

Colonial Hanoi and Saigon at War: Social Dynamics of the Viet Minh's 'Underground City', 1945–1954

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Abstract

Because much of the existing literature on the Indochina War (1945–54) remains focused on its diplomatic and military aspects, scholars have tended to overlook the transformative impact of this violent war of decolonization on the Vietnamese city 'down below'. This article shifts our view of the Viet Minh's war against the French in this direction by exploring how the colonial cities of Hanoi and Saigon were a vital part of the rural-based Democratic Republic of Vietnam's war and state-building efforts. Of particular concern are two socio-economic phenomena and one related military one. On the economic front, the colonial city exported badly needed manufactured goods, electronic products, people, and medicines to the isolated and unindustrialized guerrilla state. Second, in order to build 'underground cities', to connect them to the maquis state, and to obtain and export hard-to-find materials, the Viet Minh cultivated a complex set of social relations going into and out of the cities. Third, these social relations involved civilians from the start, which was essential to the DRV's ability to transform the colonial city into a major battle zone first in Hanoi, then in Saigon. The urban–rural divide was never a sharp one during the Indochina War.

Keywords

city, colonialism, decolonization, Indochina War, Hanoi, Saigon, Viet Minh, countryside

I. Introduction

In the vast Western-language literature on the wars for Indochina, the city must be one of its least studied dimensions.¹ Other than William Turley's path-breaking articles on

1 This is a revised version of chapter 5 in my *Vietnam: un état né de la guerre (1945–1954)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011). My deepest thanks to Professors Hew Strachan and Martin

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Hanoi and Saigon and Christophe Dutrône's account of the battle of Hanoi in 1947, we know remarkably little about how some 30 years of violence in Vietnam impacted upon urban centres.² Very few scholars have considered the social and cultural transformations of the colonial city in a time of war, whether in wars of conquest or those of violent decolonization. This stands in contrast to studies of the Algerian War, in which the battle of Algiers looms large.³ Authors writing general histories of Saigon and Hanoi touch upon urban violence, to be sure, but they only do so as a sideshow to their larger stories. And yet the city was the site where hostilities first commenced between the French and the Vietnamese in 1945; the war for Vietnam ended there 30 years later. The impact upon urban centres, people, and society was real.⁴

Part of the problem is that scholars working on war and society in Vietnam War studies have tended to treat the city as an island cut off from the wider conflagrations occurring in the countryside.⁵ Similar presumptions prevailed in Chinese studies, until recent scholarship on wartime Shanghai, for example, demonstrated the extent to which this semi-colonial city was anything but isolated from communist bases during the Second World War.⁶ Indeed, many rural Chinese communist zones depended heavily on Japanese-occupied urban centres. A parallel shift towards the city at war has also occurred in the historiography of the world wars in Europe. The work of Jay Winter, Jean-Louis Robert, and Roger Chickering on European capital cities during the First World War certainly comes to mind, as does Mark Mazower's penetrating account of the Greek experience of occupation during the Second, including its urban dimensions.

Thomas for their incisive and helpful comments. John Broucke kindly provided help consulting the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*.

- 2 William S. Turley, 'Urbanization in War: Hanoi, 1946–1973', *Pacific Affairs* XLVIII (1975), pp. 370–97; William Turley, 'Urban Transformation in South Vietnam', *Pacific Affairs* XLIX (1976–7), pp. 607–24; Christophe Dutrône, 'La bataille de Hanoi', *Batailles*, hors série no. 7 (2005), pp. 12–28. Vietnamese scholars have written prolifically about the battle of Hanoi, but almost all of this literature is commemorative in nature (published annually to coincide with 19 December 1946). However, it does include a large number of interviews with actors of the time, thus providing invaluable sources for historians (see below).
- 3 On the military and political aspects of the battle of Algiers, the literature is massive. Less has been done on the social, cultural, and urban nature of Algiers in wartime. A notable exception is the groundbreaking work of Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also chapters in Jean-Jacques Jordi and Guy Pervillé, eds, *Alger (1940–1962): une ville en guerres* (Paris: Autrement, 1999).
- 4 See Samuel Huntington, 'The Bases of Accommodation', *Foreign Affairs* XLVI (1968), pp. 642–56.
- 5 A recent and notable exception is David Hunt's *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959–1968* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).
- 6 Gregor Benton, *New Fourth Army: Communist Resistance along the Yangtze and the Huai, 1938–1941* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1999); Christian Henriot and Wen-Hsin Yeh, eds, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai under Japanese Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Wen-Hsin Yeh, ed., *Wartime Shanghai* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

Rather than divorcing the home front from the front lines, these new studies explore the sociocultural linkages between them.⁷

This connection also applies to wars of decolonization in the non-Western world. Far from severing the French-controlled cities from the rural-based Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), better known as the Viet Minh, war and its attending requirements made colonial urban centres of vital importance to the embattled nation-state. This article explores the nature and the operation of the Viet Minh's underground city or 'occupied city' (*thanh pho bi chiem*). However, rather than providing a strictly military or political account of it, our study focuses on some socio-economic forces driving it. In material terms, urban centres provided badly needed manufactured goods, labour, specialists, electronic products, people, and medicines to the isolated and unindustrialized guerrilla economy. Second, in order to build 'underground cities' in Saigon and Hanoi, to connect them to the maquis state, and to export much-needed materials to the 'outside', the Viet Minh cultivated a complex set of social relations in urban centres and surrounding rural areas. Third, while Dien Bien Phu has come to symbolize the Viet Minh's independence struggle, this set-piece 'modern' battle masks the fact that the colonial city was also a battlefield. However, in order to deliver this type of asymmetrical battle, the Viet Minh had to promote something of a 'total' war in which civilians, even children, found themselves in the line of fire. Understanding how the Viet Minh organized colonial cities socially and fought urban wars might allow for wider comparisons of war and society in other areas of the world, and not just its non-Western, colonial parts.

II. The Nation's Colonial Cities: Knowledge, Modernity, and People

Four years before Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China in Beijing in October 1949, the communist-led nationalist front, the Viet Minh, had already taken power in all the colonial cities of Vietnam. On 2 September 1945, before hundreds of thousands gathered in the capital of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declared the birth of a new 'Viet Nam' – the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, this unchallenged urban presence hardly lasted a month in Saigon before the French, with a green light from the British, returned by force to areas below the 16th parallel to re-establish the colonial state taken by the Japanese a few months earlier. The Expeditionary Corps pushed the Viet Minh out of the cities and into the countryside as it took control of roads, bridges, and provincial towns. Things were very different above the 16th parallel, however. Thanks to the Potsdam conference dividing Indochina at that line and the reluctance

7 Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, vol. 2: *A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

of Chiang Kai-shek's occupying forces to countenance a French *coup de force* above it, the Viet Minh operated largely free of colonial interference in towns located in central and northern Vietnam for well over a year. Based in the urban centres, DRV leaders grafted much of the new nation-state onto the pre-existing colonial infrastructure, occupying French administrative buildings, plants, hospitals, and schools, and keeping on board as many reliable colonial-trained Vietnamese civil servants as possible.⁸

What is less known is that as war became increasingly likely from mid-1946, the Viet Minh began evacuating as much of the urban infrastructure and personnel as it could carry. Before dynamiting the French broadcasting station outside Hanoi, for example, DRV officials carefully emptied warehouses of their radios, telephones, generators, and spare parts. They trucked off the station's transmitter, the backbone of the Voice of Vietnam. The same was true for the Pasteur institutes and a host of hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies. The Viet Minh carefully confiscated vaccines, medicines, medical equipment, and, sometimes, personnel. The government even evacuated a sizeable portion of the French-built Faculté de Médecine in Hanoi, enough to allow the new government to start a rudimentary medical school in the northern hills. The DRV's armaments 'industry' operating in the maquis functioned thanks mainly to colonial machinery, materials, and labour evacuated from towns. Meanwhile, scouts and students lifted printing presses, paper, and ink, without which there would have been no circulation of information, functional bureaucracy, education system, or propaganda in the early days.

In many ways towns provided much of the early materiality – apparently around 40,000 tons of it – during the transition from an urban to a rural-based war state. The exportation of manufactured products, machinery, and personnel helped the fledgling state survive the French onslaught of 1947 and start rebuilding itself in the countryside. This also meant that, even after the outbreak of full-scale war in Hanoi in December 1946, the DRV's resistance capital in the northern hills of Thai Nguyen remained very urbanite. Most of the civil servants working there into the late 1940s had left Hanoi as war approached in late 1946 (*phan lon nguoi deu o Ha Noi ra di*).⁹

That said, medicines soon ran out, ink dried up, paper disappeared, machines broke down, and many a bureaucrat lost heart, abandoned the resistance, and returned to the city to make a new start. Holed up in the hills of northern Vietnam, cut off in central Vietnam, and on the run in the insalubrious marshes of the south, DRV authorities constantly struggled to obtain modern equipment and skilled labour to keep the state up and running. To make matters worse, until 1950 the DRV struggled to penetrate the surrounding Asian markets as the French armed forces did their best to isolate their adversary. The need for the Viet Minh to maintain its links to the colonial city and the black markets it harboured remained imperative. This only changed in northern Vietnam from 1950, when Chinese and Soviet communists began supplying weapons, radios, medicines, and

8 On state-making and the colonial graft, see Goscha, *Vietnam*, ch. 2.

9 'Etude sur l'économie Viet Minh', 11 December 1948, p. 12, box C889, Service historique de la Défense (SHD); *Tong ket 60 ngay dem chien dau mo dau toan quoc khang chien chong Phap cua quan va dan thu do Ha Noi* (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1997), pp. 105–6; *Lich su Bo Tong tham muu trong khang chien chong Phap, 1945–1954* (Hanoi: Bo Tong Tham Muu, 1991), p. 154.

other modern materials via the northern border. Even then such aid only trickled into central zones and it rarely, if ever, reached the south, making access to Saigon a top priority well into the 1970s.¹⁰

