

In the Service of World Revolution

Vietnamese Communists' Radical Ambitions
through the Three Indochina Wars

❖ Tuong Vu

Introduction

The end of World War II witnessed the rise of many anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa that fueled a global trend of decolonization. Soon this process became entangled in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. The connection between the Cold War and decolonization was complex and shaped not only by the superpowers.¹ As the United States and USSR sought allies around the world to strengthen their global positions, elites in newly independent countries or those still struggling for independence pursued their own visions and found ways to make the Cold War serve their interests.

In Vietnam more than anywhere else in the postcolonial world, the Cold War and the struggle for national independence became deeply intertwined, with devastating consequence. A Communist-led movement in Vietnam took advantage of the power vacuum in the wake of the Japanese surrender to form a government in late 1945. As the Vietnamese Communists fought a protracted war with France (the “First Indochina War”), they found support in the Soviet bloc, whereas the French and other Western powers embraced anti-Communist nationalists. After about fifteen years of fierce warfare

1. The best account is Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For an Asia-focused review, see Tuong Vu, “Cold War Studies and the Cultural Cold War in Asia,” in Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), esp. pp. 5–6. For Southeast Asia, see Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009); Marc Frey et al., eds., *The Transformation of Southeast Asia* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003); and Clive Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia, 1900–1980: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001), gives special attention to the role of ideology.

(the “Second Indochina War”) Vietnam was reunified in 1975 under Communist rule. The peace proved to be elusive, however. Just four years later, in 1979, a new war broke out involving three former Communist allies: Cambodia, Vietnam, and China (the “Third Indochina War”). Not until the early 1990s did a lasting peace finally arrive. The length and complexity of the conflicts engulfing Vietnam are puzzling. Why did the First Indochina War become a front in the Cold War? Was the Third Indochina War related to the previous two? Why did Vietnam become entangled in so much conflict?

Building on a book published in 2017, this article shows that the radical worldview of Vietnamese Communists was largely responsible for the course taken by postcolonial Vietnam.² Unlike much existing scholarship, I consider Marxist-Leninist ideology to have been a critical factor shaping the thinking and decisions of Ho Chi Minh and his comrades. These men and women imagined their revolution as a proletarian revolution first and as forming an integral component of world revolution second. They entrusted the destiny of their country to the Communist camp and in some periods even claimed to be the vanguard of world revolution, wanting to set an example for other countries to follow. Based on archival research and published sources that have rarely been used before, I argue that the ambitious revolutionary vision of the Vietnamese Communists, their persistent desire to live up to that vision, and the overblown pride in their revolutionary accomplishments were central factors in all three Indochina wars.

The article first reviews the literature and presents the ambitious vision espoused by Vietnamese Communist leaders. I then illustrate the argument with four episodes that reveal the loyalty of Vietnamese Communist leaders to that vision. The land revolution, the first episode, was launched with much fanfare and bloodshed in the middle of the war against the French. From conception to execution this revolution demonstrated that Vietnamese Communists were as serious about social revolution as they were about national independence. The second episode involved propaganda materials produced by Communist Party founder and president Ho Chi Minh in the 1940s and 1950s that revealed his deep belief in the two-camp worldview during a period when that worldview held no use for the goal of winning national independence and unification. This episode indicated that Vietnamese Communists did not view their revolution as separate from world revolution.

The third episode comprises the evolving thoughts of Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) First Secretary Le Duan, who opposed Nikita

2. Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence in the early 1960s. The VCP leader's opposition stemmed from his belief that Soviet policy deviated not only from the mission of the Vietnamese revolution but from that of world revolution. His stand indicated a firm loyalty to world revolution and a willingness to challenge Moscow on doctrinal matters despite the risk of offending Soviet leaders. The final episode is the vanguard internationalist worldview that emerged in Hanoi in the late 1960s and early 1970s from North Vietnamese leaders' pride in their success in South Vietnam. As the Cold War in East Asia was evolving, with both Moscow and Beijing courting U.S. friendship, leaders in Hanoi remained loyal to world revolution and stuck by the two-camp vision. North Vietnam came to imagine itself as the vanguard of world revolution and sought a dominant role in Southeast Asia and beyond. Hanoi's conceit offended its Chinese and Cambodian comrades, contributing to the regional war in the late 1970s. Thus, decolonization in Indochina did not end with a Cold War battle but spilled over to become a regional war.

The Misunderstood Vietnamese Communists and Their Revolutionary Vision

The literature on the Indochina Wars is voluminous but uneven, with most scholarship focused on the Second Indochina War.³ Until recently, the dominant scholarly view treated the First and Second Indochina Wars as a single protracted anti-colonial struggle by Vietnamese against foreign intervention and domination. Out of colonial designs or Cold War concerns, the argument goes, both France and the United States frustrated the historically powerful desire of Vietnamese for national independence and unity, causing wars. Thus Frances Fitzgerald claimed in one of the most popular accounts of

3. For reviews of the literature on the Vietnam War, see Andrew Wiest, "Introduction: Historians and the Vietnam War," in Andrew Wiest and Michael Doidge, eds., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–13; Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* Vol. 4, No. 3 (October 2009), pp. 1–16; and David Anderson, "No More Vietnams: Historians Debate the Policy Lessons of the Vietnam War," in David Anderson and John Ernst, eds., *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), pp. 13–33. On the First Indochina War, see Mark Bradley, "Making Sense of the French War: The Postcolonial Moment and the First Vietnam War, 1945–1954," in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 16–40. For a relatively recent collection of the far more limited literature on the Third Indochina War, see Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, eds., *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972–1979* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

the Vietnam War, “Standing in the place of all Vietnamese, [the National Liberation Front] has carried on the tradition of Le Loi and those other Vietnamese heroes who waged the millennium-long struggle against foreign domination.”⁴ Writing more than 25 years later, Robert Buzzanco rehashed the same myth:

The area that today encompasses Indochina emerged as a coherent community in the first millennium BC, and its people have spent the better part of the next twenty-five centuries fighting off foreign invaders. . . . At various times, the Chinese, French, Japanese, and Americans would try to take over Vietnam; all ultimately met harsh resistance and failure.⁵

In these accounts, Vietnamese Communists appear at heart to be nationalists who inherited a tradition of patriotism and whose craving for national independence and unity trumped everything else. Their connections with Moscow and declarations of loyalty to Marxism-Leninism were often dismissed as instrumentally intended. For example, George Kahin argued that Vietnamese Communist leaders were “men in whom the strength of nationalism decisively overshadowed any propensity to follow some line dictated in the Kremlin.”⁶ George Herring, the former president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, wrote a well-known book on the war that takes a similar view: “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.”⁷ Without citing any sources, Walter LaFeber has absurdly claimed that “Ho was not [directed by Moscow]. He had clashed with the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin as early as the 1920s and 1930s, and since then, their relationship had not much improved.”⁸

4. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), pp. 548–549.

5. Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 22. For essentially the same view, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), pp. 110; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Light: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 159–162; and David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1880–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 10–17.

6. George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 27.

7. George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), pp. 21–22.

8. Walter LaFeber, “The United States and Vietnam: The Enemies,” in Anderson and Ernst, eds. *The War That Never Ends*, p. 37.

