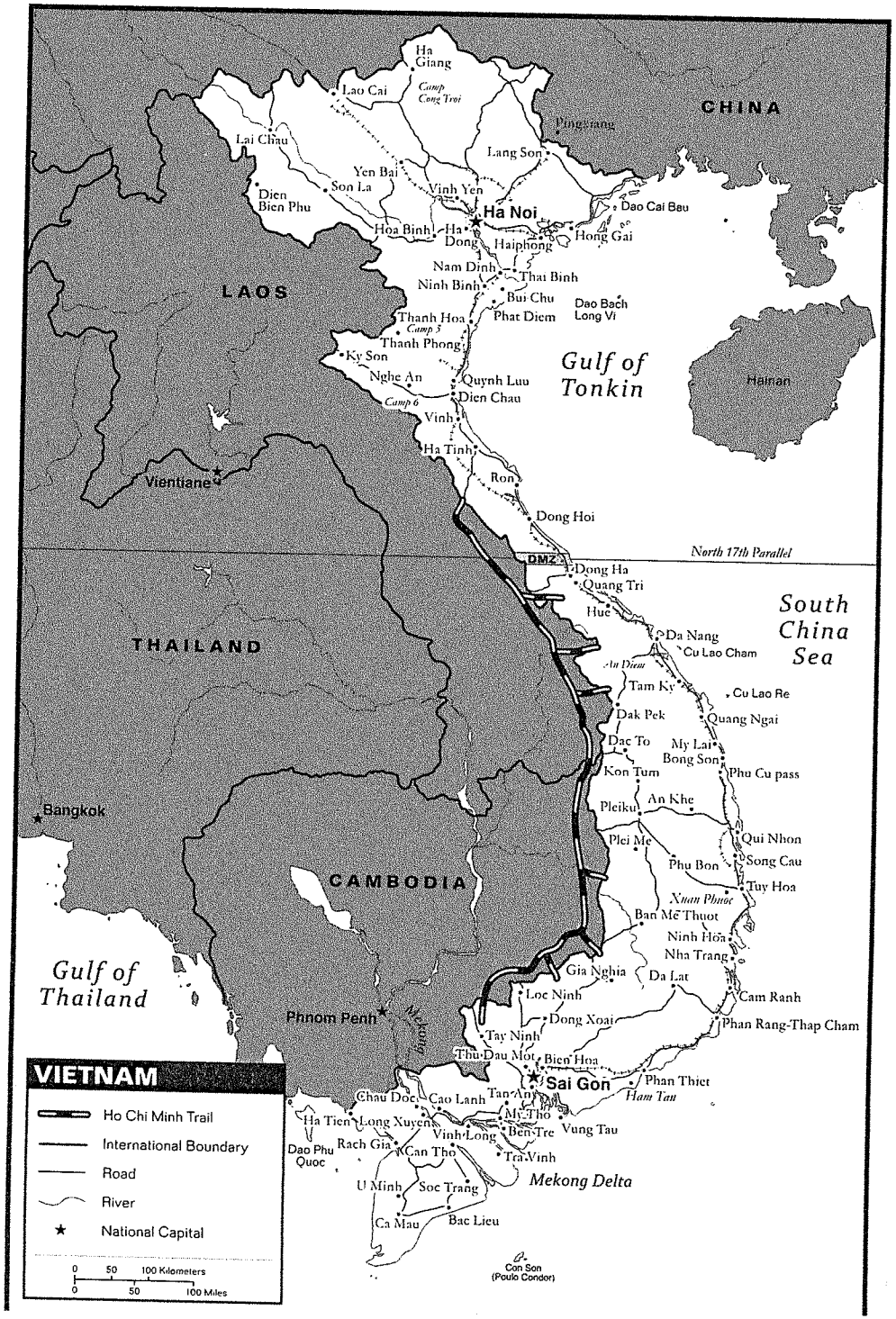

Nationalist

in the Viet Nam Wars

MEMOIRS OF A

VICTIM TURNED SOLDIER

Nguyễn Công Luận

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FOREWORD

As it was being fought, the Việt Nam War was the most thoroughly documented and recorded war in history. It is, therefore, especially ironic that more than thirty-five years after the fall of Sài Gòn, Việt Nam remains one of the most misunderstood of all American wars, shrouded in a fog of misconceptions, bogus myths, and distorted facts. One of the most cherished of those many false beliefs centers on what was supposed to have been the complete operational ineptness and combat ineffectiveness of the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam—the ARVN. The seemingly stark difference between the ARVN of the South and the People's Army of Việt Nam—the PAVN—of the North prompted many pundits at the time and since to ask why "our Vietnamese" couldn't fight, but "theirs" obviously could.

Even the leaders of North Việt Nam believed the common wisdom about the ARVN being little more than a house of cards. One of North Việt Nam Defense Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp's key assumptions when he launched the 1968 Tết Offensive was that the ARVN would collapse on first contact. But it didn't collapse. It fought, and it fought well. The ARVN again put up a stiff and largely successful fight during North Việt Nam's 1972 Easter Offensive. And when the North Vietnamese again attacked with overwhelming force in the spring of 1975, some ARVN units finally did collapse under the crushing onslaught, but many other South Vietnamese units went down fighting. Most of the ARVN soldiers who survived then paid the terrible price of years of brutal treatment in the forced "reeducation camps" established by the victors.

Most Americans who served in Việt Nam had some contact with the soldiers of the ARVN. Those who served in Special Forces units or as Military Assistance Command, Việt Nam (MACV) advisors had almost daily contact with the South Vietnamese military, and consequently they developed a more in-depth understanding of its particular structural and institutional problems, as well as the intricacies of the broader South Vietnamese culture from which the ARVN was drawn. For those GIs who served in the conventional U.S. units, the contact was more sporadic, and what understanding of their allies they did develop did not run very

deep. Thus, while some Americans had positive experiences and still hold fond memories of their South Vietnamese comrades, many others had experiences with the ARVN that were frustrating at best.

In the past ten years, memoirs written by former ARVN officers and soldiers have contributed immensely to our understanding of that military force. Most have been written by South Vietnamese who either escaped after the fall of Sài Gòn or were allowed to immigrate to the Unites States following their release from the camps. So far, no accounts written by former ARVN soldiers who remained in Việt Nam have appeared in English, if indeed the current Vietnamese government has allowed any to be published at all. One of the most important of those volumes published in the United States is this book, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier,* by Nguyễn Công Luận.

Major Luận starts his narrative by detailing his childhood in North Việt Nam under Japanese occupation during World War II and through the subsequent French phase of the Việt Nam War in the late 1940s and early 1950s. After his family fled to South Việt Nam in the mid-1950s, Nguyễn attended one of the first graduating classes of the Republic of Việt Nam Military Academy and was then commissioned an officer in the ARVN. He served just short of twenty years, right through the collapse of South Việt Nam in April 1975. Nguyễn then endured almost seven years in the reeducation camps. He finally was allowed to immigrate to the United States under the Orderly Departure Program.

Most of this book is devoted to Major Luận's service and experience as an ARVN officer. This is one of the most compelling and thoughtful ARVN accounts ever published. Nguyễn's view of the ARVN from the inside offers a perspective that few Western readers will ever have an opportunity to see. Along the way he also provides fascinating accounts of Vietnamese village life and social culture, the French colonial occupation, the communist government of the North, and the U.S. forces in Việt Nam during the second phase of Việt Nam's thirty-year war.

This book is an unblinking, unflinching account, and it will be received with serious reservations in many quarters. Some readers among the French most likely will object to Luận's portrayal of the French military during the period of the colonial occupation. The current government of Việt Nam quite likely will not be pleased with his descriptions of the corruption and brutality of the communist system, both in the North after the French defeat and in the South after the fall of Sài Gòn. Some members of the former South Vietnamese government and the ARVN likely will object to Luận's frank assessments of the weakness and political corruption systemic to South Việt Nam. And some American veterans might take umbrage at his "warts and all" portrayal of the U.S. military and of his severe criticisms of the U.S. government's overall handling of the war. Nonetheless, everything that Major Luận writes rings true. He calls it like he saw it, but he does not take

cheap shots. Despite his well justified descriptions of the cultural blindness exhibited by too many Americans during the war, it is very clear that he still has a great deal of sympathy and admiration for the typical American soldier and a genuine affection for what is now his adopted country.

Although he never served above the rank of major, Luận was for three years the director of the Reception Directorate, the largest of the three directorates of the RVN Chiêu Hồi Ministry, which included the National Chiêu Hồi Center. He was responsible for evaluating former Vietnamese communist soldiers and training them to be integrated into South Vietnamese society. He also served several years as chief of the strategic study and research division of the General Political Warfare Department. The Chiêu Hồi program was widely misunderstood and generally underappreciated. Major Luận's unique perspective and his discussion and evaluation of the program constitute one of the book's most valuable contributions.

The author's integrity comes through on every page of this brutally honest account. Major Nguyên Công Luận was above all a patriot who loved his country and was willing to make any sacrifice for it. When the North Vietnamese army started its final attack on the South in the spring of 1975, he was in the United States, a student at the U.S. Army Infantry School. Even as the doom of South Việt Nam seemed all but certain, Major Luận chose to return to share his country's fate. He didn't have to go back. Senior-ranking U.S. military officers were urging him to stay and offering to help him get his family out. But Major Luận remained true to the end to his soldier's oath. Eventually he did leave Việt Nam, and in the long run that country's loss was America's gain.

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PREFACE

In my early childhood, "war" was one among the first abstract words I learned before I could have the least perception of its meaning. It was when World War II began. When I was a little older, I saw how war brought death and destruction when American bombers attacked some Japanese installations near my hometown. But it was the wars in my country after 1945 that resulted in the greatest disasters to my people.

Particularly, the 1955–75 Việt Nam War has been the most destructive in Việt Nam history and the most controversial in the United States as well as in many countries in the world. The debate seems endless, the arguments contradicting.

Before and since April 1975, there have been conferences, teach-ins, books, reports, and movies about the Việt Nam Wars after 1945. I realized that many of them contained incorrect and insufficient information, one-sided and superficial arguments, and erroneous figures. There have been conferences held outside Việt Nam about the war, but among many hundreds of participants, there was not a single Vietnamese from either side.

Besides, most books in English about the Việt Nam War were written by presidents, ministers, congressmen, generals, scholars, journalists, or U.S. fighting men, not by common Vietnamese who were victims and participants of the wars, who saw the wars from the bottom, not the top, and from inside, not outside. Most of these individuals can't write well even in Vietnamese, let alone in English. Many who are fluent in English would prefer to do something else rather than write about wars.