True, the Viet Minh did its best to burn down the colonial cities upon withdrawing in 1945–7 and subsequently issued orders to embargo them as a part of its own politico-economic offensive to undermine the colonial economy based in Hanoi and Saigon. True, too, the DRV tried to sow a climate of terror to divide loyalties and undermine French legitimacy among the urban populations.¹¹ However, official discourse and practice were often two very different things. The paradox was that the rural-based republic badly needed access to enemy urban centres to survive, and in the end refrained from trying to destroy one of its most important foreign markets and sources of foreign currency, the colonial *piastre indochinoise*.¹² Commanders carefully targeted urban sabotage. Intimidation often worked better than violence. Blind terrorism certainly occurred, but in the end it served only to alienate Vietnamese civilians, who would turn to the French and their Vietnamese allies. Undercover operatives soon received orders to cultivate relations with Western, Asian, and Vietnamese capitalists. The Viet Minh cut deals with Chinese merchants and the owners of the biggest gambling casino in town, Le Grand Monde. If these people paid their dues, everyone could get along just fine. In 1948, taxes in Saigon-Cholon generated the tidy sum of 340,000 piastres for the southern DRV.¹³ Lucien Bodard, a legendary French war correspondent during the Indochina conflict and a fine observer of Saigon's social underside, certainly thought that money was at the heart of the war:

Capitalism is so important to the Vietnamese (*les Viets*) that they are careful not to destroy it. To do so would easily inflict a rude blow! What would stop them from burning all the trucks on the road, killing more French in Saigon, placing mines and bombs anywhere they wanted? It would be easy for them to paralyse the economic life [of Saigon]. And yet they do not do it. They have even gone so far as to organize self-criticism sessions on the 'incorrect solution' of wide-scale destruction.

One Saigon-based DRV agent went so far as to claim that he operated in the city because the Viet Minh 'needs French colonialism'.¹⁴

While Bodard loved to add colour to his anecdotes, there is some truth to this one. The colonial city served as one the DRV's most important foreign markets during the first

10 Vietnamese sources confirm that Saigon and Phnom Penh were crucial to Washington's adversaries' ability to fight on during the Vietnam War (1955–75). And yet one would not know it from the vast Western-language scholarship on this major twentieth-century conflict.

11 The Indochinese Communist Party issued instructions to this effect for the south in late 1945, including the embargo of the cities. *Lich su Sai Gon, Cho Lon, Gia Dinh khang chien, 1945–1975* (Ho Chi Minh City: Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1994), p. 77.

12 Owing to space limitations, I cannot take up the question of the colonial city and currency exchanges in this article. For the Vietnam War, see Thang Long, *Dong do la trong cuoc khang chien chong My cuu nuoc* (Ho Chi Minh City: Tre, 1997).

13 'Etude sur l'économie Viet Minh', 11 December 1948, p. 7.

14 Lucien Bodard, *La guerre d'Indochine: l'enlèvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), II, pp. 187–8.

half of the conflict. How important exactly? It is impossible to say with certainty for lack of trading statistics. The DRV certainly turned to overseas Chinese in Haiphong, Hanoi, and especially Saigon-Cholon to conduct their commercial exchanges in Vietnam and with the surrounding Asian region.¹⁵ Viet Minh underground officials in Hanoi and Saigon were constantly on the lookout for ways to buy the paper and ink required to operate printing presses, the medicine and antibiotics to keep the war state's personnel, leadership, and fledgling army healthy, and the hard-to-find radio parts to guarantee real-time radio communications. The DRV's cottage industries could produce none of these materials. This is why importing paper and typewriters was arguably as important as obtaining bullets and guns. The administrative operation of the state *and* army depended on it. Even vital footwear and clothing came from the occupied city. In 1952 a French intelligence officer complained to his superiors:

For several months now a traffic in sandals is going on between Tourane [Da Nang] and the rebel zone. Made of used tires, these sandals are identical to those used by Viet Minh troops. Almost everyday, on the borders of the [French] controlled zones, our patrols arrest Vietnamese transporting relatively important quantities of these sandals. Lately, a stock of 600 pairs of sandals was discovered in Tourane itself, while the owner was preparing to send them into the non-controlled zone [DRV].¹⁶

The DRV's local industries simply could not match the quality of so many essential manufactured imports. The Viet Minh could purchase these materials, extort them, and even steal them from the city. The French police reported that, between 1 June and 30 August 1948, 9 million units of penicillin, 200,000 packets of Dagenan, and 60,000 premaline and quinacrine tablets (anti-malarial medicines) disappeared from Saigon-Cholon pharmacy shelves.¹⁷ Another report concluded in mid-1947 that 'most' Vietnamese pharmacists in the Saigon-Cholon region were 'supplying the rebels in pharmaceuticals either out of sympathy for the Viet Minh or fear of them'. Also in Saigon, Viet Minh radio specialists renewed their pre-war contacts with their former professors of electronics, who helped them plan and export the parts needed to create the Voice of Nam Bo and that of Saigon-Cholon.¹⁸

Just as important, scientific knowledge flowed out of the underground city in the form of smuggled Western journals, medical dictionaries, electronics diagrams, and training manuals essential to the operation of the DRV's medical school, communications, and intelligence services. During the heat of the battle of Hanoi in late 1946 (see below), soldiers received orders to evacuate under gunfire Dr Ton That Tung's medical library. The Viet Minh operated special supply sections for ordering, procuring, and shipping

15 On the overseas Chinese networks, see Goscha, *Vietnam*, ch. 7.

16 Commandement des Forces terrestres du Centre Vietnam, Secteur autonome de Tourane, no. 298/SAT/2, undated, circa 1952, file V36, box 10H3235, SHD.

17 'Etude sur l'économie Viet Minh', 11 December 1948, p. 14, note 1.

18 Sûreté fédérale, 'Renseignement', 15 July 1947, box 10H534, SHD; *Lich su, truyen thong 30 nam thong tin vo tuyen dien Nam Bo, 1945-1975* (Hanoi: Buu Dien, 2003), pp. 34-7; Georges Boudarel, *Autobiographie* (Paris: Jaques Bertoin, 1991), pp. 122-35.

needed goods from the cities to the maquis. The one for Hue, for example, operated subsections in each of the DRV districts in central Vietnam, and relied on loyal merchants to communicate and trade with the city. This clandestine commerce with Hue fed 'resistance markets' inside the DRV zones with pharmaceutical products, office supplies, and clothing, as well as knowledge.¹⁹

The recruitment and export of city dwellers to the maquis only reinforced such urban-rural connections. The DRV needed skilled personnel, specialized workers as well as literate intellectuals, to work in government ministries, weapons workshops, communications services, clinics, and hospitals. The DRV's nascent education system might have run on high levels of patriotism, but it could never match the quality of training provided by the colonial state (at least not in the early years of the war, before the internationalization of the conflict allowed the communists to create a new class of civil servants and send students to Beijing and Moscow for higher studies). In 1947 orders went out in the south to recruit as many patriotic bureaucrats as possible in urban places in order to get the DRV administration off the ground in the countryside. Unlike northerners, southerners never had the time to evacuate urbanites to the maquis before the French struck in September 1945. They had to recruit and 'export' them clandestinely. In 1947, thanks to the patriotic outburst triggered by the outbreak of hostilities, some 5000–6000 civil servants and intellectuals and 1,000 skilled workers made their way to the DRV.²⁰

In the north the heavy-handed French reoccupation of Hanoi in early 1947 sent thousands of city dwellers fleeing into the countryside, where the Viet Minh could recruit among them easily. The brutal French bombing and reoccupation of Haiphong and Kien An in late 1946 emptied these towns of most of their inhabitants. And by killing and wounding thousands of civilians, the French created a sea of hate which the Viet Minh easily exploited. As late as 1948–9, according to William Turley, Hanoi's population may have remained as low as 10,000 compared to the estimated urban population of 120,000 for 1943. Even if this number represents the inner-city population of around 40,000 people in 1946, this would mean that 30,000 people fled inner-city Hanoi (see below).²¹

The colonial city was an invaluable source of intelligence. Modern means of communication and transportation connected Hanoi and Saigon to the surrounding Asian region, the French metropolis, and the world. One could buy French, Vietnamese, and international newspapers in the cities. Libraries reopened their doors, including those run by the American and foreign consulates. And of course Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon constituted the locus of colonial power. The French high command operated from Hanoi and Saigon and organized its military operations there. The elaboration of any political

19 Commandement des Forces terrestres du Centre Vietnam, Secteur de Hue, Deuxième bureau, 10 October 1952, based on interviews with prisoners involved in this trade, file V36/LK IV, box 10H3235, SHD; Do Sam and Hoang Tieu, 'Tran chien dau bao ve kho sach quy tai nha bac si Ton That Tung', *Tap chi lich su quan su*, no. 4 (1994), pp. 50–1.

20 *Lich su Bo tham muu Quan khu 7 mien dong Nam bo, 1945–1975* (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1994), pp. 40–3; *Lich su Sai Gon*, pp. 137–9; *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an nhan dan, lich su bien nien 1945–54* (Hanoi: Cong An nhan dan, 1998), p. 85.

21 Turley, 'Urbanization in War', p. 371, and *Tong ket*, pp. 70–9.

projects to counter the DRV, such as the 'Bao Dai solution' and a counter-revolutionary state, all emerged there.