Since the end of the Cold War, a great deal of evidence has emerged that contravenes the long-prevailing wisdom. For example, scholars have now confirmed that in the late 1960s more than 100,000 soldiers from other Communist countries (mainly from China, but also from the Soviet Union and North Korea) served in the war on North Vietnam's side. Ho Chi Minh's extensive work for the Soviet-dominated Comintern to organize or promote revolutions in southern China, northeastern Thailand, and British Malaya from 1924 to 1930 is also now known in greater detail.⁹ In addition, scholars have documented Vietnamese Communists' deep intervention into neighboring Laos and Cambodia until the late 1980s.¹⁰ Evidence has also established that post-war Vietnam trained sappers for, and sent surplus weapons to, Algeria, Chile, and El Salvador in support of armed guerrillas there.¹¹ Vietnamese Communists' ardent commitment to a domestic social revolution, despite repeated setbacks, is no longer deniable.¹² Given the new knowledge, the Indochina Wars can no longer be regarded as merely anti-colonial and the Vietnamese Communists can no longer be seen as ideologically shallow.

A few recent works in diplomatic history even implicate Vietnamese Communists in the conflicts that have traditionally been blamed entirely on foreign powers.¹³ As Pierre Asselin has argued in a recent study on the

9. Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999). Nevertheless, Quinn-Judge seeks to downplay radical aspects of Ho Chi Minh's career.

10. Thomas Engelbert and Christopher Goscha, *Falling Out of Touch: A Study on Vietnamese Communist Policy towards an Emerging Cambodian Communist Movement, 1930–1975* (Clayton, Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1995); and Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisers in Laos (1954–62)," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (July 2004), pp. 141–185.

11. Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Covertly Supplied Weapons to Revolutionaries in Algeria and Latin America," Cold War History Project (CWIHP) e-Dossier, No. 25 (2 November 2011), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-25-vietnam-covertly-supplied-weapons-to-revolutionaries-algeria-and-latin>; and Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Trained Commando Forces in Southeast Asia and Latin America," CWIHP e-dossier, No. 28 (3 January 2012), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-27-vietnam-trained-commando-forces-southeast-asia-and-latin-america>. Pribbenow collected the information from the PAVN history blog (Quan Su VN), where veterans posted comments, personal documents, and sometimes internal official documents.

12. Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990); Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Tuong Vu, "Triumphs or Tragedies: A New Perspective on the Vietnamese Revolution," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 236–257.

13. Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Stein Tonnesson, *1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lien-Hang

origins of the Vietnam War: “Informed alternately by nationalist, internationalist, and other considerations, the [North Vietnamese] leadership’s decisions were always its own, and the tragic events that unfolded in Indochina in the decade beginning in 1965 owe as much—if not more—to those decisions as to decisions made in Washington and Saigon.”¹⁴ Writing about the protracted negotiations that eventually led to the Paris Agreements of 1973, Lien-Hang Nguyen similarly maintains that, “often, American leaders were at the mercy of actors in Hanoi and Saigon.”¹⁵

Although recent studies rightly restore Vietnamese agency and responsibility in history, they do not address the role of Communist ideology. Because the agency of Vietnamese Communist actors cannot be fully assessed without an understanding of their worldviews, the remainder of this section outlines the ambitious ideological principles espoused by leading Vietnamese Communists. From their standpoint, national independence was merely one of the two main goals of the “bourgeois democratic revolution” they sought from the 1930s on.¹⁶ The other main goal was a land revolution to destroy the vestiges of “feudal” society and liberate peasants from landlords’ “domination.” The bourgeois democratic revolution was thus a rural class struggle together with an anti-colonial struggle. For both struggles to take place either

Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

14. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, p. 2.

15. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, p. 9.

16. There is no single document or source that presents the overall revolutionary concepts in Vietnamese thinking, in part because thinking continued to evolve. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s, these concepts were well developed and did not change much for the next two decades. My overview of Vietnamese thinking in this section relies on numerous VCP reports written for Central Committee plenums or top-level meetings from 1930 to 1980. Key documents include: Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Duong Kach Menh,” (1927), in Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap (VKDTT)*, Vol. 1 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2005), pp. 15–82; Tran Phu, “Luan cuong chanh tri cua Dang Cong san Dong duong,” October 1930, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 2 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2005), pp. 88–103; “Trung Uong Hoi Nghi Lan Thu Tam,” May 1941, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 7 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2000), pp. 96–136; Truong Chinh, “Hoan thanh giai phong dan toc, phat trien dan chu nhan dan, tien toi chu nghia xa hoi,” February 1951, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 12 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 40–175; “Dieu le Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam,” February 1951, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 12 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 444–472; Le Duan, “Duong loi cach mang mien Nam,” August 1956, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 17 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2002), pp. 783–825; “Nghì quyết của Hội nghị lần thứ chín,” December 1963, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 24 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), pp. 716–862; Le Duan, “Bai noi cua dong chi Le Duan tai Hoi nghi lan thu 12 cua Trung uong,” December 1965, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 26 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), pp. 564–621; and Le Duan, “Bao cao chinh tri cua Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang,” read by Le Duan at the Fourth Party Congress, 14 December 1976, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 37 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2004), pp. 978–1060.

concurrently or sequentially, leadership of the movement had to be in the hands of a Communist Party.

Yet the bourgeois democratic revolution, for all its radicalism, was not the end goal of Vietnamese Communism. It was to be merely the first phase of the Vietnamese “proletarian revolution.” The second phase involved an open-ended agenda of “socialist revolution” to establish a Communist system in the mold of the Soviet Union. This revolution was aimed at creating an industrialized economy and society inhabited by “socialist men and women” and purged of so-called capitalist exploitation and its decadent culture.

In the Leninist ethos of the Bolsheviks, Vietnamese revolutionaries believed that the Russian revolution had not only created the first socialist state but had also ushered in a new era—an “Age of World Revolution”—at the end of which Communism would triumph globally just as Karl Marx had predicted. If world revolution had been a distant dream before 1917, it became an unfolding reality in the 1920s when Vietnamese Communists were baptized into the movement. Under Iosif Stalin’s leadership, a rapid industrialization had transformed the Soviet Union from the late 1920s on, and a Moscow-centered network of Communist and worker movements had spread widely around the globe. Vietnamese Communists received policy direction and material support from the Third Communist International (Comintern) from the very start. Ho Chi Minh and other important leaders received training in Moscow, along with salaries and assignments for revolutionary missions throughout southern China and Southeast Asia. They also gained various forms of support from many of the Comintern’s member parties operating in European and Asian capitals.

Guided by their millenarian vision and embedded in the global Communist network, the Vietnamese never thought of their revolution as an isolated event; rather, it was to be an integral component of world revolution. A successful proletarian revolution in Vietnam would thus be a step forward for world revolution, which was to occur country by country, region by region. The conditions of the world revolutionary movement in turn could, at any point, either facilitate or hinder the Vietnamese revolution, accelerating or reversing its progress.

World revolution gradually took shape in the Vietnamese imagination to include three related but geographically distinct kinds of class struggle:

- (1) the global confrontation between the socialist and the capitalist camps;
- (2) the struggle of workers against capital in each capitalist country; and

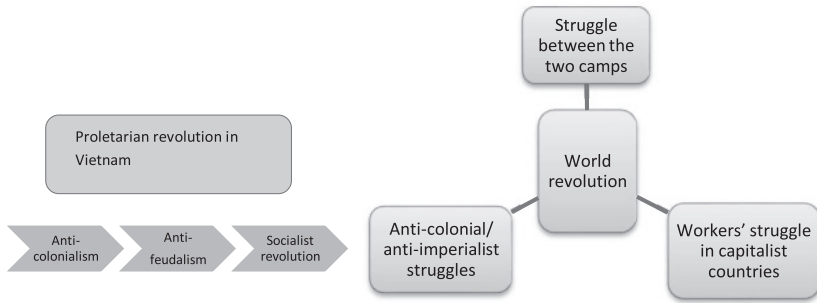


Figure 1: Revolutionary Vision of Vietnamese Communists

- (3) the struggle of colonized and semi-colonized peoples around the world against imperialist domination, of which the Vietnamese struggle was a part.