Only a few works by pro-South Việt Nam writers can be found in bookstores and libraries in the world, whereas the communist regime in the North spent great effort and a hundred times more money than South Việt Nam to inundate foreign libraries with its propaganda publications. The voice of the nationalist Vietnamese was rarely heard by the world outside, and they were slandered and humiliated without the fair opportunity to defend and tell the truth. The nationalists in South Việt Nam did not spend much of their taxpayers' money for the costly propaganda operation, as the communist North Việt Nam did.

As a member of the South Vietnamese Republic Armed Forces, I have an obligation to contribute my little part to the protection of the honor of our military servicemen and my fellow nationalists. The Vietnamese nationalists, the Republic of Việt Nam (South Việt Nam) and its armed forces were the undeniable entities representing a large segment of the Vietnamese people and their wishes. They deserve recognition in world history, however good or bad they were.

I was just a nobody in Việt Nam, only a common person of my generation in the two wars. I was serving the South Việt Nam Army with all my heart, but I have not contributed anything great to my people nor to my army. I have never strived to make myself out to be a hero, and I have never been one. I've done nothing important, either good enough to boast about or bad enough to write a book to justify.

This is not an academic study, so there are no lengthy references. I only compiled my experiences from my memory concerning the conflict between the pro-communists and the anticommunists to write these memoirs with my best effort at honesty and impartiality.

It is my great hope that these stories might give a little more insight into the very complicated ideological conflicts in my country, into how the many millions of Vietnamese noncommunist patriots like me were fighting in the wars, and why we believed we were on the right side. Truthful and sufficient perception of events in history can be attained from common people's personal experiences and stories, not only from what the big wheels of the time were doing or saying.

These memoirs were written not to nourish wartime animosity but to help the coming generations, particularly those of Vietnamese origin, have a clear look into what life was like during the wars that killed millions of my dear compatriots and left the country with the scars that deeply divide the Vietnamese people.

I also would like to touch upon the roots of the war begotten from social traditions, nature, and conception, without which a deep understanding could hardly be achieved. Therefore, I go into details at some points to help clarify the related aspects or circumstances in question and construct the overall view of the wars as I saw them. So please read them with patience.

These memoirs are based mostly on facts and events I experienced as a child and as a young man that are imprinted on my memory, although I did not try to remember. I could not understand many of them during the early years of my life. But as I was growing older and my general knowledge developed, I recollected each of them and found the explanations by people around me and even by myself.

Other experiences came later in my life. During my time serving in the South Vietnamese Army in the 1955–75 war, I happened to be serving in various jobs that helped me have a close look at the war, especially at the rank and file, at the peasants living between the anvil and the hammer, and at the horror of war from both sides.

A NOTE ON VIETNAMESE NAMES

Vietnamese names generally consist of three parts: family, middle, and given, used in that order. In writing or speaking, a respected old man or a despicable bastard is referred to by his given name, and this is correct in any case, be it formal address or colloquial dialogue.

Highly respectable men of celebrity who are considered old are referred to by family name, as a mark of respect. For example: Phan Bội Châu, a revolutionary, was called Cụ Phan (Cụ = old Mr.), and nobody called him Mr. Châu. Usually such men were born before 1900. This rule is applied when the person cannot be mistaken for another in a text or a speech. If that is not the case, the full name must be used instead. Hồ Chí Minh was called President Hồ or Mr. Hồ because he was the only famous person who carried the family name Hồ. Nguyễn Tường Tam, the famous writer and a Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng leader, was not called Mr. Nguyễn because there are other famous personages with this very common family name. Instead, he went by a pen name, Nhất Linh. A pen name is usually a two-word noun and inseparable in any text or speech.

No one addressed Hồ Chí Minh as Mr. Minh, or ARVN General Duong Văn Minh as General Duong, or Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as President Nguyễn. Ngô Đình Diệm, born in 1906, was simply Mr. Diệm or President Diệm. A number of his supporters called him President Ngô, probably because he was born in the pivotal era at the beginning of the twentieth century.

PART I

A Grain of Sand

ONE

A Morning of Horror

It was a cool summer morning in 1951 in my home village, a small and insignificant place on the Red River delta, some sixty miles south of Hà Nội, in the north of Việt Nam. Under the bright sunlight and the cloudless blue sky, the green paddy in front of my grandma's house looked so fresh and peaceful. It would have been much more beautiful if there had not been war in my country.

I was surprised that I was still able to perceive beauty when the whole village was filled with horror. At about 5 AM, African soldiers of the French Army arrived, took position in the pagoda area, and began searching the village houses at sunrise.

Sitting by the doorway of our brick house beside my grandma and a cousin, I was waiting for the worst to happen to me. The village was very quiet; even birds seemed to be aware of impending dangers. At that hour of a day in peacetime, the air would have been noisy with voices, children babbling, birds chirping, and the rice fields active with farmers working.

We three sat still for hours. At times we spoke, but only in clipped words as if a complete phrase would precipitate disaster. My chest was heavy, my mouth dry, and my mind blank. Occasionally I cast a quick glance at my eighty-two-year-old grandma and my fifty-year-old third cousin. Their eyes were expressionless, their faces tense, and those only heightened my fear.

I turned my eyes to the horizon far away. Beyond the winding canal a mile from my village was a hamlet where columns of black smoke rose high behind the bamboo hedge. The French Army soldiers must have been there and set the houses on fire. Fortunately, my village had been spared fire and destruction after many raids in four years of wars. I loved my village so much. It was small with the population of about 300. Since 1950, my village had been under French military control. A village chief was appointed along with members of the village

committee working under King Bảo Đại's administration, the noncommunist government that sided with France against the Việt Minh.[1]

However, our submission to the French military authority did not protect us from being looted, raped, tortured, or killed by French soldiers. Every private, whether he was a Frenchman, an African, or a Vietnamese, could do almost anything he wanted to a Vietnamese civilian without fear of being tried in a court or punished by his superiors. It was safer in the cities where higher military officials and police authorities could exert their judicial power.

In 1950, my mother brought my two little sisters and me back to Nam Định (our provincial city, only six miles from my village), where I would attend high school. The French military forces had controlled the city since early 1947, a few months after the war broke out on December 19, 1946.

During the summer of 1951, I came to see my grandma as I always did whenever there was a day or two open from school. Although life in the countryside was full of danger, she refused to come live with us in the city. Despite every hazard, she was happy to remain in the house where many generations had lived and died, full of memories of her life with my grandpa. They had eight children, of whom my father was the fifth.

She loved me more than anyone else in the world, as I was her only grandson. She always worried about my safety. A bruise on my knee or a cut finger would move her to tears.

As if she happened to remember something, she handed me a bowl of warm rice she had cooked before dawn with a chunk of fried fish. She whispered, "You eat something. You should not be hungry."

She did not say what I knew she really meant: she wanted to be sure that I would not be a hungry ghost in case I should be killed. I was always willing to please her, but I found it impossible to swallow even a small bit as fear choked my throat and dried my mouth.

Long hours of waiting drained my energy. I wished that the soldiers would come sooner if the calamities were unavoidable.

When the sun had climbed high above the bamboo row, I heard the black soldiers shout loudly about 300 feet away. Often we could tell how near they were by the sound of their heavy boots and the smell of the tobacco they smoked, which could be detected from a mile or more away.

The noises of household objects being broken and the cries of women and children drew nearer and nearer. After a while, four tall black soldiers appeared, rifles on their shoulders. The area so far had been free of activity by the Việt Minh, so it was not necessary for these soldiers to be ready for combat. They kicked open the gate of my cousin's house across a small garden and a low wall from my grandma's and walked in. In a few minutes, they came out, after breaking a few jars and earthenware.

They walked across the garden, entered my grandma's house by a side door, and searched every nook and cranny. They didn't find anything worth stealing. How could anything of value be left after so many raids during the previous years? One of them broke the rice pot with his rifle butt; the other swept the altar with his machete and shattered a joss-stick burner. On the way out, the tallest soldier took a small bottle of rice wine left on the altar and emptied it in just four or five gulps.

The tallest soldier approached the doorway where we were sitting. He stared at me for a few seconds, then motioned for me to stand up. I rose slowly, trying to find out from his countenance what he would do to me. It was a blank face, hard and savage, and it frightened me much more than his rifle and machete did. He grabbed my arm and pushed me toward the gate. I felt his big hand tightening around my upper arm like an iron vise. As I only came up to his chest, he had no difficulty keeping me in his hand without any fear of my escape. I produced my student ID card, but he refused to look at it.

My grandma burst into tears. She rose to her feet, clasped her hands together, bowed low before the soldiers, and implored them in Vietnamese to set me free, although she was well aware that the African soldiers did not understand her language. One of them turned and, without a word, hit her in the upper back with a big bamboo stick, knocking her down on the ground beside my cousin.

The soldiers brought me to a place beside the dirt road where there were about twenty villagers, all the men and teenage boys, who were crouching under the soldiers' rifles. I sat down beside one of them. Each glanced at me, then looked away. I felt calm, not from any courage but from the utmost despair that numbed my feelings and perhaps from seeing that there were many others suffering along with me.

Whenever I was in great danger, I used to ask myself what would happen to me the next minute and hope that it wouldn't be worse. In doing so, I could calm down a little by nourishing a flickering hope of getting through a perilous situation.

When a soldier arrived with two villagers, the three soldiers beside us flew at the two and beat them violently while laughing. It was obvious that they tortured the villagers for pleasure, not out of anger. The tallest soldier hit a fifty-year-old villager in the lower back with a wooden club. The man collapsed with a short, loud scream. Some of us were about to help him, but a soldier stopped us with his rifle. The blow didn't kill the man, but he could never sit up or stand again.

Suddenly, the tallest soldier turned to me. He pulled me up and led me to a fruit garden about thirty yards away beyond the thin bamboo hedge. He asked if I spoke French. My French at the time was very poor, hardly enough to exchange anything more than very simple ideas. It was a risk to speak that kind of French to the Africans, whose French wasn't much better than mine, so I shook my head. He asked, "Where are the Việt Minh?" Again I shook my head.

The soldier flew into a rage. He slapped my face, and I almost fainted. I felt warm blood trickling down my lips and chin. He yelled at me in French and held out a book, demanding to know whether the book was mine. That was my French textbook with my name, the date of purchase, and a small photograph of me glued on the flyleaf. It was foolish to say that it wasn't mine, so I nodded.

He slapped me again and asked me why I didn't speak French to him. I could only say that I was afraid of speaking with my poor French vocabulary. In fact, my language was no worse than what was taught in the textbook, but it was useless to explain to him.

"Where are the Việt Minh?" he asked, his eyes red with anger.

"I don't know any Việt Minh," I said, trying to make every syllable as clear as possible.

"You liar! You swine!" He shouted at my face, so close that his breath made me feel queasy. Again he slapped me several times and pointed at a piece of paper on which two names were scrawled. The names were of two villagers in their twenties who had joined the Việt Minh and left home two years earlier.