Following such developments was obviously a vital task. The countryside could not provide information on these important matters. Nor could the DRV's still badly underdeveloped diplomatic service match the colonial city when it came to reporting on current events. Saigon and Hanoi served as the single most important sources of intelligence and information for the Viet Minh. Agents in the 'occupied cities' systematically bought French, Vietnamese, and foreign newspapers, clipped relevant articles and statistics, and filed and dispatched them to decision-makers waiting in the countryside. Engaged in a colonial war with increasingly important international dimensions, DRV decision-makers needed to keep abreast of the activities of their French as well as their Vietnamese enemies and foreign allies. Effective decision-making depended on it. Security and intelligence agents worked undercover collecting information on French troop movements and political projects. They carefully established detailed reports on the attitudes of the local populations and wove complex webs of relationships with an amalgam of urbanites, ranging from the down and out to the well-to-do, all the while doing their best to infiltrate student, intellectual and cultural associations.²² As a recent history of the security services describes it:

The city's precinct-level public security elements sent hundreds of reports about enemy military activities, political activities, enemy spies, and reactionary political parties back to the city public security headquarters in our base area. Many of these reports contained valuable information that helped us to counter the enemy's efforts to hunt down and arrest our agents and organizations inside the city. Books, magazines, and newspapers that the enemy published inside the city were also sent out regularly to the base area. These published materials helped us to analyse and uncover a great deal of valuable information about enemy activities of all kinds, information that directly supported our counter-espionage operations and our efforts to monitor the overall situation.²³

No sooner had DRV leaders evacuated Hanoi and Saigon than the party sent its agents back in to build parallel underground cities in colonial Hanoi and Saigon, better known in Vietnamese as 'special zones'.²⁴ This also meant that Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon came under unprecedented levels of police surveillance, first from the French and the DRV, then from the Associated State of Vietnam under Bao Dai from 1949. Of course long before the outbreak of hostilities the colonial police had always closely followed underground nationalist activities in the cities. What was new during the Indochina War was that the Sûreté could now rely on the army and a host of new intelligence services to help it in its repressive and intelligence-gathering work.

22 For an excellent account, see Nguyen Bac's memoirs, *Giua thanh pho bi chiem* (Hanoi: Ha Noi, 1994), beautifully translated into the French by Philippe Papin, *Au cœur de la ville captive: souvenirs d'un agent viet-minh infiltré à Hanoi* (Paris: Arléa, 2004).

23 *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an*, p. 163.

24 *Lich su tinh bao cong an nhan dan Viet Nam (1945–1954)* (Hanoi: Cong An Nhan Dan, no date), pp. 55–7.

A decade before going into the Casbah in Algiers, the French army had already become deeply involved in policing the colonial cities in Vietnam. The Deuxième Bureau opened files on Saigon, Hanoi, and Hue, and exchanged information with the Sûreté and a wide range of other Franco-ASV intelligence services. By 1950, in order to keep the Viet Minh out of Saigon-Cholon, the French deployed almost 15,000 troops there, including 1000 Cambodians, 2100 Cao Dai, and 171 Catholic Vietnamese. Another 5000 troops protected Cholon. Security agents and soldiers subjected buses and cars entering and exiting the cities to routine searches. The French military constructed blockhouses; set up armed checkpoints at the main arteries; stationed agents, informers, and troops in strategically located suburban villages; and operated regular commando operations.²⁵

All of this contributed to the militarization, regimentation, and surveillance of urban life. Citizens carried obligatory identity cards with them and grew accustomed to showing their papers, undergoing frisks, and passing through checkpoints. Curfews were often de rigueur. Armed policemen and soldiers patrolling the streets were common sights. Movements into and out of the city were subject to control. One did not just 'walk into' or 'out of' the colonial city in wartime. For those working against the French, even moving through the city could be a nerve-racking experience. As one undercover communist agent recalled his time in Hanoi in the early 1950s: 'When one moves about, one must do so with calm and it is particularly important not to look over one's shoulder. An anxious look, a scared face or an abnormal demeanour is enough to give you away and get you nabbed.'²⁶

The DRV police and intelligence services mirrored the work of their adversaries, which gave rise to the dual surveillance of the city. The DRV's underground police officials led by the likes of Tran Quoc Hoan in Hanoi and Cao Dang Chiem in Saigon presided over the monitoring of the French and the ASV in the colonial cities. These security men stationed their own moles, agents, and spies, responsible theoretically for each of the quarters into which Saigon and Hanoi had been divided. The head of the southern armed forces, General Nguyen Binh, ran his own military surveillance operation in Saigon until 1950. Bureaucrats established card files on those working with the French 'up above', all the while carefully noting the names of those working for them in the streets and cafés 'down below'. The underground city was part of the DRV's state administration and military command. Little wonder French and ASV authorities travelled with unprecedented security details and changed their itineraries daily. The fear of assassination and 'grenading' was real. Nor should we be surprised that powerful Vietnamese politicians and merchants allied with the French were not the only ones to flee Hanoi in late 1954.²⁷

25 Tran Huy Lieu, ed., *Lich su thu do Ha Noi* (Hanoi: Vien Su Hoc, 1960), p. 243; *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an*, p. 116; 'Expériences tirées des combats des défenses, 20–24 novembre 1946, à Haiphong', box 10H532, SHD; *Lich su Sai Gon*, p. 207.

26 Nguyen Bac, *Au cœur de la ville captive*, pp. 37–8.

27 See what Nguyen Bac has to say about the different classes of people leaving Hanoi in *Au cœur de la ville captive*: ch. 15 among other passages.

III. The Ties that Bind

The DRV's underground cities could never have operated had it not been for the people moving the goods and information on the ground. Suave communist cadres may have called the shots. Nguyen Binh's charisma may have become the stuff of legends. But all these men (few women held leadership positions) relied on patriotic youth and students, women street vendors, and even children to pass information and materials to and from the city. Many took extraordinary risks harbouring agents, gathering information, and moving people, medicines, radio parts, and money across enemy lines. These people came from all walks of life. Bourgeois students driven by the patriotism flowing out of the exciting days of 1945–7 were certainly active in this domain, especially at the outset of the war, as were intellectuals, teachers, and even lawyers who protected Nguyen Binh during his underground tour of Saigon in 1947. Hundreds of these individuals evacuated with the Viet Minh or joined the army in the early days. Many returned to the cities and continued to militate in legal and illegal organizations.

Dr Nguyen Thi Ngoc Toan, a member of the Vietnamese royal family, is a case in point. She began her revolutionary career in Hue with the advent of the Viet Minh. While still a teenager, she secretly carried documents and medicines out of the city and handed out propaganda pamphlets in Hue and Saigon. 'I was just so excited, so I followed the others,' she later recalled; 'we enjoyed it very much', because 'these kinds of activities were very well suited to that age, when one enjoys adventure and danger'. Toan's elite education (she was a fluent French-speaking graduate of Dong Khanh high school) and high social standing (royal blood) served her well, helping her to get out of jail on a number of occasions. Her French captors (as well as her worried mother) told her that a member of the royal family, a woman at that, should not be involved in these subversive activities reserved 'for the poor and the downtrodden'. This did not stop Toan, or other educated middle-class youth. In 1948, exasperated, the Sûreté finally expelled her from Hue. This was one case among many.²⁸

Of equal if not greater importance logistically was the phalanx of itinerant women traders, street vendors, and hawkers who plied their trades daily between the city and its outlying areas, moving from market to market, street by street. The mobile nature of their jobs dovetailed nicely with the Viet Minh's need to move materials, documents, and people into and out of the city. These women, mainly in their teens and twenties, covered the urban terrain with their baskets on their shoulders. They possessed invaluable knowledge of the main streets, backstreets, and the social underside on which the DRV's underground city's exchanges turned. Male nationalist leaders betted heavily that the combination of their gender and class would shield these women, and thus the goods they carried secretly, from body searches and confiscation.²⁹

28 'Oral History Interview of Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Toan', 11 June 2007, by Merle Pribbenow, Hanoi. See also Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 141, and Xuan Phuong, *Ao Dai* (Great Neck, New York: EMQUAD International, 2004), pp. 49–82.

29 *Luoc su chien si quyet tu: Sai Gon Cho Lon Gia Dinh, 1945–1954* (Ho Chi Minh City: Cau Lac Bo Truyen Thong Vu Trang, 1993), pp. 55–9, 100–8; Bui Kim Khoat and Hai Ha, 'Gia lam phu nu di cho danh up dich', *Su Kien va Nhan Chung*, no. 54 (1998), p. 23.

The DRV thus carefully recruited *passeuses* or *giao lien* to link the city to the countryside. How many exactly? Probably around 50 respectively for Saigon, Hue, and Hanoi, located inside the cities and their outlying suburbs, where the Viet Minh ran safe bases usually near markets – sources of local information par excellence. In their memoirs, ranking DRV cadres often mention the importance of female guides escorting them safely into or out of the city. Reflecting on his entry into Hanoi in 1951, Nguyen Bac emphasized the impressive knowledge they marshalled:

My liaison agent, that is the person charged with taking me [into Hanoi], was a solid young woman with a sun-tanned complexion who knew the area perfectly. There was nothing that escaped her when it came to her work [as a liaison agent]. She warned me that in the event of a police check or even if someone asked indiscreet questions, we were to answer that we were a couple returning to Hanoi after spending several days in our native village to take part in a ceremony in honour of a deceased parent. She gave me the name of the imaginary village, that of its hamlet, and the complete family lineage of the members of our alleged rural family, as well as the kinship ties uniting our families for generations. And she made it clear to me in all seriousness that I had to be able to repeat all of this without hesitation and do so with a straight face!³⁰

The social and sociological knowledge these young women possessed was simply priceless, situated at that very real intersection where the rural-based war state's sovereignty meshed with that of the French colonial city which the nationalists so badly needed to penetrate. These were extremely dangerous zones, where suspicions always ran high at border checkpoints, ID papers were mandatory, and demeanour, diction, and intelligence counted more than brawn. Ngo Van Chieu, another patriotic urbanite who joined the army in 1945, owed everything to his young female guide smuggling him safely into Hanoi in 1951. During a police inspection of the bus carrying them into the northern city, Chieu forgot where he was, and disingenuously used the word 'comrade' when responding to the soldier questioning him at the checkpoint: 'Why did you call me comrade?' the Vietnamese officer shot back. 'I was speechless,' Chieu later recalled, but in a flash 'the young girl took over [the conversation]'. In fact, she did *all* the talking and *all* the thinking. She provided the ASV officer with an extraordinarily detailed account of Chieu's life as a poor peasant under communist tyranny and a plausible alibi for his use of this communist term. As she concluded brilliantly to the gun-toting man standing before her:

The liaison agent: Honourable officer, my brother is a very good bricklayer but he's not that intelligent. We are but poor peasants. Please be so kind as to forgive us. We are coming to place ourselves under your protection [against the communists] in Hanoi ...