The first kind of struggle was a life-and-death one, but the Vietnamese Communists were fully confident they would triumph in the end, thanks to the force of history. The third kind of struggle included the Vietnamese revolution, which involved more than just national independence. All three kinds of struggles, called “three revolutionary tidal waves” (*ba dòng thác cách mạng*) by North Vietnamese leaders in the 1960s, shared the same ultimate goal, which was to sweep away imperialism and establish global proletarian rule. Figure 1 shows the Vietnamese system of concepts that suggested not only great ambition but also organic coherence.

As the careers of Vladimir Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong attested, ideological loyalty and great ambition did not necessarily mean an inability to compromise for strategic and tactical gains. The “united front” tactics that Vietnamese Communists often applied to manipulate the “balance of forces” relied on such strategic compromise. For example, when the Vietnamese fought the Japanese and French in the mid-1940s, the Communists sought Washington’s support. When at war with the United States in the 1960s, the Vietnamese courted Paris. These deft maneuvers could often seem puzzling to enemies, supporters, and outside observers, but they should not be confused with a lack of ideological commitment.

The remainder of the article examines four cases that exemplified the Vietnamese Communists’ revolutionary worldview and their efforts to realize their ambitions. Space constraints prevent me from discussing the full context of each episode, so the cases are presented for illuminative purposes rather than as definitive proofs of the argument.

The Land Revolution (1953–1956)

Since the late 1920s, the founders of the Vietnamese Communist movement had made rural class struggle a core part of their revolutionary agenda.¹⁷ In the party program approved at the first plenum meeting of the VCP, in October 1930, Tran Phu the party's first General Secretary, established that the bourgeois democratic phase of the Vietnamese proletarian revolution had two mutually dependent tasks: anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism. One task could not be fulfilled without the other. Tran Phu proposed that the revolution confiscate land from landlords and the church to redistribute to "middle and poor peasants, with ownership rights retained by the government."¹⁸ A decade later, under different leadership at the VCP's Sixth Plenum in 1939, the party went even further. The resolution of this meeting not only affirmed the confiscation and redistribution policy but also made clear that no land market would be allowed. Peasants would be given "enough land to live," and out of the remaining land the government would create state farms modeled after Soviet collective farms.¹⁹

At the VCP's Eighth Plenum, in 1941, the leadership team under Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh decided to shelve the land revolution for the sake of national mobilization. After coming to power in 1945, the Viet Minh government under Ho Chi Minh issued a rent reduction directive, but the policy was apparently not implemented.²⁰ This prompted a frustrated Truong Chinh, then the VCP's General Secretary, to complain in late 1946 that

Now we need to criticize a mistaken view about the stages of the Vietnamese revolution. 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. Domestically, the leadership of the revolution is firmly in the hands of the proletariats, and the democratic progressive forces are united. Under these historical

17. The only book-length study of this event is 30 years old and uses none of the sources cited in this section. See Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

18. "Luan cuong chanh tri cua Dang Cong san Dong duong," p. 95.

19. "Nghị quyết của Ban Trung ương Đảng," 6–8 November 1939, in *VKDĐT*, Vol. 6, pp. 542–543.

20. Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 5.

conditions, our national liberation revolution can accomplish anti-imperialist tasks and fulfill *part of* our anti-feudalist responsibilities.²¹

In the late 1940s, with the Cold War brewing in Europe and Chinese Communists emerging victorious in northern China, Truong Chinh renewed his call for advancing the revolutionary agenda beyond national liberation.²² He predicted: “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 one step higher [than merely rent reduction].”²³ He did not get his wish right away, perhaps because of the Korean War, which diverted the Chinese Communists’ attention and resources away from Indochina.

By the end of that war, however, the VCP, with strong encouragement and resumed material support from Moscow and Beijing, was ready to implement class struggle in the countryside.²⁴ Because war was still going on with the French, Truong Chinh proposed that the nationalist struggle be retained as cover for what would actually be a class struggle unleashed in the countryside:

National democratic revolutions are [essentially] peasant revolutions. Wars of national liberation are essentially peasant wars. . . ., leading peasants to fight feudalism and imperialism is class struggle and nationalist struggle at the same time. It is class struggle within a nationalist struggle and under the appearance of a nationalist struggle.²⁵

The anti-feudalist goal was thus given the highest priority. Together with the general radicalization of the movement since 1948, the revolution shifted decisively to the second phase, whose aim was the overthrow of traditional social hierarchy even while the war against France continued. In this phase, the VCP received significant Chinese assistance and advice. In return, it showed its socialist comrades that it was a bona fide revolutionary party with a radical land program.

21. “Cach mang thang Tam: Trien vong cua Cach mang Vietnam,” *Su That*, 7 September 1946; emphasis in original.

22. Tuong Vu, “‘It’s Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colours’: The Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2009), p. 540.

23. “Chung ta chien dau cho doc lap va dan chu,” Truong Chinh’s speech at the Fifth Cadre Conference, 8–16 August 1948, n.p. (Ban chap hanh Lien khu Dang bo Lien khu X, 1948), pp. 80–85.

24. Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, ch. 3.

25. “Bao cao cua Tong Bi Thu Truong Chinh tai Hoi nghi lan thu tu Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang,” n.d. (late January 1953), in *VKDTT*, Vol. 14 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2000), pp. 53–54. For an insightful account arguing that Ho Chi Minh, not Truong Chinh, was the supreme decision-maker in the land revolution, see Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyen Thi Nam and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2015), pp. 1–62.

Yet the shift from national liberation to class struggle was not a simple matter. The VCP up to then had attracted a broad coalition of diverse social groups with diverse political loyalties. Its leaders were apprehensive that the party was not pure enough to be the vanguard of the working classes.²⁶ Under Chinese guidance and using Chinese methods of *chengfeng* and *tugai*, they ordered an “organizational rectification” campaign in parallel with the land revolution to purge members of privileged classes from the party. Poor peasants were incited to “struggle” against both landlords and local cadres. Nearly half of all local governments and party units were dissolved, with old leaders purged and new ones promoted from the ranks of poor peasants.²⁷

The purge was combined with a deliberate, systematic effort to destroy landlords as a class. Prior to implementing the campaign, the party issued an order fixing the ratio of executions at one landlord per 1,000 people.²⁸ Violence during the campaign occurred on a large scale and reached a “barbaric” level.²⁹ Quotas of landlords imposed from above led to widespread mislabeling and indiscriminate killings authorized by local land reform teams.³⁰ Thousands of patriotic landlords who had supported the party since 1945 perished in the campaign. Those who survived joined the nearly one million North Vietnamese who fled to South Vietnam after the Geneva Agreements were signed in 1954.³¹

The land revolution was the earliest proof that Vietnamese Communists were struggling for more than national independence in the First Indochina War. It evinced their desire to achieve a long-held vision when conditions were favorable. Their violent anti-feudalist ambitions created a greater challenge for them, and the bloodshed that accompanied the land revolution suggests a radical break in practice and not simply a neat unfolding of phases as in the concept of “bourgeois democratic revolution.”

26. Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia*, ch. 6.

27. “De cuong bao cao cua Bo Chinh tri tai Hoi nghi Trung Uong lan thu 10,” 25 August to 5 October 1956 (likely prepared and read by Truong Chinh), in *VKDTT*, Vol. 17, pp. 432–438.

28. For an English translation of this decree, see *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 243–247.

29. The term was used by Truong Chinh himself in his draft report for the 10th Plenum in October 1956, when he admitted the “errors” committed during the campaign.

30. More than 71 percent of rich peasants and landlords were mislabeled, and about 15,000 landlords were executed. See Dang Phong, ed., *Lich Su Kinh Te Viet Nam 1945–2000*, Vol. 2: 1955–1975 (Hanoi: Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 2005), p. 85; and Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia*, p. 103.

31. For a recent treatment of this subject, see Peter Hansen, “Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2009), pp. 173–211.

Class struggle brought the VCP significant support from poor peasants but also created deep national cleavages. The brutal purge of landlords and wealthier peasants generated numerous class enemies and pushed many on the fence to join the anti-Communist government founded in 1949 and led by former Emperor Bao Dai. To the extent the Second Indochina War can be seen, at its core, as a civil war between Communists and anti-Communists, its true origins lie in the murderous land revolution begun in 1948.³²

Ho Chi Minh's Propaganda Work (1940s–1950s)

Since the 1930s, Vietnamese revolutionaries had viewed the world in binary terms; that is, as divided into two opposing blocs. From their perspective, the Soviet Union, the only Communist country in the world until 1945, represented a paradise on earth, in contrast to the capitalist West, which forever languished in political turmoil, interstate wars, economic recessions, cultural decadence, and social injustice.³³ In the VCP's thinking, the struggle between the two blocs represented a "tidal wave" of world revolution, and Vietnamese Communists passionately sought to align the destiny of their nation with that of the Soviet bloc.

The party's binary view of the world was fully evident even at a time when one would have least expected it. In the mid-1940s, when the United States and the Soviet Union had joined forces against Germany, Ho Chi Minh and his comrades maintained almost no contact with Moscow and received no outside assistance. The Viet Minh front they led was ostensibly founded on the principle of national unity. The propagandist for it was Ho Chi Minh, who is commonly seen as ideologically moderate. In reality, he was no less radical than his comrades, although his style was different, and he made an effort to disguise his radical views. In 1941–1942, in his capacity as editor-in-chief and main contributor of *Viet Nam Doc Lap* (Independent Vietnam), the Viet Minh's weekly newsletter, Ho Chi Minh was on the front line fighting with his pen not only for independent Vietnam but also for the Soviet Union.³⁴ Aimed at less-educated Vietnamese, *Viet Nam Doc Lap* scrupulously

32. For a review of recent scholarship that highlights this point, see Miller and Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War."

33. Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, chs. 1–3.

34. Hồ Chí Minh founded the newsletter in August 1941 and ran it from then until August 1942, when he left for China.

avoided ideological language but managed to indoctrinate its readers with the two-camp worldview in subtle ways.

In particular, the newsletter regularly published news of the war that exaggerated Soviet success in combating the Nazi Wehrmacht while advertising the Soviet paradise to Vietnamese readers. A typical account of the war read:

Russia is a revolutionary state. In this country, people enjoy freedom, equality [and] happiness. Externally it does not bully other countries but helps the oppressed nations. Germany is a fascist state, meaning it is extremely cruel and only wants to raid other countries. In that country people live hard lives. If Germany wins, the whole of mankind will be enslaved. Only if Russia wins can the world see glorious days.³⁵

Another article reported that

in the five months since the war began, Germany has suffered 4.5 million killed, whereas Russia has 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 titled “What Kind of Country Is Russia?” we can see the two-camp worldview lurking underneath a highly fanciful story about the Soviet Union, which can be paraphrased as follows.³⁶ Russia is the largest country in the world. Twenty years ago Russians had been forced to do *corvée* work (*di phu*), paid taxes, and been “exploited, oppressed, poor and ignorant like [Vietnamese].” Thanks to the Bolsheviks’ “unity and struggle,” the tsar was overthrown in 1917, and since then the people had enjoyed “equality, freedom and happiness.” Currently, Russian workers toiled only seven hours a day, had a day off for every five days worked, and 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 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. Children, whether male or female, had to go to school until at least sixteen years of 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*), village chiefs (*chanh tong*), and the head of the country. If they were

35. “Nga-Duc chien tranh,” *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, No. 109 (21 October 1941), p. 4. The style of this article suggests it was likely to have been written by Ho Chi Minh.

36. B. V., “Nga la nuoc the nao?” *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, No. 126 (11 July 1942), p. 7. This article also was very likely written by Ho Chi Minh.

not happy with these officials, they could remove them. “No one is oppressed, unlike in our country.”³⁷

Ho Chi Minh continued his journalistic work in spreading the two-camp worldview throughout the 1950s, when Hanoi’s official position still stressed national reunification by peaceful means. His writings, however, displayed a much sharper binary worldview than in his work for *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, but he maintained his practice of disguising his true identity as author. From 1951 to 1956, under a variety of pen names, he wrote nearly 100 short articles that were published in the party’s newspapers *Nhan Dan* (The people) and *Cuu Quoc* (National salvation). Most of his articles were about 500 words long and were published in 1953–1955, about one every other week. They were written in a simple style for ordinary readers, but the language was sharp, concise, and idiomatic. The topics ranged from the story of an ordinary farmer in the USSR to the evolution of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU). In these articles Ho often cited sources from foreign newspapers, presenting himself as a well-read and objective observer who wanted to educate his people about foreign lands by sharing hard facts (statistics) and interesting vignettes. The stories about the Soviet Union conveyed an image of a happy life, advanced technology, economic success, and progressive society there. Typical of the genre is the following about a supposedly 147-year-old farmer named Aivazov:

“Communist Youth” is the name of a collective farm in Azerbaijan (the Soviet Union). This farm was organized by Mr. Aivazov decades ago, when he was more than 120 years old. He named the farm “Communist Youth” because he considered himself a young man. Indeed, although he is now 147, he is still healthy and likes to do such things as herd sheep, raise chickens, plant crops, do carpentry, and work as a blacksmith.³⁸

Roughly two-thirds of the articles (67) written by Ho were about the United States; the rest were about the Soviet Union. Most of the pieces about the United States are satirical, written in a mocking tone to criticize U.S. society, whether its decadent culture, its racist practices, its crime-ridden cities, or its oppressive government. The aim was to instill in readers a contempt for the morally, socially, and politically corrupt United States. A typical piece discusses the hypocrisy of U.S. policy as follows:

37. Ibid. In addition to being wildly exaggerated and rose-colored, the article projects Vietnamese eating habits (rice as a staple) and administrative units onto Soviet life.

38. C. B. (Ho Chi Minh), “147 tuoi ma van thanh nien,” *Nhan Dan*, 17 October 1965, reprinted in C.B. (Ho Chi Minh), *Lien Xo Vi Dai* (Hanoi: Nhan Dan, 1956), pp. 26–27. No human being has ever been reliably documented to have lived beyond 126.