The soldier took a piece of rope about two yards long and pushed me down, my face on the ground. He then tied my arms together on my back from my wrist up, so hard that the elbows nearly met, my shoulders pulled back, and my chest tightly drawn. Then he led me to the paddy nearby and showed me two little boys sitting on a grassy bank. Because their faces were badly bruised, it took me take a few seconds to realize that they were my cousins.

The soldier showed them the paper, pointed at me, and shouted, "Parler! Parler!" (Speak! Speak!) One boy told me that the soldier had beaten them, given them paper and pencil, then asked them, "Việt Minh? Việt Minh?" Therefore they had to write the only two Việt Minh names they knew. I was surprised that the African soldiers also applied a Việt Minh intelligence technique: drawing information from children and old people in their dotage.

I tried my best to explain to the soldier that the two men had left the village, but he kept shouting at me. I really didn't know whether he understood me or not with such pidgin French, his and mine. He began hitting me hard, punching my chest and my face, and kicking my ribs and stomach. His wall-eyed face convulsed. He clenched his teeth, and saliva dribbled from his mouth while he was beating me madly.

I held my breath with all my strength to bear the blows that landed all over my left side. For minutes I didn't feel any pain. The great fear probably turned me numb to every blow. I closed my eyes to undergo the agony.

When he stopped, I opened my eyes and had a faint hope that it was all over. I was wrong. He picked up the submachine gun that he had hung on a small tree nearby while beating me, and before I knew what would be happening, he kicked me hard in the chest. I lost balance and fell over on the soft soil.

Lying on my elbows, I could see the soldier cocking his French MAT-49 submachine gun and pointing it at me with one hand. And it flashed with something deafening but so quick that I could hardly hear it.

The whole thing happened in no more than a second. I didn't have enough time to feel fear, to close my eyes, or to turn away. I was still able to reckon that only one or two rounds were shot, then the magazine was empty. I also realized that the bang of his gun was less dreadful than one shot at a longer range of about 50 to 100 yards that I had experienced previously. The bullets hit the soil beside me, sending dirt high above and then down on my face and chest.

I lay there not frightened yet, only wondering if any bullet had hit my body. Seeing no way to escape death, I kept still, waiting for what would happen. The soldier angrily replaced the empty magazine with another one. "It must be full with thirty rounds," I thought.

As he was about to cock the gun, an African sergeant ran up. He snatched the gun from the soldier, spoke to him in his language with a rather loud voice, and shoved him away to the roadside. The sergeant took the end of the rope and pulled me up.

Only in that very minute did I feel a great fear. Horror seized me, and my knees trembled. My legs were paralyzed. In five seconds or so, I wasn't able to move when the sergeant told me to step forward onto the dry ground.

I still thought that I must have been wounded somewhere. I had heard that one might feel nothing in the first few minutes after he was shot. So I tried to look at my legs but was unable to bend my head as the tied arms pulled my neck backward. When I finally could make a few steps to the pathway, I turned back to see if there was any blood on the soil. No blood, so I had not been shot.

The sergeant told me to sit down in front of him and talked to me in soft voice. He told me that if he had arrived a few seconds later, I would have been dead. I thanked him with the best words I could summon from my wretched vocabulary. What surprised me was that the sergeant spoke French with the formal grammar we were taught at school. Despite my poor French, I could understand him, at least the main points.

I answered his questions about the two Việt Minh, and he seemed to believe me. I also told him about my family and that I was a high school student on summer vacation. He glanced at my student ID. After a moment, he told me to stand up. He untied the rope from my arms and tied it around my left wrist to keep me from running away. Then he took me to a high ground down the road and away from other soldiers, where we sat.

Encouraged by this unexpected behavior, I told him that his French was perfect. He replied that he had been a junior high school graduate in Senegal and that he had volunteered for the army, not for money but because something

very sad had happened to him. When I asked why he was not promoted to officer rank, he only said, "The French," and pointed his thumb down.

At last, I asked him if he could release me. He looked at me for a few seconds and sighed. "In this war, every private can arrest anybody but none of them has the right to release, even if he finds out it was an error a few minutes after that." What he said has been and still is partly true in Việt Nam.

When I asked him for help, he said, "I can't release you, and I can't help you overtly. But there is something I can do. In about an hour, the units operating in this area will move back on this road. I'll let you see if there is anyone you know who can give you some help." Then he led me up the road to the pagoda area near his mortar section.

It was about 9 AM. Passing by a white brick wall under the bright sunshine, I looked at my silhouette and I could see how my face was swollen. It must have been badly deformed.

The soldiers and the captives were still there, but I saw no more beating. The sergeant and I sat under a big fig tree. About an hour later, a green cluster-star flare was shot into the air far to the south. The sergeant nodded to me. It was a signal for the troops to withdraw.

From a village half a mile from mine, a long column of troops slowly approached. Most of them were Vietnamese along with Senegalese and Moroccans marching as if on a pleasant hike, not like warriors. Some drove cows or buffaloes; some carried chickens dead and alive and other household objects that they had looted from the area.

The sergeant and I stood a few yards from the road. My left wrist was still tied to one end of the rope, the other end held fast by the sergeant. After hundreds of troops had passed by, I had seen no one I knew. There were some who looked familiar, but I dared not claim acquaintance. If by mistake I should choose a "death informer," it would be my certain death. A death informer at that time was a former Việt Minh who had surrendered to the French Army and was used to identify other suspected rebels. Anyone identified by such an informer as a Việt Minh would be shot on the spot, unless he might be a good source of intelligence. These informers were envoys of death all over Việt Nam during the first few years of the 1946–54 war.

Then came a group of French officers with golden stripes on their shoulder straps. I knew they were part of the operation's mobile command post. Among them was a stout Frenchman in military shorts, his shirt unbuttoned, a Vietnamese conic hat on his head, and a pair of rubber tire sandals on his feet. He wore no insignia, but his manner displayed unmistakable high dignity and authority. Two majors and many captains and lieutenants were around him.

When he came nearer, I recognized him easily. He was a lieutenant colonel from the Southern Zone Headquarters of the French Việt Nam North Command.

We students all knew him well, as he appeared sometimes at ceremonies that we had to attend in Nam Định City. As he passed in front of us, the sergeant snapped to attention and saluted. Just on instinct, I drew myself up and said, "Bonjour, mon Colonel." Within a split second, I was filled with fear: I didn't know if I had done the right thing. In war, anything could turn out to be a mistake, sometimes a fatal one.

The colonel stopped and responded gently with a refined language. The sergeant briefly reported my case to him in favor of my innocence. The colonel turned to me and asked, "Why do you know me?"

"I saw you several times in the city, sir," I said.

He said something to the tall major, who then stepped forward and took my ID card from my chest pocket. Looking at it for a few seconds, the major asked me softly, "Who is your principal?" I told him my principal's name and description. When he saw a twenty piaster bill in my pocket, he asked me, "Did the soldiers take anything from you?" I said no. That twenty piaster bill is equal to about US$30 today. I was lucky: none of the soldiers had searched me for money.

The colonel nodded, and the major himself untied the rope from my wrist. He asked me if I felt much pain from the beating. I said, "Very much, sir. But I can stand it all right."

All the French officers stood in silence and looked at me attentively. Then the colonel spoke to me very slowly: "In this situation, unlucky civilians are like grains of sand falling into a machine of war. A cogwheel can't stop to save you while the others are turning. By good luck you might not be caught by any part of the running machine and safely escape the machine unharmed. Otherwise, you'd be crushed. Now you may go home. Take care of yourself."

I bowed to salute and thanked all the officers. I paused with the sergeant, shook his hand, looked him in the eyes for a moment, then walked away. The troops kept moving north, while I used another path away from the road to get home, lest some crazy soldiers far behind in the column should arrest me again.

At the gate, my grandma was waiting. Someone had told her that I was dead. When the troops withdrew from my village, she asked two neighbors to go fetch my corpse with a pole and a hammock. They were about to depart when I got home. My grandma wept for joy and mumbled a prayer as I ran to her arms. She said, "Pray Buddha protect you!" She was still feeling great pain in her back, but the blow from the bamboo stick had not broken her spine.

I found out that all my neighbors who had been arrested early that morning had been released, probably by order of the colonel. Many young captives from other villages were brought to the prisoner camp in Nam Định and locked up for over two years as war labor serving French combat units. Some were killed on the battlefields.

That afternoon I packed and left for the city. I was treated with herbal medicine and anything handy that we could afford, such as a kind of bitterroot soaked in rice wine and sugar, raw blood of a terrapin, and juice from mashed crabs. For a month, I just stayed home. How could I risk running into some of my girl classmates with such a bruised and swollen face?

My mother said to me several times, "It could have been worse, darling." In war, anything less than death makes a victim feel lucky.

This encounter with the French soldiers was one of the many dangers and pains I was to experience.

TWO

My Early Years and Education

MY FAMILY

I was born into a lower-middle-class family in 1937, not long before Japan waged war against China, beginning with the Marco Polo Bridge crisis in Beijing, which my father used to refer to when talking about my birth.

My grandparents had not been rich farmers when they married in 1884, having nothing more than a small wooden house and a few acres of farmland. My great-grandfather was poor, but he managed to send my grandfather to school for ten years. My grandfather didn't obtain a degree, but his education was enough to give him a decent position in the village. My grandparents had to work hard to raise their eight children and to send all their sons to school. Their eldest son was born in 1887. They gained respect from most of the villagers and also from people of the neighboring villages, and they had no enemies.

My grandmother was a strong-minded woman who sometimes was more obdurate than my grandfather. When I was still a young boy, my aunts and uncles used to tease me, saying that I took after my grandpa and that I would be a henpecked husband. (They were right.)

My grandma had a perfect memory. She could remember exact dates of all events in her family and in many others' since she was seven. She could recite by heart 3,254 lines of *Truyện Kiều*, the famous verse story by the great poet Nguyễn Du. I inherited her good memory, which helped me in school and especially in writing these memoirs. But sometimes I wished I didn't have any memory at all, so that I would have been much less concerned about the events in war and the hardships of our people and lived a much happier life.

My grandfather was one of the many supporters of Kỳ Đồng (Child Prodigy), real name Nguyễn Văn Cẩm, the young man in our neighboring province who led

a struggle against the French at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some of my grandfather's cousins and a few villagers joined the fight and were defeated after a short clash. They brought back a battle drum and a large conch, which were later displayed in the village temple for worship. When I was a child, I often came to look at them and to conjure up some heroic images of the people from my village who had fought desperately but bravely against the French. I was very proud of them.

My father was born in 1904 and was his parents' favorite son. At age six, he was sent to a private teacher's Chinese characters class along with two elder brothers and some other children in the village. In the early 1900s, Chinese was still the official written language in Việt Nam. It was gradually replaced by quốc ngữ (national language), Vietnamese written in the roman alphabet. This form of written Vietnamese had been in use since the mid-nineteenth century, but was not officially taught and prescribed as the language of administration in Việt Nam until 1905. By the time my father was born, many families in Việt Nam still refused to let their children go to the new schools established by the French colonial government for learning quốc ngữ.