Officer: OK, that's fine, get going. But don't call people here comrades ... You could come across less understanding policemen.

The liaison agent: Yes, honourable officer, thank you, sir. [To Chieu:] Quick ... we will go to my godmother, who lives near here.³¹

30 Nguyen Bac, *Au cœur de la ville captive*, p. 20.

31 Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un combattant viet-minh* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), p. 168.

Women, their knowledge, and social and kinship connections were vital to the operation, indeed, the creation of the underground city and its linkages to the 'outside'. Chieu's guide, a Catholic, sheltered him in her godmother's house. Chieu owed his freedom, perhaps his life, to this young woman. Communist ideology clearly counted for little here. But in other cases it could be an important bond. Leading the very reconnaissance team that the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) sent back into the devastated capital days after the last militias had withdrawn on 17 February 1947 was one Nguyen Thi Thuan. Her task? Gathering intelligence and securing the safe passage of male cadres back into the now occupied city. She was the wife of one of the most important Vietnamese communist leaders. And she was not the only 'party leader wife' to play such important (and dangerous!) roles in the underground city and elsewhere.³²

Also serving as scouts for the first returning teams to Hanoi were five children from the 'young boys surveillance squad' (*Doi Thieu Nien Bam Sat*). All of them came from poor families. Most were orphans. And there was unfortunately no shortage of them at the time. Poverty had long pushed peasants into colonial Saigon.³³ The terrible famine of 1944–5 had created scores of parentless children in heartbreaking circumstances in and around Hanoi. The dislocation of families caused by the famine facilitated the Viet Minh's ability to recruit guides and informers among children. In Saigon, Hue, and Hanoi, the Viet Minh recruited orphans hawking newspapers, working as shoeshine boys, begging, or thieving. They were judged streetwise and not under parental control, and – because of their young age, scruffy appearance, and menial jobs – they tended to go unnoticed by the French security services (or so the Viet Minh thought – wrongly). These children helped provide and move information and personnel within, into, and out of towns. The DRV leadership used youngsters to deliver personal letters from Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and others to friends and luminaries in Hanoi, urging them not to collaborate with the French and to join the resistance zones.³⁴ Many of these children also died in this violent war of decolonization, collapsing the divide between civilians and combatants from the start (Figure 1).³⁵

32 'Quan bao mat tran Ha Noi trong vung bi dich tam chiem', *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 13 October 2009. While I treat the question in a separate study, it is worth noting that markets, as sites of local knowledge and social networking, served as nodal points for organizing the 'underground city', gathering intelligence, and building networks. The French also used the markets to combat their adversaries in similar ways.

33 Haydon Cherry, 'Down and Out in Saigon: A Social History of the Poor in a Colonial City, 1860–1940', PhD dissertation, New Haven: Yale University, 2011.

34 *Lich su tinh bao cong an*, pp. 56–8; *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an*, pp. 55–7, 76–7, 96–7; 'Doi thieu nien quan bao Bat Sat', *Su Kien va Nhan Chung*, no. 14 (March 1995), p. 33. For Saigon, see *Luoc su chien si quyet tu*, pp. 59, 104–8.

35 That said, there is nothing uniquely 'Vietnamese' or 'non-Western' about the appearance of children, especially orphans, in asymmetrical 'wars of liberation' dating back to antiquity. Bernard Fall, renowned French specialist of the Indochina War, got his start in the French resistance at 15. The Nazis murdered his parents. Another French soldier who began his military career as an orphan in the resistance against the Germans was none other than Roger Vanderberghe. See my *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War, 1945–1954* (Honolulu/Copenhagen: University of Hawaii Press/NIAS, 2011), pp. 168–9, 479–80.



Figure 1. Child soldiers in the *Nhi Dong Cuu Quoc Hoi* (Children's National Salvation Association), Hanoi, c.1946. (Collection Christophe Dutrône.)

IV. The Battle of Hanoi: Collapsing the Civilian–Military Divide

Ten years before French paratroopers stormed the Casbah in 1957, the Viet Minh had already transformed the colonial city into a battlefield (Figure 2). Between 19 December 1946 and 17 February 1947 the DRV committed a 10,000 strong ragtag militia force to bogging down the French in the narrow streets of the Sino-Vietnamese quarter of Hanoi as the government headed for the hills. House by house, street by street, Viet Minh partisans struggled to hold out against enemy commandos as well as French artillery



Figure 2. DRV militia pulling a corpse from Hanoi rubble, December 1946. (Copyright Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, Hanoi.)

barrages and air strikes. By the end of the battle, much of the old quarter of Hanoi and its historic *36 rues* lay in rubble.³⁶

That the city was the site of the first twentieth-century battle for Vietnam should come as no surprise. Having taken power in the wake of the Japanese defeat in August 1945, and in the absence of the French, republican leaders were as determined to hold the capital as their colonial competitors were to recover it. As diplomatic negotiations deteriorated in France in mid-1946 and local French authorities adopted a more aggressive line towards

36 See the images in the propaganda newsreel made by the French in early 1947 on the battle of Hanoi: 'Les débuts de la guerre d'Indochine: Hanoi en décembre 1946', [www.ina.fr / fresques/jalons/fiche-media/InaEdu00063](http://www.ina.fr/fresques/jalons/fiche-media/InaEdu00063).

the DRV based in Hanoi, Vietnamese communists began preparations for full-scale war. On the one hand, strategists such as Truong Chinh, Ho Chi Minh, and Vo Nguyen Giap understood perfectly well that, in the event of a violent conflagration, their forces would be unable to hold Hanoi for long against the better armed and trained Expeditionary Corps (part of which had fought violent urban battles against the Nazis in Alsace-Lorraine).³⁷ As a result, the government accelerated preparations to evacuate its archives, civil servants, and materials to secure zones in the countryside as discussed above. On the other hand, the leadership was determined to make the colonial reoccupation of central and northern towns as costly as possible for the returning colonizer. More importantly, this would serve to pin down enemy troops and firepower as the leadership made its long march to its new capitals in the jungles of northern and central Vietnam. Such a battle would also draw international attention to the Viet Minh's cause, since several foreign correspondents (for the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*, for example) and diplomats were covering events from Hanoi and Saigon.³⁸ Perhaps more important was the need to demonstrate to the Vietnamese people the government's will to fight. The French occupation of Haiphong in November and their attacks on refugees fleeing to nearby Kien An had left the impression that Ho Chi Minh's government could not or would not protect its citizens. By taking a stand in the capital, the DRV leadership wanted to send a clear message to its people that it was prepared to fight. The last thing the leadership wanted was to lose popular support at this vital moment in its existence.³⁹

The result was that although Ho continued to try to negotiate a way out of a colonial war until the last minute, his government simultaneously initiated plans to bog the French down in the cities in the event that hostilities broke out. In mid-1946 DRV leaders met on several occasions to discuss ways of holding the capital in order to meet the goals outlined above. Strategists considered how the Soviets had fought at Stalingrad. They examined how southerners had used scorched-earth tactics and mounted barricades in certain towns in confrontations with the French. Nguyen Binh recommended such methods to his northern counterparts. The high command and the ICP put Vuong Thua Vu in charge of devising an urban battle plan that would cover the government's retreat and demonstrate to the people its resolve to fight. Vu immediately went to work as commander of the 'special region of Hanoi'. Not without reason: on 19 October 1946 the ICP concluded that 'sooner or later' the French would attack and the Vietnamese would have to adopt an armed line.⁴⁰

That said, Hanoi had been on a war footing for some time. Japanese occupation had already militarized colonial cities since the early 1940s; the advent of the post-colonial

37 On the complex events leading to the outbreak of war on 19 December 1946, see Stein Tonnesson, *Vietnam, 1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

38 *Ha Noi ban hung ca bat tu mua dong 1946* (Hanoi: Ban tuyen giao thanh uy Ha Noi, 2006), p. 40. The British and Chinese operated consulates in Hanoi as of late 1946. A full-fledged American consulate operated in Hanoi as of 9 January 1947. Its vice consul, James O'Sullivan, sympathized with Vietnamese nationalist aspirations and helped facilitate, with his Chinese and British counterparts, the signing of a truce a few days later.

39 *Tong ket*, pp. 91–2.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–7, 91–2.

state and its army only reinforced this after mid-1945, as did the arrival of tens of thousands of Chinese troops. Thanks to the 6 March Accords, the head of ground forces in Indochina, General Philippe Leclerc, had already legally landed some 15,000 troops above the 16th parallel to replace the withdrawing Chinese ones. Leclerc's men occupied strategically important towns located across central and northern Vietnam, working in tandem with their DRV counterparts via mixed military commissions.

The Vietnamese Army (*Ve Quoc Doan*) maintained 2516 troops on active duty in Hanoi in December 1946 and counted a 10,000 strong militia force (*dan quan tu ve*). Although they all ran on high levels of patriotism, the militiamen and women were poorly trained and woefully armed. Discipline was often shoddy. The French stationed some 4500 well-armed and experienced Expeditionary Corps troops in Hanoi, including those of the famous *Deuxième Division Blindée* as well as Foreign Legion troops freed from their Japanese-imposed confinement. Armoured vehicles, tanks, artillery, and machine-gun-equipped Spitfires backed them up. French commanders also rearmed many of the terrified French community in Hanoi so that they could protect themselves in the event that hostilities broke out.⁴¹ One can only imagine the intensity and the complexity of human emotions running through Hanoi by late 1946.