America brings money and medicine to help people in other countries. At the same time, how do Americans live? On July 5, the American president said, there were 32 million Americans without doctors. Last year more than 1 million Americans died of intestinal diseases. More than 600,000 Americans had mental disorder. More than 25 million had this or that disease. ... So you see, the American people live such miserable lives, but American reactionaries are wasting money to help French colonizers, [Vietnamese] puppets, Chiang Kai-shek, [and] Rhee Syngman to help spread American "civilization" to the Asian people! How crazy. Even crazier are those who admire America, trust America, fear America.³⁹

Ho's biting criticism was not limited to U.S. policy or the U.S. government; it was just as often directed against U.S. leaders as well as against U.S. (capitalist) culture and society. He viewed the struggle as both political and cultural. He ostensibly translated for readers materials from U.S. newspapers in mid-August 1954:

Phoenix has 25,000 residents. Casinos, cocaine shops, and brothels operate freely. Gangsters can be hired to kill people: the cost to kill a person is 12,000 francs [*sic*]. A merchant wanted to organize a self-defense group; his house was bombed to the ground the next day. A local paper reported this case; the paper was raided, and two correspondents were critically beaten. A judge wanted to investigate the case; his house was also bombed. Another judge declared he would wage war on crime; he was assassinated a few days later. Criminal gangs control the city. The government and the police are their puppets. ... Phoenix is a small city. What about big ones like New York?⁴⁰

Ho then asked his readers: "Is [the United States] a civilized country? Or is it a disgusting and odious place [*hôi tanh rợn người*]?" His technique was to pick an isolated (perhaps true?) story and present it as typical of the United States:

The American capitalist magazine *Tin Tức Hàng Tuần* (30 January 1956) reported, "Phe-rit [*sic*], 22, was executed in Oklahoma for killing a policeman. When Phe-rit was 18 months old, his *uncle* was executed for murder. A year later, his *mother* (who had left his father for another man) shot to death her new husband. She was absolved from this case because she was 'defending' herself from her husband who threatened to kill her. Later she killed her third husband and spent five years in jail for this crime. Phe-rit's *brother* is serving ten years for

39. D.X. (Ho Chi Minh), "Mô cha không khóc, khóc mô moi," *Cuu Quoc*, 12 October 1951, reprinted in C.B. et al. (Ho Chi Minh), *Nói Chuyện Mỹ ...* (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1972), p. 31.

40. C.B., "Mô ma: Phong không thuận, tuc không mỹ," *Nhan Dan*, 1 September 1954, p. 7.

theft. (Another) *uncle* of his received a life sentence for repeated crimes without repentance. Phe-rit's *girlfriend* is serving time in Virginia for stealing a car. Phe-rit's *father* is in a Texas prison because of theft." Father, mother, uncles, brother, and even girlfriend all committed crimes or have been executed. What a "model family" of America!⁴¹

Sophie Quinn-Judge in her biography of Ho Chi Minh claims that "the depth of [his] attachment to communism is difficult to gauge—the one thing one can say is that he had little interest in dogma."⁴² The evidence presented here, which is corroborated by an analysis of Ho's writings early in his career, reveals a startlingly different picture of the man.⁴³ As Ho promoted a policy of national unity for independence through the 1940s and 1950s, he continued to express and propagate the two-camp worldview in his self-assigned role as a journalist. One may question whether he believed his own propaganda, but the fact that he could simultaneously do both suggests that national destiny and the struggle of the Soviet camp for world revolution were deeply connected in his mind.

Opposition to Soviet Policy and the Second Indochina War (1957–1964)

By the late 1950s, however, Cold War tensions began to thaw, with Khrushchev calling for peaceful coexistence and economic competition between the two camps. Hanoi's reaction to this shift in Soviet policy again revealed that it saw the Vietnamese revolution and world revolution as intimately connected.

The confrontation between the imperialist and Communist camps in Vietnam was, in the view of the VCP, a component of world revolution. In response to the Sino-Soviet dispute over a revolutionary strategy for the world, a radical faction among Hanoi leaders, led by First Secretary Le Duan, chose to back Mao but not Khrushchev.⁴⁴ Mao's militant take—although it did not

41. C. B., "Mot 'gia dinh guong mau' của Mỹ," *Nhan Dan*, 16 February 1956, p. 3, emphasis in original. The name *Tin Tức Hàng Tuần* might be referring to *Newsweek*, but I did not find the story in the *Newsweek* issue published on 30 January 1956. An alternative translation is *Weekly News*, but I could not find any U.S. national publication with this title in 1956.

42. Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 256.

43. Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia*, pp. 183–184.

44. For this contest, see recent analyses by Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009).

yet extend to encouraging the escalation of the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam—appeared to be more in line with the VCP leaders' own position on both world revolution and the Vietnamese revolution.⁴⁵ As with Ho Chi Minh's propaganda, this shift indicates that Vietnamese Communists not only situated their revolution in the greater context of world revolution but also viewed the former as having a mutually supportive relationship with the latter. The Cold War thaw initiated by Khrushchev deviated from the missions of both revolutions and thus had to be opposed.

Prior to 1960, Vietnamese leaders had equated the Soviet Union with the socialist camp. This changed when they were drawn into the ideological dispute between China and the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Their participation in the ideological debate at the second Moscow conference in October 1960 helped to clarify that ambiguity in their thinking. For three weeks, three leading VCP officials participated in face-to-face discussions with leaders of 26 Communist parties concerning a draft document provided by the Soviet Communist Party about the international Communist movement's global strategy.⁴⁷ The leaders included VCP First Secretary Le Duan; Truong Chinh, the former General Secretary who was the most powerful leader after Le Duan; and General Nguyen Chi Thanh, a VCP Politburo member and commissar of the Vietnamese People's Army.

Le Duan came away from the event strongly opposed to Khrushchev's détente policy. As he argued in his report about the trip to the VCP leadership,

class struggle on the global scale has intensified and [now] involves the life and death of either imperialist or anti-imperialist forces. ... For Communism to triumph, there is no other way but to wage a class struggle against imperialism. ... The conditions for accelerating anti-imperialist revolutions today are more favorable than ever.⁴⁸

Although Le Duan acknowledged that the dangers of nuclear weapons made the preservation of peace an important task, he wanted Communist parties worldwide to be on the offensive against imperialism everywhere and

45. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 83.

46. On Soviet-Vietnamese relations, see Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996); Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003); and Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949–64* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

47. Tran Quynh, "May ky niem ve Le Duan," n.d., unpub. memoir, courtesy of Sophie Quinn-Judge. Trần Quỳnh was deputy chief of staff of the Party Central Office, a confidant of Le Duan, and a member of the Vietnamese delegation.

48. Le Duan, "Tang cuong doan ket nhat tri, tien toi nhung thang loi moi," in *VKDTT*, Vol. 22 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2002), pp. 60–61.

on every occasion to destroy it in part and eventually in whole.⁴⁹ Le Duan further maintained that the Communist camp must maintain a hard line, by which he meant that it should not compromise with imperialism on matters of principle even as it devised flexible tactics to divide the imperialist camp and isolate the United States, the most dangerous imperialist enemy.