In 1912, my father's uncles persuaded my grandfather to give up his passive resistance against the French and to let my father and my uncles attend the new school for quốc ngữ and French language. After months of thinking it over, my grandfather took their advice. As any other in their generation, my grandfather and his sons were greatly influenced by Confucianism. They wanted their children to be well educated more than to earn big money. My grandpa died when I was two years old.

In 1925, my father participated in some anticolonialist activities in Hà Nội. In 1927, he joined the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Việt Nam National Party), abbreviated VNQDĐ.[1] The VNQDĐ, well known in Việt Nam as Việt Quốc, launched a bloody uprising in several provinces close to Hà Nội in 1930 but was crushed after a few days.

The VNQDĐ revolt was an anticolonialism military action by the first well-organized revolutionary party in the French colonies. French authorities mobilized its forces to suppress the patriots' movement, which resulted in hundreds of death sentences and thousands of prison terms for VNQDĐ members. Nowadays, the revolt is referred to as the "Spirit of Yên Báy," named for the province where the fiercest fighting took place on February 10, 1930.The situation became even more serious to the French when the communists led the farmers' protest, the so-called Nghệ Tĩnh Soviet. It was a violent movement against the French in the "Soviet" style that led farmers from several villages in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces to stage mass protests for months after May 1930. My father's friends were among the communists who participated. The Nghệ Tĩnh movement lasted longer than the Yên Báy uprising, but it drew much less attention in Việt Nam and France at the time.

After the February 10 uprising, my father was on the French Security Service's blacklist. With help from some bribed officials, he changed his name and moved to a northern province for a teaching job to escape arrest. After two years, those officials managed to have his police records cleared so he could come back home safely. The bribery took away two acres of my grandparents' property.

In 1931, he applied for a government job. Until September 1945, he was serving magistrate courts in many different districts in Tonkin, far from Hà Nội. My father and my mother married in 1935.

* * *

I was born two years later in the provincial town of Vĩnh Yên, thirty miles north of Hà Nội. In 1942, when I was five and could understand simple things in life, my father often met with his comrades in secret gatherings. At times, strangers came to see my father at night, then disappeared quietly after an hour or two. My grandma and my mother were worried, but found no way to stop him. It was such a serious matter that they dared not interfere.

As I was growing up, my father became more involved in revolutionary activities. He devoted much of his spare time to meeting with comrades in villages far from main roads. Although he and his friends kept it a secret, my mother was somewhat aware of what he was doing. How could a man conceal everything from his wife, especially when he had to ask her for help that no one else could provide?

He used to bring me along to the meetings as if we were visiting friends. My father and his comrades played cards to disguise their real purpose, and I was allowed to play with other kids around the place. "Don't worry, mama," my father once said to my grandma. "The French secret police won't think I'm going to do anything big when my kid is with me." That seemed to be true. And he taught me to keep what he was doing a secret from the security agents in case they should interrogate me about him.

From the age of six, I was often permitted to listen to many of his conversations with his friends. Therefore, I knew about war and politics in a childish way much sooner than I should have.

At seven, I was interested in matters that didn't bother most children of my age. I was proud of that, but when I grew up after years in the war, I wished that my father hadn't brought me along with him to his secret meetings and let me learn such things so early. If he hadn't, my life might have been much different, maybe much better in a sense. So I am not surprised to see teenagers in some countries fighting real wars with automatic rifles as volunteers. I know it's not a difficult task to teach kids to hate and to kill with less fear of death.

Many of my father's comrades were teachers and public servants like him. A large number of the patriots serving different revolutionary parties before and after 1945 were teachers, probably because the teaching profession engendered fervent patriotism in them.

One of my father's best friends and comrades was Hoàng Phạm Trân, pen name Nhượng Tống, a founder of the VNQDĐ and a close assistant to the national hero Nguyễn Thái Học. After 1930, he was arrested and sentenced to many years in the well-known prison camp on Poulo-Condore Island. He was released on probation sometime before 1940. He often visited with my father. He told us stories of Poulo-Condore, of how the French guardians had tortured political prisoners, and of heroic struggles against the French authorities in jail. His stories hardened my abhorrence of the French colonialists.

My father served the district magistrate court headed by the district governor, a mandarin. Many people who were defendants or plaintiffs attempted to bribe him, but he never accepted their money or gifts. Several times I saw him show the door to those who came to offer him bribes. In his time, receiving bribes was considered the privilege of a public servant, but he often taught us, my cousin and me, that bribery was immoral and that if we became public servants, we should never take bribes. That's what I liked most about him.

Whenever my father had a vacation, he brought me with him on trips to scenic mountains, rivers, and historic spots, along with his friends. On the trips, my father often told me stories about how we should love nature, love the fatherland, and do everything possible to help the poor. Sometimes we rode in a boat under the full moon while my father and his friends were reciting poems, chatting, and drinking. Too young to wholly understand the poems, I could only appreciate the melodious sound under the bright moonlight on the immense body of water that spread to the darkened shores far away.

Those trips created in me a deep love for rivers. Any river is beautiful to me: the Mekong in Cần Thơ, the Perfume River in Huế, the Dak Bla in Kontum, and especially the Red River near my home village.

Many afternoons my friends and I went to the Red River to watch it running swiftly to the south—much larger and swifter in autumn, the flood season. Right there was the place where the king's soldiers and men in our district had fought a desperate battle with flintlocks and spears against a French warship on its way to the first attack at Nam Định City in the late nineteenth century.

FIRST EXPERIENCES OF WAR

I began learning to read and write at home. At the same time, World War II escalated with the attack on Pearl Harbor. In the following school year, 1942–43,

I was six years old and was admitted to the first grade by permission of the school district inspector. Before that, my father had been teaching me.

It takes a child about two years to learn to read Vietnamese well, even words that he or she does not understand. At age seven, I could read some parts of newspapers and magazines that my father brought home. Every day I read about the war in China and Europe, learning about guns, warplanes, aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers, submarines, and V-1 and V-2 rockets before I was taught science, math, history, and geography. My second cousin, who was ten years older than I and was living with us, was always eager to explain to me anything I didn't understand.

As a child, I had a vague notion that war was an action whereby people killed to get something they wanted, such as money and land. Once I overheard my father discussing war with his friends. He said, "Since kids everywhere in the world still love to play with toy guns, pistols, swords, and daggers, wars will never end."

To most working-class Vietnamese at that time, World War II was something still far away. In the village, peasants didn't care that the war was going on in other countries. The war only affected the middle class and above when imported goods such as gasoline, mechanical spare parts, bikes, medicine, cloth, milk, fruits, or toys ceased to come in. At school, there was a great shortage of paper, pens, pencils, and chalk, even of the worst quality manufactured by domestic industry. Students were asked to write in lines of a half space. I had to wrestle with my pen to write in narrow lines on rough paper. People of my generation could write letters with characters only one millimeter high.

Sometime in my first year at school, Japanese soldiers stopped by our town. Children in our neighborhood rushed to the roadside at the marketplace to watch them. We had not seen or heard of anything to be afraid of. We had heard of no crime or savage maltreatment done by Japanese soldiers.[2]

It was a Japanese platoon of about forty soldiers and one officer with a sword at his side. They stopped at a fruit stall, bought some oranges, and paid generously. A man in the candy store near my school told us that the Japanese sword was extremely sharp: a hair blown against its edge would be cut in half. We believed him because he had been a sailor who traveled to many ports. He also told us that when the blade was unsheathed, one head must be decapitated. So we looked at the officer's sword with great fear and admiration. Whenever he touched the handle, we were ready to run. Fortunately, he did not draw the blade out. The man became a propaganda team member after the Việt Minh ascended to power in August 1945.

When I was in second grade, American bombers began pounding away at bridges and Japanese military installations in our province. Every day before 9 AM, the time for American planes to reach our area from their bases in the Pacific, rich families left the city for the rural areas nearby, returning after dark. Others who stayed would be ready to rush to bomb shelters when the siren wailed. Most elementary schools were moved to nearby villages.

A few months later, the planes began bombing also at night. In the city, the sound of the siren was frightening, especially when the whole city was drowned in darkness of the blackout. During each air raid, a number of civilians were killed or wounded.

Once I followed my cousin to a place a mile from home where American bombs hit not the bridge but a street close by. There we saw a dozen dead bodies soaked in blood, limbs chopped off, stomachs torn open. It was horrible, and for the first time I realized what war really was.

One noon while we boys and girls were playing in the large schoolyard, a plane suddenly popped out over the tall bamboo grove on the other side of the river several hundred yards away. It roared in fast and so low that we could see the pilot. We all cried, and the teachers shouted to stop us from running. We had been taught to stand still when a plane came so that the pilot would not notice us. A few seconds later, another plane followed. Its gun barked noisily and frightened us much more than the first. We dared not move, even a minute after both had disappeared in the horizon. Our teacher said that the first was an American bomber and the chasing plane was Japanese.

FROM VILLAGE TO CITY

My home village was only twenty miles from the district town where my father was working. I always spent my holidays (summer, Christmas, Tết, and Easter) in my village with my grandma, my aunts, and my uncles, who all loved me and coddled me much more than my parents did.

During my first eight years of life, Việt Nam was a French colony. French colonialists imposed oppressive measures to exploit the colony. However, life in my village before 1945 was calm, and people were living peacefully with each other. The peasants had to work ten hours a day almost 365 days a year to produce enough food for their families. One-tenth of the population owned no land at all and worked as sharecroppers.

In most villages, every man, at age eighteen, rich or poor, was allocated an equal portion of village-owned land, usually about two-tenths of an acre, free or at a very low rent. In villages like mine, which owned a large common property, land was allocated also to women.

In a good year for crops, farmers usually had enough rice to feed their families. In years with bad harvests, their meals might consist of only 70 percent rice, the 30 percent rice substitute being sweet potato, manioc, or Indian corn, which were considered far inferior to rice. In some very bad years, they had only 30 percent rice. In some extreme cases, they had to live on thin porridge for days while waiting for the next crop.

The richest landlord in our area owned about 90 acres. There were only two landlords in our neighboring districts who owned more than 100 acres. Most, as far as I knew, did not impose brutal exploitation on their tenants. Traditional relations between villagers and religious teachings somewhat restrained them from being too avaricious. Land rent was usually about 30 percent, including government tax. In years of severe weather that caused a sharp drop in production, landlords usually postponed rent collection and would let it be paid back with the next crop. In some cases of good friendship or close relation, the debts could be remitted. As a matter of course, there were many avaricious landlords who paid low wages, imposed high land rent, and lent money at high rates. Their avarice led peasants to resentment but rarely to profound animosity. I heard of some wicked landlords who demanded exorbitant rent from tenants. Some even tortured farmers who failed to pay rent and treated peasants roughly as if they were slaves. But there were not many such landlords in my district. Their atrocities were often dramatized in fiction, especially in the propaganda materials of every revolutionary party at that time, nationalists and communists alike.