Until the outbreak of war, the DRV administered the capital. In 1946 greater Hanoi, including its outlying villages, covered 150 km². The inner city measured around 13 km², consisting of the capital's main buildings and factories, as well as the European, Chinese, and Vietnamese neighbourhoods. After coming to power, the DRV divided the inner city into 17 quarters and placed them within three new 'inter zones'. The ICP-run special zone was theoretically in charge. In November 1946, as both sides slid towards hostilities, the authorities transformed this urban zone into war zone 11. On the eve of full-scale war, some 30,000 people lived in inner-city Hanoi, including about 10,000 overseas Chinese, 2,000 French settlers, and perhaps 200 Indians, whereas the outlying areas of the capital registered 223,000 mainly Vietnamese inhabitants.⁴²

The militia bore the brunt of the battle of Hanoi. Unwilling to see his nascent army smashed at such a critical juncture, Vo Nguyen Giap evacuated all but a handful of his regular troops from the capital in mid-December. Civilians would thus do the fighting. Since taking power in August 1945, the DRV operated three main militia groups in Hanoi: the Hoang Dieu Fighting Militia Forces (*Doi Tu Ve Chien Dau Hoang Dieu*), consisting of 300 members, both men and women; the Hoang Dieu City Militia (*Tu Ve Thanh Hoang Dieu*), numbering 8500 persons; and the Industrial Workers Militia (*Doi Tu Ve Xi Nghiep*). On 20 August 1946 the government combined these three elements into the Hanoi Youth Militia Corps (*Doan Thanh Nien Tu Ve Hanoi*), which operated in the inner city and numbered about 9000 individuals in all. In the outlying areas the DRV counted on the Suburban People's Armed Militia (*Dan Quan Tu Ve Ngoai Thanh*), which numbered more than 10,000 members. In addition there was a very small police assault force (*cong an xung phong*). In all, in December 1946, the Tu Ve inside Hanoi numbered

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–8, 268–9; 'L'état de siège s'étend à tout l'Indochine du Nord', *Le Monde*, no. 624, 24 December 1946, p. 1.

42 *Tong ket*, pp. 70–1, 81–2, 266; *Thu do Ha Noi lich su khang chien chong thuc dan Phap 1945–54* (Hanoi: Nhat Xuat Ban Ha Noi, 1986), p. 18.

around 9000 individuals, in addition to about 1000 soldiers who remained behind. This total force of 10,000 men and women had at their disposal some colonial-era mines, grenades, pistols, 5000–6000 rifles, and 2 light machine-guns. However, these civilian forces had little ammunition and would find it exceedingly hard to obtain supplies from outside the city during the battle. Moreover, almost none of these fighters had any kind of combat experience and knew nothing of urban warfare. When the fighting broke out, many scattered and ran. Probably only some 2000 militiamen and women at most participated in the battle. This was, however, a military operation. In charge was Vuong Thua Vu, the future commander of the redoubtable 308th division at Dien Bien Phu.⁴³

But could the Vietnamese pin down the French in Hanoi for long enough to allow the government and the army to head for the hills? The loss of Haiphong a month earlier was hardly encouraging. During a meeting held on 14 or 15 December, Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Hoang Van Thai discussed this matter. The president pointedly asked his colleagues ‘if war were to break out, for how long could we hold Hanoi?’ A wall of silence met his question. Ho repeated it, wondering whether the DRV forces could hold the capital at all. His military leaders consulted each other separately before finally promising the president that they could. Such faltering hesitation could not have been encouraging. There was no guarantee that the DRV would do any better than it had in Haiphong or Saigon. Whatever its weaknesses, the French Expeditionary Corps was no pushover.⁴⁴

While Ho Chi Minh did not want war, he and his government prepared for it in the weeks leading up to the 19th. On 13 December, Vuong Thu Vu’s final battle plan received the leadership’s stamp of approval. According to Yves Gras, as many as 30,000 people, including 8000 Chinese, remained holed up in the Sino-Vietnamese part of downtown Hanoi (LK I) after hostilities began on the evening of 19 December. Vietnamese, Chinese, and European civilians were thus caught in the crossfire when full-scale colonial war commenced that fateful evening.⁴⁵

As with the Algerian FLN holed up in the Casbah in Algiers in 1956–7, Vuong Thua Vu’s plan in late 1946 was designed to exploit the maze of narrow streets and alleys of the indigenous quarter of Hanoi.⁴⁶ In the weeks leading up to war, the Vietnamese organized a labyrinth of relays and communications, stashed supplies and arms, recruited messengers and militia, all the while trying to keep these highly excitable elements under control. This was no mean feat, as the French looked to advance their positions at every available opportunity. On the basis of lessons coming from other areas, northern Viet Minh chose to place barricades in the narrow streets of the old quarter to slow tanks, armed vehicles, and troops from advancing easily into the city. In the weeks leading up

43 *Tong ket*, pp. 50–5, 82–6, 280–1; ‘En Indochine: attaques et contre-attaques localisées se poursuivent’, *Le Monde*, no. 654, 30 January 1947, p. 2.

44 ‘Vo Nguyen Giap va hai lan bao ve thu do’, *Viet Bao*, 21 November 2007, and *Tong ket*, p. 92.

45 *Tong ket*, pp. 104–5, 152–4, 213; Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d’Indochine* (Paris: Denoël, 1992), p. 163.

46 For more on this, see To Kien, ‘“Tube House” and “Neo Tube House” in Hanoi: A Comparative Study on Identity and Typology’, *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, no. 262 (November 2008), pp. 255–62.

to the outbreak of war, the Viet Minh requisitioned houses and prepared their contents to be emptied into the streets once the order arrived. Even before the lights went out on the night of 19 December, the cue for the militias to attack, the face of the inner city had already changed as mountains of furniture, felled trees, and heaps of refuse piled into the streets, anything to stop the rapid advance of the enemy. Meanwhile, some 2000 fighters, men, women, and children, disappeared into a rabbit warren of interconnected houses, shops, back alleys, and buildings (Figure 3). This ‘barricading of the streets’ (*chien luy duong pho*) and cat-and-mouse tactics would slow down the French as the militia sought to make good on the pledge made to Ho Chi Minh that Hanoi could be held for a month.⁴⁷ The strategic goal of course was to make international headlines and to bog down the French for as long as possible, so that the government could make it to the new capital in the countryside without being destroyed en route (Ho was in the Hanoi area only hours before hostilities began). Except for the devastating French paratrooper attack on Bac Kan, this was largely a success.

However, things hardly went as planned inside the capital. Demolitionists failed to blow up the Paul Doumer (Long Bien) bridge, nor did the Viet Minh succeed in taking the Gia Lam airport, despite several attempts under enemy machine-gun fire. The French thus controlled the vital routes connecting Hanoi to the outside, along which they could rush in reinforcements and supplies from Haiphong and Langson. From Gia Lam, the French flew in troops, arms, and supplies from Saigon. They bombed and shelled with impunity Viet Minh positions in Hanoi, and even mortared the indigenous sector from the nearby airbase.⁴⁸ In the early days the French quickly consolidated their hold on the European quarter and the main arteries and administrative buildings of the capital (Figure 4), including the presidential palace and the post office, but not before some of the most gruesome massacres of the Indochina War had occurred, when Viet Minh partisans attacked French civilians. The militarization of daily life was inevitable as French civilians organized their own vigilante groups to patrol the streets against those attacking them. On both sides of the colonial divide, the humanity of the other was the first to go. As one French civilian under siege in Hanoi wrote to *Le Monde*:

Morale remains very high and, after the humiliation of 9 March 1945, the French have even greater amounts of courage needed to smash an organized banditry ... which has been able to fool the entire world with a mask of loyal collaboration but was at the same time slowly and surely organizing the extermination not only of the French but of all the whites in general.⁴⁹

In accordance with the French law of 1849, the French announced martial law as the army assumed ‘full powers’ in areas above the 16th parallel it was now taking from the DRV.⁵⁰

47 *Tong ket*, pp. 93–5, 228; ‘Les opérations militaires’, *Le Monde*, no. 627, 27 December 1946, p. 1; and ‘L’état de siège’, p. 1.

48 ‘Les événements d’Indochine’, *Le Monde*, no. 643, 21 January 1947, p. 2; ‘Le conflit s’étend à tout le Tonkin’, *Le Monde*, no. 622, 21 December 1946, p. 1.

49 See ‘Les événements de Hanoi du 19 décembre’, *Le Monde*, no. 643, 21 January 1947, p. 2.

50 ‘L’état de siège s’étend’, p. 1.



Figure 3. Barricaded Hanoi, 1946. (Collection Christophe Dutrône.)

By 1 January 1947 the French army was in control of the city except for the Sino-Vietnamese quarter located in the maze of streets, houses, and shops making up the old quarter (LK 1, 2, and 3 in Figure 4). Some 2000 members of the militia were holed up in this area and they were not going to come out without a fight. On 27 December the French attempted to penetrate these areas, but failed at the price of 15 dead and 30 injured. The commander-in-chief of Expeditionary Corps in Indochina, General Jean Valluy, called for a demonstration of force. He instructed General Louis Morlière, in charge of retaking the city, to ‘hit them hard with the cannon and the bomb ... in order to put an end to [the resistance] and to prove to our adversary the overwhelming superiority of our capabilities’. However, rather than reduce the old quarter to rubble, Morlière preferred to impose a blockade around the indigenous quarter, leaving an outlet for the militia to escape across the Red River into the countryside. Perhaps more important was the need to protect the large Chinese community caught in the crossfire. The Chinese consul strongly opposed the bombing and strafing of the old quarters, where thousands of Chinese civilians were still trapped. On 15 January, thanks to a truce brokered by the Chinese, British, and American consulates, civilians began evacuating the besieged quarter. On that day 6000 women, children, and elderly Vietnamese, as well as some 500 Chinese, left the city. On the 24th another 3000 Chinese and some 200 elderly and sick left the town.⁵¹

51 *Tong ket*, p. 234; Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, pp. 164–5; ‘En Indochine’, p. 2; ‘10,000 Chinese Trapped’, *New York Times*, 13 January 1947.