On the Sino-Soviet dispute, Le Duan contended at the Moscow conference that the disagreement was rooted not only in two ideological standpoints but also in different “national positions [*vi tri dan toc*].”⁵⁰ He said it was not a coincidence that most “Eastern” Communist parties supported China in the debate, whereas most of their “Western” counterparts backed the Soviet Union. The latter had started from a position of relatively well-developed capitalism, whereas China and other Asian Communist states were developing socialism in “semi-feudal,” backward societies. Different socioeconomic conditions plus dissimilar geopolitical locations naturally led to different “national positions” within Communist ranks. To avoid conflict, Le Duan believed that “each party in the socialist camp should always ensure the correct handling of the relationship between national interests and the interests of the world revolutionary movement.”⁵¹ For the first time, Le Duan implicitly acknowledged the possible incompatibility between the national interests of individual Communist countries and those of the whole camp. This was a critical departure from his earlier worldview that all member countries of the socialist community shared the same class interests.

This new thinking did not mean that Le Duan had become a Tito, inclined to take North Vietnam out of the Communist camp. He went on to say:

Previously, there was only one socialist country, namely the Soviet Union. Therefore the Soviet Union was the representative and the only hope of the entire international Communist movement. A [loyal] attitude to the Soviet Union was the litmus test [to determine the credentials of] any Communist in the world. Today’s circumstances are no longer exactly so. These days socialism has become a worldwide system, so the representative and hope of the Communist movement should be the entire socialist camp centered on the Soviet Union. The litmus test of today should be *one’s [loyal] attitude toward the entire socialist camp centered on the Soviet Union.*⁵²

49. Ibid., pp. 66–73, 76–79.

50. Ibid., pp. 96–99.

51. Ibid., p. 98.

52. Ibid., pp. 98–99; emphasis in original.

In this way Le Duan dissociated the Soviet Union from the socialist camp in his mind. Even though the Soviet Union was still the center of the camp, it was not the same as the camp. Le Duan also hinted that Soviet interests had diverged from those of the socialist camp and that all Communists, including the VCP, should align their national interests with those of the camp, not necessarily with those of the Soviet Union. He thus reaffirmed the VCP's commitment to world revolution, of which the Vietnamese revolution was a component. At the Moscow conference, General Thanh fully supported Le Duan's position, whereas Truong Chinh did not do so until mid-1963.⁵³

By late 1963, at the Ninth Plenum of the VCP Central Committee, Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh were able to convert their own position on the matter into official North Vietnamese policy. The ideological shift in Hanoi from 1960 to 1963 contributed to the deterioration in Soviet-North Vietnamese relations.⁵⁴ Despite lacking support from Moscow, Le Duan authorized the escalation of the Southern insurgency, with the aim of allowing Hanoi to achieve a quick victory before the United States decided whether to intervene.⁵⁵ Hanoi, not Washington, chose war first.⁵⁶ Although North Vietnamese leaders correctly sensed the indecisive mood in Washington after the death of South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem and U.S. President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, they underestimated the new U.S. administration's commitment to defend South Vietnam. The most brutal phase of the Second Indochina War came right after Hanoi's escalation, as President Lyndon Johnson decided to retaliate by bombing North Vietnam and sending U.S. soldiers to fight in the South.

The New Vanguard of World Revolution and the Third Indochina War (1968–1979)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Cold War in East Asia underwent a major realignment, as shown by the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 and

53. Tran Quynh, "May ky niem ve Le Duan."

54. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, pp. 199–200.

55. For an astute analysis of these events, see Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*. On the debates in the United States over intervention in 1963–1964, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

56. Writing about the U.S. decision to escalate the conflict in 1964–1965, Logevall in *Choosing War* appears unaware that Hanoi had already chosen war in late 1963, so there was no "lost chance for peace," regardless of what Lyndon Johnson decided. Logevall also assumes that leaders in Hanoi could have followed the path of the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito if Washington had not chosen war, an assumption not supported by the evidence here.

President Richard Nixon's trip to China in 1972. Sino-Soviet tensions reached a new height even as Washington and Moscow entered a period of *détente*. Leaders in Hanoi were not swayed by the changes in Cold War alignments. Instead, they continued to embrace a two-camp worldview and chastised their two patrons for deviating from world revolution. The events that followed the North's victory in 1975 confirm that the VCP's ambition was more than just national independence and unity. Emboldened by that victory, leaders in Hanoi began to demand a Southeast Asia free of "imperialist" militaries. This set them on a collision course with their revolutionary comrades in Cambodia and China, although the latter bore greater responsibility for the ensuing conflict.⁵⁷

The key to understanding Hanoi's evolving view is the *political* victory the North achieved in 1968 with the bold Tet Offensive. This massive Communist attack across South Vietnam was a military disaster, but the scale and audacity of it shocked the U.S. public and the Johnson administration, sparking widespread antiwar protests in the United States and around the world. President Johnson decided to halt the bombing and not to seek reelection. In light of these results, North Vietnamese leaders increasingly viewed their own struggle as the driving force of world revolution. They imagined that within world revolution a third kind of struggle—revolutions in colonies and neocolonies—contained the most revolutionary potential. When world attention was focused on Vietnam in 1968, Hanoi sent envoys around the world in an effort to create a "global people's united front" against U.S. imperialism.⁵⁸ Vietnamese analysts repeatedly touted Vietnam as the "center," "crest," and "frontline" of the revolutionary struggle of the world's people.⁵⁹ As Truong Chinh wrote, Vietnam was proud of leading the offensive (*chien si xung kich* against imperialism. Because the United States was using Vietnam as a laboratory to test war strategies and modern weapons, the world's people had much to learn from the Vietnamese Communists about how to defeat those strategies and weapons.⁶⁰

57. Clive Christie argues that Vietnamese leaders did not want to be a revolutionary vanguard under Chinese leadership, whereas the latest sources suggest more specifically that they wanted to be the vanguard of world revolution. See Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia*, p. 198.

58. "Báo cáo tại Hội nghị Ban Chấp hành trung ương lần thứ 15," p. 369.

59. In Vietnamese, "trung tâm," "đỉnh cao," and "tuyến đầu." See Truong Chinh, "Đoi doi nho on Cac Mac va di con duong Cac Mac da vach ra," *Hoc Tap*, October 1968, pp. 48–49; Nguyen Van Kinh, "Mat tran thu hai chong chu nghĩa de quoc My da hình thành va lon manh trong long nuoc My," *Hoc Tap*, October 1968, p. 78; and Nguyen Duy Trinh, "Cong tac ngoai giao phục vụ cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước," *Hoc Tap*, October 1971, p. 15.

60. Truong Chinh, "Đoi doi nho on Cac Mac," p. 48.

Hanoi considered the Paris Agreements signed in 1973 to be a victory. Under the terms of those agreements, U.S. forces withdrew from South Vietnam, even though North Vietnamese forces were not required to do so as the United States had originally demanded. This “victory” elevated VCP leaders’ pride in their radicalism to a new height. An editorial in *Hoc Tap* after the Paris Agreements claimed that “the anti-American resistance to save the country is the most glorious in Vietnam’s thousand-year history of national resistance against foreign invasion.”⁶¹ “Vietnam’s victory over American imperialism,” the editorial proclaimed, would exert a “profound impact on the development of world revolution in the remaining decades of the twentieth century.”⁶²

Hoang Tung, editor of the party newspaper *Nhan Dan* (The people), went beyond bombastic slogans and presented a modified two-camp worldview that centered on Vietnam. He argued that the clash between the United States and the VCP was not a coincidence but a “historic encounter” and “historical inevitability.”⁶³ The context of the war, as he saw it, was the confrontation between imperialism and socialism that marked the twentieth century. Vietnam became a focal point of all the major antagonisms of the age because the national liberation movement in Vietnam was aimed at developing socialism and was led by workers in an alliance with peasants. As Hoang Tung argued, this complex character of the Vietnamese revolution gave it the highest revolutionary potential, beyond what existed in other “petty bourgeois democratic and patriotic revolutions.” “Yankee Imperialism” was against all revolutions in general, but it had selected Vietnam for the fight because of the “explosive” revolutionary potential there.⁶⁴ The world revolutionary movement also had strategic interests (*nhu cau chien luoc*) in Vietnam, where revolutionary potential was highest.