When I got older, I learned from books and the grownups that the plight of poor farmers in my home province was not the worst. Wicked landlords in China ruled their immense family farms of thousands of acres with cruel exploitation and heartless laws, as if they were emperors. Farmers were beaten, tortured, and even killed.

A MANDARIN IN EACH VIETNAMESE

In old-time Việt Nam, according to a 1,000-year-old system of regional power distribution, the village had been autonomous. Each had its own written or unwritten "charter" that stipulated special customs and regulations that were to be abided by. Some of these might have been contrary to common rules as stated by the proverb "King's laws sometimes are second to village's customs."

The village charter determined the ranking order of the notables—whether by seniority or by degree of education. In some villages the charter fixed the marriage fee that a groom had to pay in cash or in kind. In a village up north, the groom was required to go naked into a pond (usually in winter) to catch one fish of any size as a symbol before the village committee approved the proposed wedding. The required task was a trick just to make sure that his genitals looked normal. The rules might be harder on grooms from outside the village.

When the French occupied Việt Nam in the second half of the nineteenth century, they maintained the ancient Vietnamese system, as it had proved its efficiency to facilitate their rule.[3]

For 1,000 years until 1945, Việt Nam had been ruled by the notables, who were mostly landlords and rich farmers, with deep-rooted customs as their instrument of rule. As leaders of rural Việt Nam, most of them gained respect from the peasants not by coercive measures but by the tradition of paying reverence to educated persons. It should be noted that the educated notables in the old Việt Nam lived

right in the midst of the poor peasants. Therefore, good relations between them and the poor, as well as their leadership role, were maintained and consolidated.

At the same time, Việt Nam strongly adhered to 1,000-year-old traditions in which honors from an official title were highly regarded. However rich a man could be, he would gain little respect if he bore no title. Everyone seemed to be born with a thirst for fame and power more than for riches. A name should always be preceded with some title, even one denoting an insignificant position. Mr. Ba, a clerk of a private small business, loved to be addressed as "Mr. *Clerk* Ba." Bón, a soldier, would be pleased with the title "Mr. *Private* Bón." Mr. Nam, a Trương Tuần (chief watchman) was called "Mr. *Trương* Nam." With the title so shortened, Keo, a communist cadre, would prefer being called "*cadre* Keo," not plain Keo.

People born into the old Việt Nam society were highly conservative and regionalistic, which is true to some extent even today. Some people would do anything possible to reach and to preserve a higher position in the village, sometimes in a fierce or even bloody competition. And once in power, many could be very authoritarian. Some bad traditions were therefore maintained. Family feuds divided many villages. Fighting for a more decent seat at village feasts at the communal house sometimes led to heated arguments and even to physical assaults and vendettas in extreme cases.

This traditional ruling class in the countryside was the primary target of the communist revolution. The Vietnamese Communist Party doctrine asserted that the absolute "cleansing" of that ruling class must be accomplished in order to seize power in the countryside. Even so, the current officials of the communist infrastructure, the leaders and cadres of village and district party committees, are not much different from their pre-1945 predecessors, although their authoritarianism may be concealed under better-coined titles and melodious rhetoric on behalf of "the Revolution."

A village chief or a village committee member was usually given the right to farm a piece of village-owned land, the size of which depended on the property. But he worked hard in his job, sometimes to ruthlessness, impelled only by his title and the power he was vested with.

My village chief carried his brass seal in his pocket day and night. Along with his signature, it was of first importance in every paper, such as an ID card, certificate, notarized document, and laissez-passer. He was free to accept a little money or gift as legal fees from applicants when he signed and sealed their papers.

As a basic unit of administration, my village, like any other, had a council of the notables or the legislature, headed by the Tiên Chỉ (first notable). This council supervised the elected village committee, the executive, which was headed by the Lý Trưởng (village chief), who actually ran local affairs. The French rulers established this form of village government in Tonkin and Annam, their protectorates; in Cochinchina, form was modified to reflect that region's status as a colony and

other local geopolitical concerns. The Tiên Chỉ was not paid and had little executive authority, but he functioned as the head of the village, especially in rites at the temple, during annual festivals, and at banquets. He also presided over the council conference to decide the village budget. When some family offered the village notables a boiled chicken, he was given the chicken's head, a formal indication of his status. Drumsticks, wings, and breast were shared by the lower-ranking officials: the chief of village, the deputy chief, the watchmen chief, the registrar, and the land surveyor.

The village watchmen, though equipped only with bamboo canes, were very efficient in enforcing the law. Taxes were collected to the penny. Violators were properly dealt with. If we children removed rocks from railroads, we would be severely reprimanded, even punished by rods, and our parents would have to pay a fine. It seemed that village leaders after 1945, both in South and North Việt Nam, inherited such behavior from colonial times. And indeed, local Communist Party and government officials have proved themselves much like their predecessors.

At the bottom of a village hierarchy there was a man who served as the mõ, or village crier. His principal job was to make public announcements after striking a "mõ," a wooden instrument similar to one that a Buddhist monk used in the pagoda. His secondary job was to serve every other villager whenever help was needed, usually to invite guests, to run errands, and to wash dishes at anniversary parties. The mõ's status put him in the lowest rank; everybody was above him and had the right to request his services when he was available. No one ate at the same table with him. Mõ was a special institution of the old Việt Nam society. Thanks to his status, no other commoner in a village had the feeling of being at the bottom of society. No one other than his son would succeed the mõ when he became disabled or died, although farming land given to a mõ was relatively large in some villages. In the old Việt Nam, the mõ and the king were the only two titles that were hereditary.

Above the village was a canton, which was a subdivision of a district. The canton chief had some power of inspection and was usually rich. However, he did not play a very great role in the colonial administrative system.

At the next echelons, the mandarins ruled provinces and districts. They served under the French colonial government of the so-called protectorates of Tonkin and Annam and also under the king of Việt Nam in Huế. The mandarin was taken for "the people's father" by tradition. The mandarin who was the governor of our district was a good one. He owned the only car in the district. Peasants bowed when seeing him ride in his shiny black French sedan.

I was a friend of his two sons, one four years older and the other two years younger than I, and of his daughter, who was my age. The older brother used to lend me books, mostly fiction and biographies of world heroes. Once in a while, he called me into his closed room or even into a large restroom in his home to

read some books that the colonial authority had banned. His mother soon found out why we often occupied the restroom for too long, but she never forbade us or told his father. As a governor, his father would not let us read such prohibited publications, which featured wicked mandarins and village officials; the authors dared not directly attack the French colonialist rulers yet. But they indirectly encouraged some kind of revolutionary ideology.

After 1945 this friend of mine joined the Việt Minh and became a communist ranking cadre, and his father returned to Hà Nội to serve the nationalist government. In the 1960s, his younger brother became a South Vietnamese Air Force pilot. His sister and I were in the same third-grade classroom, and we liked each other. At eight years old, for the first time in my life I felt her charm attracting me for what might be called love, a vague sympathy, pure and pristine, of a little boy for a friend of the opposite sex. It was my first school romance. Her elder brother told me that he would ask his parents to marry her to me when we grew up so I would become his brother-in-law.

The district governor had under his command a squad of ten local guards, who were equipped with French muskets and wore green puttees as part of their uniform, to keep the 100,000 people in good order. A gang of twenty bandits always took to flight when they confronted a single soldier with that three-round-clip, nineteenth-century Mousqueton rifle. Though living under the oppressive colonialist regime, our people enjoyed true peace and order.

In the old time Việt Nam, a student went to school so that he would become a mandarin. Everyone, regardless of his family origin and background (except for children of actors and actresses, singers, brigands, thieves, and prostitutes), who passed the king's examinations held every three years in some major cities would be nominated a mandarin with full privileges. Many famous mandarins in our history were children of poor farmers. In the king's strictly supervised examinations, no bonus mark was given to any candidate because of his family background, his merits, or the services he or his parents had rendered to the king or the nation.[4]

There were many mandarins and village officials who were notorious for their brutality and inhumanity. The colonial government obviously condoned their wrongdoing up to a point to maintain an efficient system that kept the whole of Indochina well under its control. The oppressed people had no way to resist or seek protection. Tonkin was nominally under the king in Huế, although the people were actually living at the mercy of the mandarins in provinces and districts and of the village officials who carried out the draconian orders given by the colonial government.

In the cities, life was better. The colonial regime allowed a large gap between life in the cities and life in the rural villages. The city population had electricity, running water, paved streets, movies, imported goods, and medicine. In cities,

people did not live under direct oppression. To some extent, the city bourgeoisie enjoyed the advantages of a modern society, which included better justice. However, poor workers led wretched existences in murky slums and were pitilessly exploited by French employers in large factories and by Vietnamese owners of small firms. Several times I witnessed savage beatings of rickshaw drivers who had failed to pay their day's rent to the owner of a rickshaw-rental house. Policemen kept the city in good order. Fines for littering were rather heavy, so sidewalks were always clean. A kid back from school would hold his bladder full to soreness until he got home because he dared not urinate at the wrong place on city streets.

At the top of my province was the French administrator, known as the "résident Française," not the Vietnamese provincial governor. The mandarins, although having great authority over Vietnamese peasants, only played the secondary role. Complete authority was in the hands of the French colonialists. In Tonkin, the top French official was the "résident supérieur," who also carried the title of viceroy of the king of Việt Nam. Thanks to the mandarin hierarchy and the village administrative system as instrument of repression, the French colonialist regime exerted a highly oppressive power upon the Vietnamese people in order to exploit all resources available in the colony.

Rice wine and opium were sold on a forced consumption basis. Each month, every village had to buy compulsory quantities of rice wine and opium, the production of which was the monopoly of French firms. Those products were so bad and expensive that their consumers preferred rice wine illegally distilled by peasants and opium smuggled in from Chinese border areas.

The arrival of the French customs officers always brought fear to my village and others. Hiding rudimentary distilling tools on someone's private land and then reporting it to the French customs house was one way to bring trouble to one's enemy, sometimes sending him to jail for months and costing him a heavy fine.

Taxes were high, especially the poll tax and rice production taxes. Many poor men in my village were unable to pay the taxes and were jailed for weeks. In extreme cases, they were flogged by village watchmen and even by district local guards.

Democracy, freedom, and human rights were unknown to poor peasants in my village and others who were living in a way not much different from that of 100 years earlier. Only men's clothing and hairstyles had changed, and Vietnamese in the roman alphabet was taught instead of Chinese characters in public schools. Women were considered inferior. Many were ill treated and had almost no rights at home if they were not able to get along well with their in-laws. Polygamy was legal.