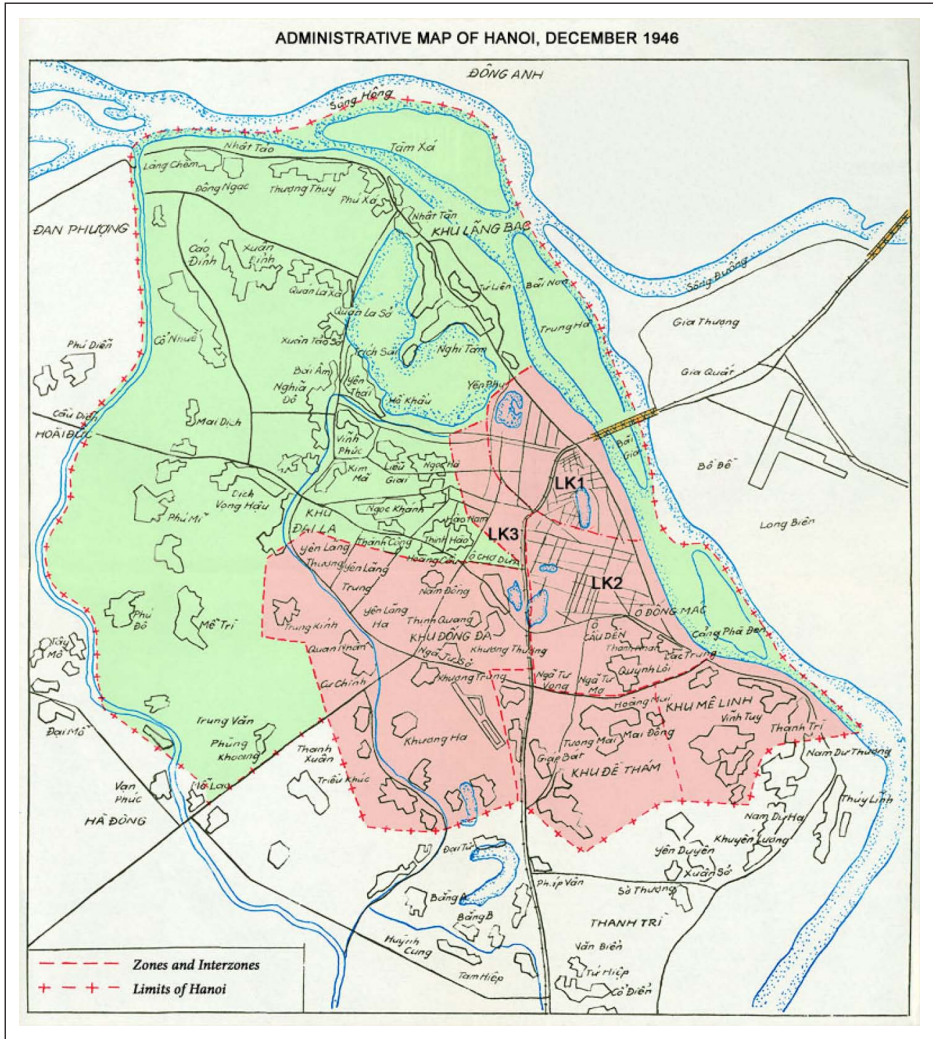


Figure 4. Hanoi on the eve of the battle of Hanoi, 1946–7. Le Minh Cuong, C. Goscha, and Tong ket 60 ngày đem chiến đấu mở đầu toàn quốc kháng chiến chống Pháp của quan và dân thủ đô Hà Nội (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1997).

Morlière’s blockade of the old quarter ended shortly thereafter, when General Leclerc relieved him of his command. Nevertheless, Morlière’s strategy, or more accurately the presence of Chinese civilians protected by their consulate, had helped the DRV high command achieve its goal of holding out in Hanoi for at least one month. All that changed when Colonel Debès, the man who had commanded the occupation of Haiphong, replaced Morlière and assumed operations in Hanoi. Like his boss, General Valluy, Debès preferred to use a lot of force (*frapper fort*). He sent in troops to destroy the

resistance concentrated now in an estimated 25,000 m² area and called in artillery and air strikes (something which the French would carefully refrain from doing a decade later in Algiers). Meanwhile, the DRV high command attempted to unite the disparate forces remaining in the city in the form of a sole 'regiment' under the command of Vuong Thua Vu. The 'capital regiment', as it was called, came to life in the old quarter on 12 January. In all, it numbered some 1000 male and female militia fighters, badly armed but committed to bogging the French down until the order to leave arrived. As for the rest, a few hundred had died, several hundred had sneaked out with refugees during the truce, and the remainder melded into the remaining population or escaped across the Red River.⁵²

Following the truce, fighting resumed (Figure 5). While it was sporadic, often occurring at night, it could be intense. Barricades lined the narrow streets. Belligerents caught glimpses of each other as they scampered from one wall to another. Snipers went to work on both sides. Some face-to-face killing certainly occurred, but bombers, artillery, and tanks did the rest. Duong Van Mai, a child at the time, described later how her two older brothers, militiamen during the battle of Hanoi, first encountered combat in the city:

Suddenly, being in the militia was no longer just fun and games for my brothers Giu and Xuong, no longer just marches and drills with spears. Their militia unit buried its first casualty when French snipers shot a squad leader as he climbed up a flagpole to display the Viet Minh banner. Right after that incident, a messenger arrived with the news that French troops stationed in the Lanessan hospital near our house were getting ready for an assault, supported with lots of tanks. The messenger told the militia unit to withdraw that night, under the cover of darkness. But the French attack came before nightfall, with airplanes and tanks strafing the Viet Minh troops' barracks near the dike. After the bombardment, French paratroopers advanced into the neighborhood from three directions, with fierce shouts of 'En avant!' There was no return fire from the Viet Minh regulars, who had secretly and hastily withdrawn, leaving the militiamen to fend for themselves... That night, the Viet Minh sneaked back and opened fire on French positions. No damage was done, but the attack angered the French. The next day, they stormed back with German shepherds to search the neighborhood. The streets echoed with the furious barking of the dogs, the crunching of French boots, and the angry voices of the soldiers, who were spoiling for retaliation.⁵³

The Viet Minh found it harder to stop the tanks much less the artillery shells and bombs falling from the sky. By early February, bulldozers were clearing the barricades leading into the core of LK I. The French often used Viet Minh prisoners to clear the barricades, putting them at the mercy of snipers. Captured during the battle of Hanoi, Mai Van Elliott's brother found himself clearing barricades he had helped erect. She recalls her brother's description of this dangerous chore: 'Once, an old prisoner, who was standing right next to Giu, quietly collapsed like a deflated balloon from a sniper's bullet.'⁵⁴ French Union troops fought house by house as the militia forces retreated to areas near the Red River waiting for the order to disperse and sneak out of the city. That order

52 Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su thu do Ha Noi*, pp. 229–30; *Ha Noi ban hung ca bat tu mua dong 1946*, pp. 62–3, 179, 217; '10,000 Chinese Trapped'.

53 Elliott, *Sacred Willow*, pp. 139–40.

54 *Ibid.* p. 143.

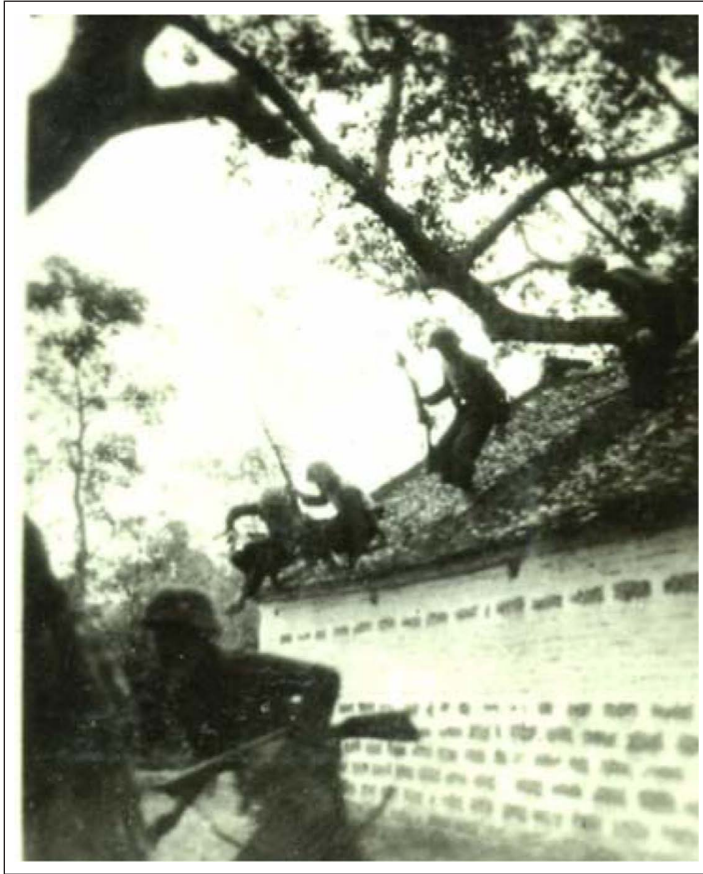


Figure 5. DRV militia forces in urban battle. (Collection Christophe Dutrône.)

finally came on 16 February. Under the cover of night, the men and women of the Capital Brigade crossed under the Paul Doumer bridge on the 17th and swam out of old Hanoi, much of which had been reduced to rubble.⁵⁵

In his call to resistance on 20 December 1946, Ho Chi Minh exhorted young and old, women and men, to pick up whatever weapons they had to fight the invading forces. Given that the DRV willingly withdrew its regular troops and pinned its hopes on the militia forces, it is little wonder that the weight and the violence of war fell upon the shoulders of those who had little training in or preparation for such intense violence.⁵⁶ This led to something of a ‘total’ mobilization of the remaining Hanoi civilian population in that everyone had to fight. Nowhere is this better seen in the urban battlefield than in the creation of a ‘Children’s Guard’ (*Ve Ut*). It consisted of 175 children, most of whom the famine of 1944–5 had orphaned. Aged between 8 and 14, most of these children were

⁵⁵ *Tong ket*, p. 63; Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su thu do Ha Noi*, pp. 231–2.