At previous VCP plenums Le Duan had criticized Vietnam’s great-power patrons for their erroneous views, but he had almost always done so tactfully, with China and the Soviet Union mentioned obliquely as “some brother parties.” In contrast, by April 1974 Le Duan was saying openly that Vietnamese theorists knew better than their Soviet and Chinese comrades how to gauge the world situation.⁶⁵ The targets of Le Duan’s criticism were the speeches

61. Editorial, “Thang loi lich su,” *Hoc Tap*, February 1973, p. 1.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

63. Hoang Tung, “Cuoc dung dau lich su,” *Hoc Tap*, March 1973, p. 40.

64. In original, “có sức công phá.” *Ibid.*, p. 43.

65. “Bai noi cua dong chi Le Duan tai Hoi nghi pho bien Nghi quyet cua Quan uy Trung uong,” 25 April 1974, in *VKDIT*, Vol. 35 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2004), pp. 27–51.

made by Boris Ponomarev, a high-ranking CPSU official, at the celebration of Lenin's 104th birthday, and by the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping a few months earlier at the United Nations. Ponomarev had talked about détente as a world trend and given credit to Soviet efforts for making it happen. In contrast, Deng viewed the world as being in grave disorder and as divided into three groups of countries. The first included the two superpowers, which were both imperialist. The second group comprised the industrialized countries of both East and West, both capitalist and socialist.⁶⁶ The third included poor developing countries, including China. Deng's worldview was realist, seeing the cause of interstate conflict as power differentials among the groups, not ideology.

As Le Duan explained, the VCP's image of world order was different from those held by their Soviet and Chinese patrons. In this image, the world was shaped by the struggle of three revolutionary tidal waves against imperialism.⁶⁷ The socialist camp that represented one tidal wave still played a very important role, despite the open split between China and the Soviet Union. Without the socialist camp, Le Duan argued, a Communist Cuba could not exist next to the United States. Yet the two other tidal waves were equally important. If the socialist camp did not export revolution to capitalist countries, Le Duan asked, who other than the workers in those countries would overthrow capitalism? Similarly, revolutionary movements in developing countries played the indispensable part of overturning the colonial system that was the rear base of imperialism.

On the current correlation of forces, Le Duan pointed out that U.S. power had weakened in all areas, whereas all three revolutionary tidal waves had surged forward. Facing an unfavorable correlation of forces, especially after withdrawing from Vietnam, the United States was seeking a temporary détente with China and the Soviet Union to concentrate its attacks on small revolutionary states. Le Duan rejected Ponomarev's argument that détente had been brought about by some clever (Soviet) scheme to pursue peace. The Vietnamese leader argued that, on the contrary, détente was caused by revolutionary forces taking the offensive strategy long advocated by the VCP.⁶⁸

Le Duan believed that Vietnamese Communists could make a correct assessment of the world situation because the struggle in Vietnam embodied both national and international antagonisms. This was the "objective

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–35.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

condition” that permitted him and his comrades to see reality better. In a jab at China, Le Duan asserted that the Chinese revolution was essentially a *civil* war and did not embody international antagonisms. Referring to the Soviet Union, he lamented that “after every meeting with us, they always said something for the Americans to know that [Soviet leaders] made effort to persuade us to ‘preserve peace.’” Le Duan believed that if North Vietnam had listened to the Communist great powers, it would have lost the war to the United States. The Paris Agreements, in his view, vindicated the VCP’s ability to make sound judgments.⁶⁹

Having achieved “victory” in 1973, the Vietnamese Communists began to express the belief that they were the revolutionary vanguard in Southeast Asia. They thus expected a say in any future arrangements in the region, as Le Duan warned:

The United States wanted to subject the interests and sovereignty of small countries to the new world order and to the rivalry between big powers. After the trips of Nixon and (Japanese Prime Minister) Tanaka to China, and after U.S.-Japanese talks, it was declared that “no country shall have control over Southeast Asia.” What do those imperialists want in Southeast Asia? ... The truth is that the U.S. and Japan are contending for hegemony over Southeast Asia. But there is another neglected truth, which is that nobody but Southeast Asian people have sovereignty over this region. Our Vietnamese people have kicked the U.S. out of Vietnam. Other Southeast Asian countries ... will surely defeat all plots of aggression and expansion by American and other imperialists.⁷⁰

In October 1974, just as Hanoi was drafting a new battle plan for defeating Saigon, Le Duan’s concerns about imperialist powers meddling in Southeast Asia were raised again. This time China was as much the cause of concern as Japan and the United States, although all likely references to China have been deleted by the Vietnamese from the published document quoted below:

The U.S. has been collaborating with [other powers] to divide their respective zones of influence. Even though they are rivals, they all are worried that the Vietnamese revolution will become stronger and achieve complete victory. They all consider a unified and independent Vietnam having close relationships with unified and independent Laos and Cambodia to be a great obstacle to their plots (...). At this point, in the strategic calculations of those powers (...) which want to invade and compete for hegemony over Southeast Asia, Vietnam represents

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–41.

70. *Ibid.* It is unclear whether Le Duan implicated China in this warning. Just three months before, the Chinese navy had seized the Paracel Islands off the coast of central Vietnam after a brief but bloody battle.

not only the confrontation between the two camps but, objectively speaking, also an important opponent to subdue. *Their plot is very dangerous, but none of them is yet ready to carry it out.*⁷¹

As the statement suggests, Hanoi was clearly offended by the great powers not just because they sought to check the advance of the Vietnamese revolution but also because they did not accept Hanoi's "close relationships" with Laos and Cambodia. At the VCP's 25th Central Committee Plenum in late 1976, Le Duan boasted:

Our victory over imperialist America created conditions for Laotian and Cambodian revolutions to triumph, opening the path to socialism for them. In the history of [world] proletarian revolution, thus far only the Soviet Union could liberate itself and some other countries [in the process]. It is a very special honor for Vietnam today to have performed that deed.⁷²

Although exaggerated, Le Duan's comment proudly acknowledged Vietnam's role in exporting revolution to Laos and Cambodia. He went on to express his pride in having foreseen the decline of imperialism since World War II and in having maintained an offensive posture for the Vietnamese revolution against Soviet and Chinese counsel:

The world now sees more clearly [what I have long seen], but [some people] still have not fully appreciated [that fact]. The American loss in Vietnam was a military loss (in a conventional war without nuclear weapons). Given this loss, imperialist America can hardly hope for a future victory in [a similar kind of war]. Yet the U.S. with its imperialist nature will rely on counterrevolutionary violence to sabotage movements for independence, democracy, and socialism. ... The world situation is still complicated.⁷³

Le Duan's remarks suggest that Hanoi did not view the war against Saigon and Washington within conventional nationalist thinking. He was proud of the Communist victory of 1975 not simply because they had defeated a powerful "foreign invader" but because they had advanced world revolution in

71. Thu cua dong chi Le Duan gui dong chi Pham Hung ve ket luan cua Bo Chinh tri," 10 October 1974, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 35 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2004), p. 178, emphasis in original. The published document includes ellipses between parentheses—"(...)"—indicating places that most likely contain references to China and have therefore been deleted from the document. People's Army General Hoang Van Thai says in his memoirs that Le Duan's speech included comments about the "other big powers [together with the United States] that also nurtured hegemonistic aims in the region," a clear reference to Japan and China. See Hoang Van Thai, *How South Vietnam Was Liberated*, 2nd ed. (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1996), p. 143. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this source.