Under the French, educational, medical, and social services were meager. My province had a hospital of about 200 beds, a small maternity hospital, and a few

dispensaries. Only the middle and higher classes knew preventive medicine. The majority of the Vietnamese still relied on traditional herbal medicine. Once when I was six years old, cholera broke out in my village. On the first day, it took away a dozen lives. Local authorities did not provide much aid to control the epidemic.

REVOLUTIONARY STIRRINGS

In 1945, a large proportion of the population was illiterate. Only half of the children in my village went to one of a half dozen elementary schools in my district when I was a first-grader. Five of those children later completed fifth grade and passed the examination for a primary school diploma in the only six-classroom primary school of my district.

Our province had only one junior high school of about 200 students; a few of those who wanted to attain higher education would have to go to Hà Nội to attend one of the three senior high schools in the whole of Tonkin. Also located in Hà Nội was the university, which enrolled students from all over Indochina.

At school, we were taught subjects common to that of any other country, with the exception that French was a compulsory language. We started learning French in first grade. By third grade, I had to know by heart all tenses and moods of the two auxiliary verbs, *être* (to be) and *avoir* (to have); it would be several years before we were taught how to use them. From fifth grade on, everything was taught in French and, ridiculously enough, we were given history lessons in which we read, "Our ancestors were the Gauls." We were taught that France, as the mother country, brought civilization to her colonies and would bring them up to mature like a tree bearing fruit: "When fruits have ripened, they'll leave the tree and grow up by themselves." However, what I knew from my father and my cousin was much different. "The French were only leeches," they said.

Subjects relating to anticolonialist or patriotic movements against the French were not mentioned, of course. But in history classes, my young teacher, a new graduate from the teachers school in Hà Nội and a fervent patriot, found the best time to teach us patriotism, independence, liberty, and equality in a simple form so that a child might comprehend them. From my father, my uncle, and my cousin, I learned about anti-French movements and celebrated patriots like Phan Chu Trinh, Phan Bội Châu, Đề Thám, and Nguyễn Thái Học. Many other teachers who were friends and comrades of my father did the same with students at higher grades but more aggressively. Years later, those teachers and many of their students became passionate fighters on both sides in the long wars from 1946 to 1975.

When I began school, many patriotic songs had been composed praising our ancestors' achievements and victories in wars against Chinese aggressors. Although not mentioning the French, the songs indirectly evoked patriotism and fostered Francophobia.

As I entered first grade, the colonial government launched a nationwide sports movement. Every school had to promote sports activities. Each district had to build a soccer field, surrounded by a running track, where matches were held regularly. Sometimes we boys were lined up along Highway 1, a few miles from our school, to cheer bicycle riders on the Indochina Tour. The adults in my family said that the sports movement was only a plot of the French to attract Vietnamese youth and deflect them from nursing rebellious patriotism. Meanwhile, my father took advantage of the movement for his party. He was appointed president of the district sports club, under the smoke screen of which he recruited and trained new party members, as I learned soon thereafter when his activities were no longer secret following the 1945 Autumn Revolution.

THE RICH AND THE POOR

During the time I was in second and third grades, the French Security Service arrested many people in the district town where my family was living. Some of them were said to be criminal gang members, some communists. I believed that the communists were doing something against the French, as was my father, and that possibly some of the people arrested were his comrades, but he wouldn't tell. To me, they all were heroes because they had the courage to stand against the French in Việt Nam.

I didn't really know what communism was, but my eight-year-old heart felt sympathy with it when my cousin explained to me that the communists took money from people who were too rich and gave it to the poor. Like any other child in the world, I was always fascinated by the stories of Robin Hood, Jesse James, and other outlaws, and I thought that what they did was not wrong but done in the name of social equality. I lived close enough to the poor farmers to be aware of their miseries and the large gap between social classes.

My family was Buddhist. Since I was very young, I had been much influenced by my parents' teaching about good and bad, cause and effect, benevolence, and destiny. Sometimes I asked my parents whether my grandparents had done anything dishonest to build up their property. My parents assured me that they had not and that our inherited estate came only from my grandparents' hard work and savings. As for my parents, they only added to the family's property some three or four acres purchased with savings from my father's salary and my mother's occasional trade business.[5]

My father once told us the story of some landlords in Nghệ An province who dedicated all their farmlands to organize their villages into co-operatives where poor peasants worked collectively and shared the crop according to their labor. My father supported the idea, but my uncle said, "It sounds like communism," to which my father replied, "It is. But anything that minimizes the misery of our poor peasants is acceptable."

Living in easy circumstances, I always felt somewhat embarrassed when I noticed that I was better dressed and fed than many other children around the district town. Several times a week, beggars of all ages stopped at our gate to ask for food and money. If I had an opportunity, I would give a beggar a full bowl of uncooked rice.

"It was too much," my mother said. "With 100 families each giving him a handful of rice, he'll be richer than a middle-class farmer." I knew that she was right, but I always gave beggars more than others did.

THREE

1945: The Year of Drastic Events

THE FAMINE

The winter of 1944 was the coldest in many decades in the Red River delta, my grandma said. Temperatures dropped to a little above zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit) as a bitter north wind brought death to some old people in the villages near mine. The winter harvest was the greatest failure in a century, according to the old villagers. Rice production at some villages was less than 30 percent of a normal crop in many fields, my uncle told my father. Panicles of rice in many rice fields bore only empty chaffs. Even children my age realized that a serious famine was looming on the horizon.

After Tết, hungry peasants in overpopulated districts of my province began moving to other areas and Nam Định (the provincial city), where they hoped they would find food. Before leaving, they sold everything they could. A thatch roof could be sold as kindling for a few pennies. In many hamlets south of my village, parts of poor neighborhoods were gone; only earthen walls remained. Some villages that had been verdant with live bamboo fences were devastated. Skinny bodies in rags wandered all over the country roads and city streets. Then corpses began to appear along roadsides and in pagoda yards, church grounds, marketplaces, city parks, and bus and railway stations.

Groups of hungry men and women with babies in their arms and other children at their sides invaded every accessible field and garden to search for anything they thought edible: green bananas, cores and bulbs of banana trees, bamboo shoots. They even ate oilcakes, used for fertilizer, which caused many deaths.

My villagers had to defend their land with force. Every night, strong men patrolled the fields to chase away trespassers. Sometimes there were clashes and

injuries. Hungry crowds attacked rich landlords' homes and looted their granaries. In many cases, law and order was not enforced. It was widely said in my town that some people, including the four-year-old son of a Chinese businessman, were killed for meat. My parents and others in the neighborhood were scared by the rumors. They kept their children in sight at all times and didn't let them play outside the gate.

One day, my three-year-old sister was standing at the front door ten yards from the gate opening to the street, eating a rice cake. The larger part of the cake was in her right hand. An emaciated young man stopped at our gate. He looked like a ghost in ragged clothes. At one jump he reached the doorstep. He held my sister's jaws with his left hand, squeezing her mouth open. His right hand scooped out the bite of cake from her mouth, then he stuffed it into his, snatched the remaining cake from her hand, and he tore away like a flash. My mother stood dumbfounded. It happened too quickly for me to have any idea how to react. My mother soothed my sister and said nothing, but I saw tears in her eyes and on her cheeks.

Every morning I saw some oxcarts, each carrying several gaunt bodies on the way out of town. They were buried without coffins or any cover in mass graves already dug beforehand in a narrow strip of land beside the main road. Public cemeteries were already full. Sometimes when I got up at 6 AM, I found one or two corpses along the roadside in front of my home. They were stiff and so thin that I could see every rib and bone. For the first time I knew that the picture of a human skeleton hung in my third-grade classroom was accurate.

Newspapers reported that there was a great surplus of rice in Cochinchina that couldn't be sent north because U.S. bombs had destroyed most bridges and railroads.

I didn't suffer much. My little sister and I were the only two in my family of nine who were fully fed. The others, including my grandmother, only got two bowls of rice in two meals a day—instead of the usual six—to save some rice for starving people, a dozen of whom could be found at any time on our street. All other middle-class families in my neighborhood did the same.

That summer the harvest brought a good crop. The new rice was reaped a little earlier and saved a lot of people who were about to collapse. Still, a dozen people in the area died, not from hunger but from eating too much after gathering the first few bushels of newly collected grains. After the disaster, I learned that from 2 to 3 million peasants had died in the 1945 famine. People said that the famine was caused not only by the failure of rice production but also by the French and the Japanese, who had commandeered an immense amount of rice in Tonkin for their own military food reserves.

I will never forget the emaciated victims of that famine.

THE FORMIDABLE JAPANESE

While millions of Vietnamese were suffering from hunger, the Japanese forces overthrew the French colonial government. On March 9, 1945, after a short nighttime clash of barely an hour, the Japanese took control of the city, and that meant they controlled the whole province. The next morning, I saw leaflets and posters everywhere. One declared martial law; others proclaimed independence for Việt Nam and praised the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.[1]

A few days later, a large meeting was held at the district soccer field to celebrate the great event. The district town was decorated with the king's flags, Japanese flags, banderoles, and posters. A thousand young men from the villages and students of all ages sang "Tiếng Gọi Thanh Niên" (Appeal to the Youth) as the flags were raised on the tall masts. This song was written by Lưu Hữu Phước, and it later became the national anthem of the RVN (Republic of Việt Nam = South Việt Nam). It was composed years before 1945 with the title in French "L'appel aux étudiants" (Appeal to the Students); there were other lyric versions in Vietnamese praising the Vietnamese heroes and victories in fighting for the country's independence that we used to sing in class. The crowd chanted patriotic slogans loudly after each speaker concluded his speech with "Long live Việt Nam!" "Down with French colonialism!" "Defend our Fatherland to our last drop of blood!" Patriotism swelled in every soul, even my third-grade classmates and me. It was our great pleasure to see that there was no more French occupation and oppression, that our fatherland was independent, and that our people had freedom, even when the Japanese still dominated.

Teachers were now free to tell us stories of how the French had tortured and massacred our patriots; treated our workers ruthlessly in rubber plantations, factories, and mines; brutally exploited our country with heavy taxes; robbed us of priceless treasures; and ruined our society by encouraging consumption of rice wine, opium, and legal prostitution.

All of what we learned about colonialism planted in our minds a profound hatred for the French. Once I saw a group of about ten French former officials doing hard labor—digging ditches, pulling heavy carts—under the surveillance of two Japanese soldiers. I felt pleasure in seeing the Japanese doing what the French had done to our compatriots. To me, every Frenchman in Việt Nam was guilty and deserved severe punishment.

Although they were also members of an army of occupation, the Japanese soldiers gained some respect from the Vietnamese common people. They showed their iron discipline in the barracks and on the streets. They may have been arrogant and somewhat authoritarian, but I never heard of Japanese soldiers raping or looting. They were pitiless with thieves, robbers, and swindlers.