⁵⁶ For a personal account, see Xuan Phuong, *Ao Dai*, pp. 56–65.

integrated into the capital regiment. While they were not recruited to fight per se as combatants, their knowledge of the streets made them invaluable guides, messengers, and scouts. These orphans had names, too: Vu Trong Phung was 10 and Nguyen Van Phuc was 8. Almost all of them were illiterate; instructions were drawn for them in picture forms. Some ended up with guns in their hands and lobbed grenades in front of French tanks entering narrow Hanoi streets (Figure 6). When the Capital Brigade withdrew in mid-February 1947, after some 60 days of fighting, only 120 of the 175 children in the guard were still alive; 55 had perished. That did not stop the DRV's intelligence services from dispatching a team of 15- and 16-year-old boys and girls back into Hanoi on 18 February in order to collect information on the adversary and help infiltrate and rebuild an underground urban presence.⁵⁷

The totalizing nature of this urban battle manifested itself elsewhere. We have already seen that Giap withdrew almost all of the regular army from the city in favour of using the civilian-constituted militia. Military commanders even relied upon Vietnamese dancing girls (*co dau*), especially in the Kham Thien area in southern Hanoi, to serve as guides, liaison agents, first-aid givers, and even combatants. Following the battle, several militia prostitutes told their commanders that they preferred to remain in Hanoi, despite the French occupation, rather than face the damning gaze of traditional society.



Figure 6. Viet Minh child guard, Hue, late 1945. (Collection Christophe Dutrône.)

57 See Goscha, *Historical Dictionary*; 'Doi Quan Bao Thieu Nien Bat Sat', *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 24 September 2010, available at www.qdnd.vn; and the series of articles that ran in *Viet Bao* starting on 8 December 2006: 'Ve ut thu do va nhung buc anh xuc dong', available at www.vietbao.vn. See also François Guillemot, 'Nhưng "Ve ut": les enfants-soldats de Ho Chi Minh au début de la guerre d'Indochine', *Mémoires d'Indochine*, 20 December 2012, <http://indomemoires.hypotheses.org/4382/> [accessed 5 January 2013].

In all, 800 members of the Viet Minh militia died during the battle of Hanoi. Many were women and children. Few were professional combatants. Recalling her escape from Hue as a 16-year-old girl on 19 December, Xuan Phuong captured in her memoirs the transformative impact of war on the human spirit:

I held hands with Le Khac Tinh, a boy in my class. He murmured: ‘At the count of three, go!’ Together, we crossed the road and jumped into the hedge. I saw him double over and fall down. ‘Are you hurt?’ he didn’t answer. Something slimy began to drip on my hand and I understood that he had been killed. This death marked the end of my adolescence.⁵⁸

And there is no reason to think that this type of violent experience didn’t sow a seed of hate, even the racial kind as destructive and as psychologically transformative as the one expressed by the scared French settler writing to *Le Monde* above.⁵⁹

V. The Southern Battlefield: Saigon, 1946–1949

Whereas the focus of the DRV’s military operations in central and northern Vietnam moved squarely to the countryside for the remainder of the Indochina conflict, southerners remained focused on the colonial city until 1950. Unlike the situation in the north, southerners had no real safe bases or rearguards free from enemy attacks in the Mekong delta. The French-armed religious sects, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, ruled large swathes of the south. The French army set up an effective system of blockhouses and blockades hemming in southerners by the late 1940s. The jungle may have provided cover, but the marshy nature of the delta also bred cholera, malaria, and dysentery. In short, the southern DRV badly needed the colonial city to operate. Arguably, nowhere in the war state was the symbiosis between the maquis and the colonial city more intimate than in the south. This was as true for commercial exchanges discussed above as it was for military operations.⁶⁰

Two decades before the famous Tet offensive on southern towns in 1968, General Nguyen Binh, commander-in-chief of southern forces, launched a campaign of terror, sabotage, and intimidation in Saigon. While it would be wrong to see this as a sustained or even a true ‘battle’, it is nevertheless clear that Saigon constituted the main site of violence for the southern army until the Chinese communist victory shifted the DRV’s strategy towards organizing large-scale modern military operations in the countryside.⁶¹ In February 1946 Nguyen Binh secretly entered Saigon-Cholon to identify enemy targets and prepare his underground networks for urban warfare. On 20 May 1947, as the central and northern DRV forces were arriving in the northern hills, Binh explained to his urban soldiers why they had to take the battle to the French in Saigon:

58 Xuan Phuong, *Ao Dai*, pp. 62–3.

59 For more on this psychological aspect, see my “‘So What Did You Learn from War?’ Violent Decolonization and Paul Mus’s Search for Humanity”, *South East Asia Research* XX (2012), pp. 569–93.

60 Extract of intercepted cable from Pham Van Bach and Le Duan to Nguyen Binh, 12 December 1946, box 10H602, SHD, and *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon: nhung nam dau khang chien chong thuc dan Phap* (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1995), pp. 15–16.

61 Christopher E. Goscha, ‘A Rougher Side of “Popular” Resistance: Reflections on the Rise and Fall of General Nguyen Binh (1910–1951)’, in Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de

Destroying Saigon is a legitimate and humane action. It is regrettable that scorched-earth policies were not applied from the start of hostilities. In the history of the southern resistance, this serves as a lesson, a painful experience. It was both a political and military error to simply ask people not to collaborate, to evacuate government buildings without destroying them as was done in Hanoi. The broadcasting station Radio Saigon continues daily with its counter propaganda, calling our fighters rebels. The electricity station in Saigon continues to power the enemy. The arsenal, the FACI, is still repairing boats and weapons for French colonial troops who kills thousands and thousands of Vietnamese. The Bank of Indochina continues to hold in its hands the economic destiny of Cochinchina ... If I remind you of this painful past, it's so that you can learn from its lessons.⁶²

Nguyen Binh's background lent itself to this type of warfare. In his youth in the 1920s he had worked as a docker and laundry boy in Saigon before being sent to the rough-and-tumble world of the colonial prison for his nationalist activities. After being released from Poulo Condor in 1934, he resurfaced in the early 1940s working among miners and sailors in northern coastal Vietnam before Ho Chi Minh sent him back to the south in late 1945 to create an army.⁶³ There, at the head of zone VII, Binh personally organized terror and sabotage operations against enemy military and political installations and Franco-Vietnamese representatives in Saigon. If he could not mobilize urbanites directly, he would use terror to keep them from joining the other side. And of course the urban battlefield also allowed him to make headlines in the international press.

To do all this, he turned to a wide range of social relations ranging from his lawyer friends, Le Dinh Chi and Nguyen Thanh Vinh, who protected him during his personal tour of the city in early 1946, to a phalanx of dockers, workers, house servants, drivers, labourers, and students he recruited into the underground urban ranks. The Viet Minh assigned agents to the 18 quarters into which colonial Saigon had been divided. Others covered major thoroughfares and spied on political and military installations. The legendary Catholic spy Pham Ngoc Thao began his espionage career serving as Nguyen Binh's personal chief of military special operations in Saigon.⁶⁴

Of the dozen urban combat squads (*ban cong tac* or BCT) in Saigon over which Nguyen Binh presided, workers were the main social component. Most came from unions in Saigon-Cholon; others worked on rubber plantations in the south. Initiated in May 1946, BCT 4 consisted of workers, unemployed labourers, and union members, numbering in all about 700 men. A month later BCT 6 came to life, bringing together rural youth from nearby Hoc Mon and workers and day labourers from Cholon and the 17th and 18th quarters in Saigon. In all, it numbered about 500 individuals. At the height of the violence in 1948–9, Binh's urban combat units probably counted some 2000–3000 people in all, with the working class constituting the

Tréglodé, *Le Viêt Nam depuis 1945: états, marges et constructions du passé* (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2003), pp. 325–53.

62 'L'organisation du commandement militaire rebelle dans la région de Saigon Cholon', 20 May 1947, box 10H534, SHD.

63 Goscha, 'A Rougher Side', pp. 325–53.

64 *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon*, pp. 21–8; *Lich su Sai Gon*, pp. 95–9.

majority of his soldiers. From zone VII, covering Saigon-Cholon and its vicinities, Nguyen Binh's team ran these combat squads and even a special academy for training people specifically in urban warfare.⁶⁵

As in the north, southerners also turned to civilian women and children to serve as the invisible yet indispensable transporters, guides, and information-gatherers. Most were itinerant vendors. Zone VII's academy held special classes for training women, children, and teenage agents. In 1947 the all-female Trung Doi Minh Khai platoon numbered 30 young women aged between 18 and 22, most of whom hailed from poor urban or semi-rural families and usually worked as small-scale street hawkers. The so-called 'pipsqueak' or *tieu quy* class trained and supplied boys and girls to serve as scouts, guides, and messengers in Saigon-Cholon. Most were orphans, aged between 11 and 16. Together, women, teenagers, and children passed into and out of the city, basket by basket, trip by trip, carrying directives, money, mail, small arms, grenades, and explosives.⁶⁶

Although women could not serve in the regular army, they were quite literally on the front lines of the 'irregular' battle for Saigon. In March 1947 the Viet Minh recruited a Vietnamese woman and a newly arrived Cantonese woman to penetrate the famous Chinese-run casino Le Grand Monde. Outfitted in Chinese clothes and presumably fluent in Cantonese, the young woman talked them through the front door and then into the heart of the casino. A short while later, their grenades went off, creating panic in the club.⁶⁷ Whatever the details, the Chinese owners and the Viet Minh reached a deal in 1947 whereby Le Grand Monde paid protection money to avoid the repetition of such events. According to French intelligence, the Chinese owners secretly agreed to make a 2 million piastre down payment and thereafter deposited 5000–10,000 piastres to the Viet Minh from daily gambling takes.⁶⁸

65 'Activités des organismes rebelles en Cochinchine', 21 May 1946, file CP225, Centre des Archives d'Outre-mer; *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon*, pp. 21–8, 58–60; *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an*, pp. 85–6; *Lich su Sai Gon*, pp. 99–100.