72. "Phat bieu cua dong chi Le Duan tai Hoi nghi lan thu 25 cua Trung uong," 24 September to 24 October 1976, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 37 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2004), p. 344.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 344–345.

Vietnam as well as in other parts of Indochina. The constant conceptual frame of reference for Le Duan and his comrades was the history of world socialism against imperialism—a history that was still unfolding at the time of his speech, with the United States being defeated in one major battle but surviving to plot its next battle elsewhere in the world.

Le Duan's regional ambitions were further revealed during his five-day visit to Moscow in the fall of 1975, when he met with Leonid Brezhnev, Nikolai Podgorny, Aleksei Kosygin, Andrei Gromyko, and other Soviet leaders to thank them for their support and to ask for continuing assistance. At the meeting, Le Duan requested a Soviet loan of 1 billion rubles for many projects. When Soviet leaders expressed their reluctance to fund his main project, a steel plant worth 200 million rubles, Le Duan confided in them,

We are poor now, but it will be different in five or ten years. We will not be this poor in ten years. When we fought the French, we had many difficulties. We never thought we would achieve victory. Now [even] the United States has lost [to us]. Previously the Philippines was an American lackey but now its attitude has shifted. The United States and Japan [now] want to control [Southeast Asia]. Our country may be small, but we will defeat them with Soviet help. In peace we want to make Vietnam into the center of socialism in Southeast Asia. That is the direction of our political and economic policy. Southeast Asia with more than a hundred million people is a large area. In this region, besides Japan, no other country is [as powerful] as Vietnam. I mean socialist Vietnam. ... We have set the precondition that Thailand and the Philippines must expel the Americans to improve relations with Vietnam.

Le Duan asserted that Vietnam had fought selflessly for world revolution and therefore deserved Soviet help to achieve even more victories for socialism:

Up to now we have said that we were fighting to defend socialism and world peace and we were willing to shoulder all the losses. Now [the world] has peace, but socialism still needs to be defended. We want to achieve economic victory [besides military victory]. Who knows what will happen in 10, 15, 20 years? Perhaps thanks to our influence Burma and India will also change. Previously India supported the U.S. attacks on Vietnam. Our Foreign Ministry wanted to sever diplomatic relations with India, but I counseled against that. [I said] when we achieved victory India would change its attitude. After we won the war, India [came around] to help us. ... India thanked us because we had weakened the Americans.⁷⁴

74. "Bien ban Hoi dam giva Doan dai bieu Dang va Chinh phu Viet nam dan chu cong hoa va Doan dai bieu Dang va Chinh phu Lien Xo trong cuoc di tham Lien Xo cua Doan dai bieu Dang va Chinh phu ta tu 27 den 31-10-1975," in File 9735, Phu Thu Tuong, National Archive 3, Hanoi, pp. 24–25.

The statement underscores Le Duan's commitment to the creation of a Communist regime, not just to national liberation. It also confirms that he was seeking Communism not only in Vietnam or Indochina but also in Southeast Asia and beyond. Although Le Duan did not necessarily strive for regional domination through military means, he tried to influence the spread of Communist revolution to the extent that Vietnam could. Soviet leaders were not impressed and refused to finance the steel plant he so ardently wanted. Nevertheless, in late 1976 Hanoi embarked on an ambitious economic program to set Vietnam on a "fast, firm, and forceful march" to socialism.⁷⁵ After Vietnam's successful invasion of Cambodia in 1979, Hanoi took the opportunity to occupy Cambodia for a decade.

The ambition of Communist Vietnam's leaders created enormous yet unnecessary challenges for them and no doubt contributed to Vietnam's war with Cambodia and China. The rigid march to socialism brought so much disruption and hardship that the Vietnamese economy soon collapsed. Famine was looming in 1978 when hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boatpeople braved the ocean and pirates to flee the country. Le Duan's condescending view of the Cambodian revolution had long infuriated Khmer Rouge leaders, who soon launched border raids on Vietnam.⁷⁶ Hanoi's challenge of Beijing's influence in Southeast Asia and its assault on Saigon's ethnic Chinese capitalists earned the wrath of Beijing.⁷⁷ As Hanoi demanded—in vain—that Washington pay war reparations in return for normalized relations, China jumped ahead to normalize relations with the United States. Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia led to military retaliations by China and economic embargoes by the West and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Following a war ostensibly fought for national independence that then morphed into a Cold War battle, Indochina became the site of a regional war between Asian Communists. Although China and Cambodia started the Third Indochina War, Vietnam was neither innocent nor powerless in this case.

Since 1960, leaders in Hanoi such as Le Duan had dissociated their revolution from Soviet policy. Believing that Khrushchev's policy of peaceful

75. "Bao cao chinh tri cua Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang tai Dai hoi Dai bieu toan quoc lan thu IV," 14 December 1976, in *VKDTT*, Vol. 37 (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2004), pp. 470–648.

76. See Engelbert and Goscha, *Falling Out of Touch*.

77. The information in this section relies on Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); Steven Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1996); Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Westad and Quinn-Judge, eds., *The Third Indochina War*; and Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

coexistence deviated from the mission of both the Vietnamese revolution and world revolution, they rallied to Mao. Despite being heavily dependent on Moscow and Beijing for material support, Hanoi criticized both in the early 1970s for their overtures to the United States. This time even Mao was not revolutionary enough for them.

Conclusion

The radical ideology of the Vietnamese Communists was a primary factor in the multiple conflicts that spanned most of the second half of the twentieth century in Indochina. The Communists' goals were more ambitious than those of most other anti-colonial movements. The drive for national self-rule was almost always combined with the overarching mission of proletarian revolution in Vietnam and other parts of the world. A class struggle in the countryside was launched while the war for independence was still going on. Ho Chi Minh's propaganda work and Le Duan's opposition to Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence suggest that national revolution was closely linked with world revolution in the minds of North Vietnamese leaders. They had long harbored a two-camp worldview and joined the Cold War when the hostilities began. But when Cold War tensions began to thaw, they distanced themselves from Moscow to affirm their loyalty to world revolution. This militant line and the rush to "liberate" South Vietnam in 1964 brought direct U.S. intervention, ushering in the most intense phase of the Second Indochina War. By the early 1970s, Hanoi's conceit of being the world's revolutionary vanguard had alienated its Chinese and Cambodian comrades, who had made crucial contributions to the Vietnamese Communist revolution. Just as global tensions thawed, Indochina became embroiled in a regional war for a decade.

Outside powers played a great role in the Indochina wars. However, many of the challenges the Vietnamese Communists faced in the march to Communism—from the land revolution to frosty relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, as well as in the period from the Second to the Third Indochina War—resulted not only from foreign intervention but also from Hanoi's external revolutionary ambitions and strenuous efforts to realize them. Vietnamese revolutionaries pursued their radical worldview under the constraints of world politics. The cases sketched in this article illuminate their deep commitment to that worldview and their determination to pursue an extraordinarily ambitious agenda in the service of world revolution, of which their revolution was a part.