The Japanese officer in charge of my district caught a renowned burglar stealing a woman's money. With his bare hands, the officer beat the burglar to death in the marketplace. The next day, all thieves in the area reported to the Japanese officer, asking for mercy and promising to abide by the law.

A rumor circulated that there was a woman who sold rice bran to the Japanese for food for their horses. One day some horses died because they had eaten sawdust mixed in with the bran. We heard that the Japanese cut open the belly of a dead horse, put the woman inside, sewed it up, and buried her alive. No one knew for sure if the story was true or not, but it was well known in Việt Nam, and it frightened away every scheme to cheat the Japanese.

In the area around my village and the dry land section nearby, the Japanese ordered large fields that had been used for food production to be set aside for growing jute to make supply gunnysacks for the Japanese army. Severe punishment was inflicted on those who failed to meet the required production goal. This imposition provoked animosity toward the Japanese but not as bitter as that toward the French. What the Japanese did in the Philippines, China, Korea, and Malaysia was not known widely in Việt Nam at that time. Not until I was twenty did I learn about the Japanese brutality in those countries. In fact, among the foreign soldiers who were once in Việt Nam—including the French, the Russians in the 1980s, the Chinese in 1945, the Red Chinese in North Việt Nam in 1965–73, the Australians, Koreans, and Americans in 1961–73—the Australian and the Japanese soldiers received the highest regard from the common Vietnamese.

As a child, I liked the Japanese, especially the captain who often came to see the father of a friend of mine. He taught me Japanese and gave me pens, pencils, and notebooks. He showed special affection for children. However, my father hated the Japanese. He said that they were also our people's enemies and always avoided meeting any of them. His party and other patriotic movements opposed the Japanese occupation.

During the summer vacation, news of war that reached our home foreboded some great event in my country. My cousin, who used to explain the news to me, said that after having won the war in Europe, the Allies had now turned to Asia to defeat Japan. He also said with an air of importance that an enormous aircraft carrier of the U.S. Navy would enter the Gulf of Tonkin before long, and all of Indochina would be "shaken" into pieces. Then we learned that Japan had launched a campaign of kamikaze attacks. All my classmates admired their heroism. The war was coming closer and closer.

There was more bombing in the area. It was the first time I ever heard about an American. After an air raid, an American pilot was shot down somewhere north of Hà Nội. A friend of my father's who had been at the scene told my father that the pilot wore a jacket with "solid gold buttons." He also said that that "American money is in gold coins" and that "many things in America, including

some household utensils, are made of gold." I believed his stories. For a long time in Việt Nam, people had the expression "spending money as extravagantly as an American." I would find out the truth of his words only several years later.

The more bombing there was, the more we were worried about war, but no one had the least idea about what would really happen if our area became a battlefield. My mother said that if war came, we would have to move to the hills three miles from our home. She prepared many jars of powdered grilled rice for the family to use in case of emergency. She didn't know that life in war wouldn't be so simple. Meanwhile, my father became much busier with his comrades. Since 1944, many of his VNQDĐ activists in the area had been cooperating with members of other movements, including the Việt Minh Front. He and his comrades were working hard to prepare for the general uprising. Sometimes my uncle helped him hide pistols and rifles, circulate indoctrination materials, and gather support for his party. I overheard the adults in my family saying that the Việt Minh were recruiting new members and training them in secret bases. It seemed that the Việt Minh organization was active everywhere.

Although my cousin and I didn't know much about my father's friends, we could tell who among them belonged to which group. Only years later did I realize how they did not have a proper concern for security measures when the threat from French and Japanese secret police was hovering not too high over their heads.

GENERATION GAP

In 1945, my years at school were the most beautiful time in my life, so beautiful that since then I have long dreamed of living just one day from that time again. Millions of Vietnamese of my generation must have the same wish.

We were trained, as our forefathers had been, under the influence of Confucianism. Textbooks on morals emphasized being a good member of the great family and an Asian-type gentleman—a man of moral integrity and generosity, who honored duty and despised riches. The lessons went along with numerous examples taken from Chinese and Vietnamese books.

In the traditional society, students were supposed to pay higher respect to their teachers than to their parents. The more a teacher punished his students, the more their parents gave him grateful thanks, and better gifts would be presented to him during the Tết season (Lunar New Year).

For many years before 1945, students had been taught the same subjects from the same textbooks. I shared with people fifteen years older the same image of our school life, the same emotions about contemporary culture. After 1945, we were motivated by the same causes that drove us to serve one side or the other in wars, and we fought each other fiercely under the same slogan of patriotism.

Romantic literature existing in the old Việt Nam was enriched with that from France. Introduced into the country in the 1920s, it greatly influenced middle-class Vietnamese, even kids like me. The image of a handsome young man, rucksack on his back, walking on a lonely road over the green mountain slope leading to a secret base in the border areas where he would fight for the lofty objectives of the Revolution, leaving behind his beloved and a luxurious life and worldly pleasures, had long been tempting hundreds of thousands of young Vietnamese into joining heroic struggles for the independence of the country.

This romanticism has played an important role in the psychology of generations of Vietnamese.

THE NEW PAGES

Although declaring independence for Việt Nam, the Japanese had merely replaced the French as the sovereign power. The mandarin administrative system was kept intact. The event of March 9, 1945, created a new political atmosphere, but the lives of the common Vietnamese changed only a little.

We children did feel something new and worth welcoming: independence. At home, we hung the new flag. By order of the new cabinet under His Majesty Bảo Đại, the national flag was three short red stripes at the center of a yellow background; the stripes were one-third the horizontal length with the center stripe broken in two at its middle. The stripes represented the *Li* symbol of the Chinese *I-ching* (Book of Changes).[2]

A very small number of city people owned radios, but their tuning mechanism was locked at a specified frequency by order of the Japanese authorities to keep people from listening to foreign stations. So news from other sources took time to travel to our district town. We heard that the Japanese had lost all of their important strongholds in the Pacific. My father told my uncle that Japan would be defeated in a matter of months and that Việt Nam would have the best chance to recover its independence.

In early August 1945, the two atomic bombs destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was awful to everybody to learn that many thousands of Japanese, more than sixty times the population of our town, had been killed in a second. The word *atomic* was heard for the first time. In Vietnamese, *atomic* is *nguyên tử,* known only to junior high school students or higher. People were frightened by the idea that if Japan did not give up, Việt Nam could be a target for that horrible weapon.

On August 14, a group of about ten men armed with muskets gathered on the main street of the town. They asked the district governor and the local guard squad to surrender. Seeing that they represented nobody, the governor refused. The group withdrew silently. Then we got news that Japan had unconditionally

surrendered to the Allies. Everyone was delighted but was too afraid of the Japanese to have any kind of celebration. As for me, I didn't fully understand what "democracy, liberty, independence" would bring us, but I felt glad that the war had ended, so we wouldn't have to worry about death or about shortages of food, goods, medicine, and especially toys.

On the morning of August 18, another group of about twenty men armed with rifles, pistols, swords, and spears appeared in the town. One hundred unarmed young men followed, yelling strange political slogans. They said they were Việt Minh guerrillas. They waved a red flag with a yellow star, then surrounded the squad of local guards and disarmed them. They invaded the governor's mansion to arrest him and brought him to the schoolyard. They tied the governor to the flagpole and declared that he was given a death sentence because he was a *Việt gian* (Vietnamese traitor). This word has since become a label for years of uncountable political persecutions and executions in the new Việt Nam.

The guerrilla group ransacked the district warehouse and took away anything they could. They said that they would execute the governor that morning. My third-grade teacher and some of the public servants openly supported the Việt Minh guerrillas but begged them to drop their intended execution. Many other respectable old men in the town and my father followed suit, strongly opposed to the guerrillas' intention. They proved that the mandarin had always been nice to the people and said that they were ready to protect him. In the afternoon, he was set free. The next morning, the governor and his family quietly left town. No one was permitted to see them off.

My father said the raid by the Việt Minh guerrillas was a surprise to him and his comrades, who were still waiting for orders from their party leadership. Members of other revolutionary parties in the area, besides the Việt Minh, who cooperated with my father's group such as the Đại Việt,[3] the Tân Dân, and the Duy Dân, were also standing by. I knew all about this because my father received many guests during that time. They argued and overtly discussed almost everything in the heat of the quick-changing situation, and we children could feel free to listen. They blamed the Việt Minh activists for the premature uprising before being ordered to take action as had been agreed upon by the parties' leaders at their joint command somewhere in China. For months before August 18, the Việt Minh members in the district—including friends of my father—often met with my father's group at many places, sometimes at my home.

As I still remember, a month before the August 18 event, one of the Việt Minh gave my cousin a copy of a Việt Minh song and taught him how to sing it. I learned the song from my cousin. It was the marching song "Tiến Quân Ca" (Troops' Advancing Song). The song began, "Đoàn quân Việt Minh đi chung lòng cứu quốc" (The Việt Minh troops are marching with their common struggle for national salvation). Later, the words *Việt Minh* were changed to *Việt Nam,*

and after Hồ Chí Minh claimed ruling power, he made the song the national anthem of the communist regime.

The true Việt Minh cadres in the district area may have been no more than a dozen or so. In the next few days, the Việt Minh recruited a large number of young peasants for their support. Many were hoodlums and vagabonds who served the Việt Minh alongside well-bred youth. The Việt Minh said they were revolutionaries and that they would redistribute land and other kinds of property to poor peasants, that there would be no taxes under the new regime, and that people would be equal—no one higher than the other. With guns and support from the new recruits, the Việt Minh organized the revolutionary government. They appointed the chairman of the provisional administrative committee of the district and its members. Specialized public servants were retained in their jobs.

According to my father and his comrades, on August 18 in Hà Nội there was a great meeting of tens of thousands of students, public servants, and workers held to proclaim Việt Nam's independence. It was sponsored by nonpartisan activists in the League of Civil Servants. Two dozen Việt Minh cadres sporting their party's colors, the yellow star on red, managed to join the crowd. They pushed their way to the podium and snatched the microphone. They delivered speeches, appealing to people to fight to recover independence. In no time, the communists took control of the meeting under the nationalist label. Their comrades in the provinces followed suit, each led by a small band of greenhorn Việt Minh members. The viceroy gave up his power easily. It was the reluctance to act on the part of noncommunist forces before receiving orders from their top leaders that helped the Việt Minh to gain power. My father said, "It was like playing an easy local sport and winning the national prize."[4]

After many decades of hunger for national independence, people didn't care who led them. Anyone was just fine, provided that he was fighting for national freedom. In such an atmosphere, the Việt Minh consolidated power quickly and easily, "with little trick and ready mind, not with real strength," said my father's comrades.