66 'Renseignements', 14 February 1947, 10H532, SHD; *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon*, pp. 26–8, 43–8, 65; *Lich su Sai Gon*, pp. 100–1; *Luoc su chien si quyet tu*, pp. 104–8. 'Minh Khai' refers to Nguyen thi Minh Khai, the ranking Vietnamese woman revolutionary who returned to operate underground in Saigon until her arrest in July 1940 and execution by the French a year later. Le Quang Sang, an 11-year-old youngster, allegedly the best of the 'pipsqueaks', fell into French hands while trying to pass Viet Minh information through enemy lines. The boy never resurfaced. One children's unit operating in northern Vietnam over five years obtained and exported to the maquis 4350 grenades, one wireless radio, 250 boxes of batteries, several hundred litres of gasoline, and much-needed clothing and canvas, among other things. 'Chuyen cua cac cuu doi vien thieu nhi du kich mot thoi ... ke lai', *Su Kien va Nhan Chung*, no. 89 (May 2001), pp. 14–15.

67 Nguyen Dinh Thong, *Tieng hat nu tu tu (Vo Thi Sau con nguoi va huyen thoai)* (Hanoi: Cong An Nhan Dan, 1995); *Chuyen muoi phu nu huyen thoai Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Van Hoc, 2004); *Nhung guong mat nu diep bao* (Hanoi: Cong An Nhan Dan, 1997?); 'Renseignement', 22 March 1947, box 10H532, SHD; and *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon*, p. 84.

68 'Interrogatoire', 15 March 1947, 10H532, SHD. If true, this might explain why the French backed Bay Vien's takeover of the Grande Monde in the late 1940s. Since crossing over to the French in mid-1948, Bay Vien was Nguyen Binh's arch enemy.

The famous bombing of the Majestic cinema on rue Catinat in 1948 is another example of this underground urban battle in women's hands. Soldiers, officials, and wealthy Vietnamese bourgeois frequented this popular theatre, making it a prime target for discouraging 'collaboration'. Having learnt that a group of 20 French officers would be attending a showing of *Adieu chérie* on 10 June 1948, the Viet Minh turned to the all-female commando Trung Doi Phu Nu Minh Khai. Of the four women entrusted with this mission, the oldest was 24; the three others were aged between 15 and 16. Because of their 'soft mannered' nature (*giao tiep me mong*), cool-headedness (*kheo leo*), and above all their physical 'beauty' (*sac dep*), they successfully crossed through the security checkpoints. Once inside, they waited until 20.00 when the feature film commenced and the lights dimmed. It was their cue to lob their grenades where the French officers were sitting. Three devices went off, killing several sailors and naval officers and wounding even more innocent bystanders. In the commotion that followed all but one of the female assassins escaped capture. The news made the papers and unnerved an already anxious city.⁶⁹ Nguyen Binh had attained his objectives, and women civilians had allowed him to do it.

While this 'grenading' of the city did not in any way stop its sociocultural activities, it did affect the way people went about their daily lives. In 1949, according to Lucien Bodard, dozens of small grenades could go off in one night, usually around dusk, and mainly in the European quarters, along the rue Catinat in Saigon and the rue des Marins in Cholon. As in Baghdad and Kabul today, shopkeepers responded accordingly in order to maintain their clientele. Protective fencing and iron mesh went up around establishments. 'All of Saigon has shut itself up behind bars,' Bodard wrote. 'It was then that Saigon became something of a prison. It wrapped itself in wire netting – boutiques, bistros and dancing halls wrapped themselves in a veil of metal. Safe on the inside, the French could hear the detonations as they ate and drank.' One Chinese restaurant owner serving 'petits blancs' in the city finally decided to 'enclose his establishment in a thick wall of iron'. One dined in peace, Bodard observed, but one did so 'in a cage'.⁷⁰

The psychological impact of this urban experience reverberated further than we might think. In 1951, then congressman John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert visited Saigon. While they remarked upon the bustling shops and pleasant restaurants lining the famous rue Catinat, they also noticed that anti-grenade netting suggested that all was not well. An outbreak of small-arms fire only reinforced their apprehensions and fuelled their doubts about the French war. 'Cannot go outside city because of guerrillas,' Robert confided to his diary. 'Could hear shooting as evening wore on.'⁷¹

69 *Tu ve thanh Sai Gon-Cho Lon*, pp. 89–92; *Lich su Sai Gon*, pp. 172–4; *Luoc su chien si quyet tu*, pp. 84–7, 100–1. The DRV's best known 'suicide bomber' was a woman, Nguyen Thi Loi. A southerner, she had grown up an orphan and a vagabond. *Cong an thu do, nhung chang duong lich su, 1945–54* (Hanoi: Cong An Nhan Dan, 1990), pp. 187–9, and *Lich su tinh bao cong an*, p. 80.

70 Lucien Bodard, *La guerre d'Indochine: l'humiliation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 138–9. Graham Greene describes similar scenes in the *Quiet American*.

71 Cited by Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. xii.

However, never did the Viet Minh impose a siege on Saigon as Chinese communists were doing to the north. For one thing, the DRV was militarily incapable of doing so and the French army was much stronger than that of Chiang Kai-shek. Nor did Nguyen Binh seek to destroy the colonial city. The Viet Minh needed it. Lastly, it is not at all clear that the ‘battle of Saigon’ did much to inspire urban Vietnamese confidence in the DRV or to rally the urban population to its cause. In contrast to what Pontecorvo portrays at the end of *The Battle of Algiers*, the Viet Minh’s attacks on Saigon-Cholon between 1946 and 1949 never triggered a ‘general uprising’, no more than the Tet offensive on southern cities did in 1968. Viet Minh violence was often indiscriminate. Of the bombs and grenades that went off, casualties may well have been higher among innocent Vietnamese civilians than the high-profile politico-military targets. When the French finally shut down the urban terrorism and dismantled much of the underground cities in Hanoi and Saigon by 1951, most of the urban population welcomed peace, safety, and the return of some kind of prosperity. Even following the fall of Cao Bang and the start of set-piece battles in the north, there is no evidence indicating that the urban populations in Saigon or Hanoi were ever ripe for or even predisposed to rising up against Franco-Vietnamese forces, much to the disappointment of communist theoreticians enamoured by urban revolution. In early 1952 the Politburo conceded that it could no longer sustain an armed line in Hanoi. By late 1952 the Viet Minh could count only a few dozen operatives in Saigon.⁷² In short, for reasons that remain unclear to this author, in both Hanoi and Saigon the French defeated the Viet Minh. In the end, the best the latter could hope for was that it could keep the civilians and non-communist nationalists on the fence, preventing them from supporting the Bao Dai solution or joining its emerging Vietnamese army. From 1950 the DRV focused its undivided attention on mobilizing the countryside, rallying the peasants, not the city dwellers, in order to defeat the French militarily on remote battlefields in northern and central Indochina.

VI. Conclusion

Nevertheless, even if the DRV has gone down in history for its set-piece modern battle victory over the French in remote Dien Bien Phu, this should not prevent us from seeing how war worked itself out differently elsewhere. The degree to which southerners focused upon Saigon as a legitimate battlefield during the Indochina conflagration casts new light upon the importance of cities in the wider strategic and military thinking of the communist leadership during the war against the French and Americans. The origins of the famous and audacious Tet offensive of 1968 – both the battle of Hue and the Viet Cong’s extraordinary commando assault on the US embassy in Saigon that year – clearly had their roots in Nguyen Binh’s urban attacks on the French. However, rather than treating the ‘battle of Hue’, the ‘battle of Saigon’, or the ‘battle of Algiers’ as unique national experiences, to be condemned or celebrated, it is perhaps time to think in wider comparative and sociocultural terms. What are the similarities and differences?

72 *Luc luong thong tin lien lac cong an*, pp. 115–16, 186–7; Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su thu do Ha Noi*, pp. 248–54; and Turley, ‘Urbanization in War’, p. 371.

For example, in ‘asymmetrical’ wars of decolonization, a focus on the ‘city’ could demonstrate the extent to which embattled war states and guerrilla movements had to rethink war socially, geographically, and spatially. Unindustrialized, isolated, and badly armed, their leaders naturally looked towards the occupied modern cities for the manufactured products they simply could not produce, the information they could not obtain, and the trained civil servants and technicians they could not train. Comparisons with urban battles in Algiers, Jakarta, and more recently in Baghdad and Kabul would undoubtedly confirm that the Vietnamese ‘underground cities’ under study here are hardly unique. Nor is this a purely ‘non-Western’ phenomenon. It is hard to believe that Nazi-occupied Europe did not generate similar underground cities, not least of all among the French guerrillas fighting the Germans near Lyons or Paris. Mark Mazower’s account of urban violence in Athens opens up fascinating comparisons.⁷³ Surely, if a methodology were carefully defined, the social dynamics of French, Greek, Polish, and Soviet underground cities during the Second World War could be compared to ones occurring in the post-colonial south to this day.⁷⁴

Lastly, this essay has tried to explore the social connections occurring ‘down below’ that allowed the DRV to interact with the cities, despite French colonial control and the distance separating the rural-based nation state from colonial Saigon and Hanoi. Much of the existing literature on the wars for Vietnam remains disproportionately focused on what was occurring ‘on high’ and, in so doing, misses the social complexity of this conflict ‘down below’. A historiography focused mainly on the diplomatic, political, and military aspects of the Vietnam Wars overlooks the transformative impact of some 30 years of war on Vietnamese society. A focus on the city is one methodological way among many others to factor the people, their experiences, and their social relations into the picture.

73 Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece*, chs 11, 15, 22, among others.

74 For wider connections, there is no better place to begin than with the thought-provoking work of Hew Strachan, ‘Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War’, *International History Review* XXII (2000), esp. pp. 353–5, and Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece and Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2008).