The meetings that my father, his comrades, and Việt Minh activists held at my home months before August 18, 1945, proved to me that the allegation of the nationalist side was true: there had been a plan of joint action between the nationalists and the communists and a break of that promise by the Việt Minh. However, I also realized years later that besides "little trick and ready mind," the Việt Minh were more successful than the other parties in organizing and motivating their members. From the very beginning, communist leaders relied on the class of the most unprivileged people for power. At that time the nationalists said that local communist leaders, not Hồ Chí Minh, made the quick decision on the August 18 uprising. In 2000, former Tonkin Communist Party Committee member Nguyễn Văn Trấn confirmed that Hồ was somewhere outside of Hà Nội at the time and that Hồ was unaware of the decision for the August 18 uprising.[5]

The days that followed were deeply imprinted in my memory. The town was red with Việt Minh flags. People went to meetings held every other day to support the new revolutionary government. Young men and students painted banderoles and posters, and women made flags. At meetings, we children loudly chanted slogans along with the adults; many of those words we didn't understand. Although my father's Việt Quốc party did not get along well with the Việt Minh, he often encouraged my cousin and me to join the meetings. Sometimes the meetings lasted long into the cool autumn nights with long speeches in which the orators showed their deep love of using enigmatic words newly introduced to the common people's ears only a few days earlier. Not until attending high school could I fully understand most of those political terms.

In some remote areas the Việt Minh recruits conducted raids against a number of landlords, village officials, and mandarins who had been well known for their atrocities and authoritarianism. Some were killed; the others were beaten, their houses destroyed, and their property looted. All of them were labeled "Việt gian." Greatly attracted by meetings and promises of the new rulers, few people cared how those traitors were treated and took for granted that they deserved severe punishment. But before long, they knew that many of the victims were not traitors at all.

When I grew up, I learned that the killings took place everywhere in August and September 1945, and the Việt Minh got rid of many well-known men. Among the victims was Phạm Quỳnh, a distinguished writer and a mandarin who supported moderate construction of an autonomous regime in Việt Nam under France's protectorate. He was charged with being a traitor and was killed not long after Bảo Đại's abdication on August 25, 1945. Other victims whose names were known to Vietnamese patriots included Tạ Thu Thâu and Phan Văn Hùm, members of the Fourth International.

My father worked hard to serve the new regime. He and his comrades said that, Việt Minh or not, they were also patriots. Some argued that the Communist Party manipulated the Việt Minh Front, but the others objected to the idea that the communists would do anything harmful to the noncommunist movements. In early September 1945, Vietnamese revolutionaries in China returned to Việt Nam by the thousands. Among them was Nguyễn Hải Thần, the prominent leader of the Việt Nam Cách Mệnh Đồng Minh Hội (Việt Nam Revolution League), who became Hồ's rival a short time after he and the league had been back in Hà Nội. The Revolution League, or Việt Cách, was founded in 1942. Member parties of the Việt Cách included the VNQDĐ, the Việt Minh, and other smaller parties for the highest joint effort to restore Việt Nam's independence in the last years of World War II.

One of my father's friends was a communist in the Việt Minh Front. In those days, he often visited us and had my mother and her friends in the neighborhood make many hundred Việt Minh flags for his committee. He was friendly to every one of my father's comrades. But some of his comrades were not. One morning, a young man who was a probationer clerk working in my father's office as a subordinate came to see him. His mother was about two years older than my mother and her friend. He used to call my mother "aunt" and my father "uncle" as dictated by the Vietnamese traditions. He had just joined the Việt Minh ranks a few weeks before the August event. That morning, he stepped into the front yard where my mother was washing clothes. He greeted my mother with "Hello, sister. Is my brother home?" Everybody in the house was surprised to hear him call my mother "sister" and my father "brother." I couldn't believe my ears. It was impossible in Việt Nam. It was very rude and was also an insult in a certain environment. Three times he repeated the words; three times my mother ignored him. At last he gave up and asked, "Hello, aunt, where is my uncle?" to which my mother said, "He is out and will be back in an hour or so." The incident taught me at my age how Việt Minh followers misunderstood "equality."

Back in my village, things were the same. A few days after August 18, two Việt Minh cadres carrying their flag and two unsheathed swords came and summoned all the village officials to the communal house beside the pagoda. There they confiscated the seals of the Tiên Chỉ, the village chief, and the registrar, as well as all documents and records. The old village committee was dismissed and the new provisional administrative committee was quickly appointed. One of the notables was appointed chairman of the new committee, and the *mõ,* the bottom citizen of the village, was appointed "committee member for information." After the appointment, the former mõ announced that from then on, he was equal to everyone in the village, that people should pay him respect because he represented the people, and that he was no more a mõ. Not long after August 1945, he became one of the first Communist Party members of my village.

That was what went on at the bottom of society. At the top, we heard for the first time the name Hồ Chí Minh. His declaration of independence brought a great pride to everyone.[6] After sixty years bearing the dishonor of being under foreign domination, we had our president and a declaration of independence like any other free country in the world. The new name, Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, and its accompanying motto, Independence—Freedom—Happiness, sounded so sweet to our ears. It was in no way inferior to the French Republic and its motto, "Liberty—Equality—Fraternity." And we were proud, as if just having that title and motto printed on every official letter made us equal to France in every aspect. Months later, I found in an article of the Việt Quốc newspaper that the motto "Independence—Freedom—Happiness" derived from the "Three Principles of the People" of China's Sun Yat-sen.

The Việt Minh cadres extolled Hồ's patriotism to the skies. They said that he himself wrote the most beautiful sentence, "All men are created equal," in his declaration of independence. Of course, I believed the story for a long time until the day I found out that the sentence was taken from the U.S. Declaration of Independence. They also said that Hồ spoke fourteen languages.

In the beginning of September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh's portraits, printed in black-and-white and in various sizes, were sold everywhere. Each of us schoolboys tried to buy one to hang in the best place of our homes if the adults had not done so. We were hungry to have a national hero to worship. That the king, Bảo Đại, had abdicated made few people feel sorry for him.

The majority of our peasants had never been photographed; photography was a product of civilization enjoyed only by the middle class and higher. So in the rural areas, not the cities, the Việt Minh cadres said to the peasants that President Hồ had "two pupils in each of his eyes, a sign of his saintly talent." The peasants were easily convinced when they saw his picture in which two bright spots appeared in each eye. They were reflections of the floodlights in the photographer's studio, as in any other portrait taken in studios under artificial light at the time. It had been my first lesson that humans easily fall for lies. And after the truth is revealed, they are ready to fall for new lies.

THE REPUBLIC BRINGS CHANGE

In September, every kid of school age of all social classes was admitted into the Young Children for National Salvation or the Teenaged Children for National Salvation troops. We wore a uniform with hat and scarf and had a few hours of close order drill every night and on Sundays. We were taught simple political lessons about colonialism, patriotism, and Hồ Chí Minh and his merits and were taught to sing many martial songs as well as to play games, to our delight. The town and the surrounding villages were filled with the sound of drums, children's laughter, and marching music. Young men and women participated in the activities of their appropriate leagues, attending basic military and political courses at night. Once a month, they held cultural entertainment on makeshift stages with songs and plays. Everyone talked politics. Everyone was eager to show off his or her patriotism. Even old men and women acted with enthusiasm in their senior citizens' association meetings.

People were looking for changes for the better. To many young men, "revolution" meant abolishment of the old to build the new order. In some places, Việt Minh cadres ordered people to burn all "remnants of colonialism and feudalism," such as honorary title certificates bestowed by the king, medals and citations awarded by the French, and even school diplomas and certificates of birth, marriage, and death. Opium dens, gambling dens, and red-light districts were closed.

Evening classes for illiterate adults attracted students. Altogether, the revolution brought the countryside a new face. It could be said that the August 1945 Revolution had the strong support of people from all walks of life. Women's rights became a topic of discussion, and an unusually high number of divorces occurred.

In early September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh declared the "Gold Week," in which he appealed to the people to make a contribution in gold to purchase weapons for national defense. Everyone was eager to respond to the call. My mother and other ladies in the neighborhood donated jewelry. My grandmother also supported the appeal, persuading her friends to take part in the contribution. She said that it was the greatest contribution she had ever known. The total gold contribution came to 370 kilograms (13,000 ounces), the Việt Minh later acknowledged.

Meanwhile, my father was feeling more and more uneasy working under some young Việt Minh cadres. They had little education, but they were tricky, greedy, and even insolent. After a few weeks during which they learned how to do different jobs, they began to discharge the former key public servants one by one. Capability and anticolonialist background were disregarded if you were not loyal to the Việt Minh. In late September, my father resigned. He wanted to give up his job before they fired him.

A week later, my family moved to Nam Định City. We lived in a rental house, and I was admitted into a fourth-grade class of a primary school right on the main street. As the new school year began, we did not have to study the French language any more. Our load of school tasks was reduced. Using alphabetic written Vietnamese, a third-grader of my generation was expected to write and to read Vietnamese without spelling mistakes. Children at my age could read most writings, although they were unable to grasp all the meanings. At nine years old, many of my classmates often discussed simple matters of adult concern, such as patriotism, democracy, and social affairs, even if at a childish level. That helped the mental capability of kids of my age to develop earlier, but it also made them easy prey for propaganda and demagogues. Besides, as I learned when I was much older, their mental strength faced a limit in study at a university, where they would attain excellent degrees in technology, but failed to succeed at business management courses and other areas of education that required synthetic mental ability. If they joined communist cadres, they could be prone to talk big in politics and simply parrot what they had been told.

* * *

The main street was the best-looking one in my city. Flags, streamers, and paper banners of the world's five major powers were displayed on the front and inside of every public building, as well as restaurants, theaters, shops, and private

homes. In the military barracks, Japanese, though already disarmed, still maintained good order and discipline. They worked and played as if they were still in power, and they always were very friendly to us schoolboys.

The Chinese soldiers who had come to disarm the Japanese looked ugly and emaciated. Coming from Yunan with wives and children, they took up quarters in any good home they liked, which they then littered with all kinds of waste. Often drunk, quarreling, and fighting, many of them refused to pay for goods they bought. After a few months, new Chinese regular army units came to replace them and things were better. The new Chinese soldiers had better equipment. Their military police conducted patrols all over the city.

In a short time, Japanese troops left my city for their homeland. But many Japanese deserted and stayed in Việt Nam. Some joined the Việt Minh; others served the Việt Quốc and the Đại Việt. On either side, they did their best. The Việt Quốc had an army officer training school in Yên Báy with a board of Japanese instructors who helped produce many brilliant military commanders for both Vietnamese sides in the post-1945 wars. The brave Japanese soldier was taken as a good example for Vietnamese warriors. "Do like a Jap soldier!" and "Practice Japanese discipline!" were the mottoes of the time.

The Việt Minh government main force, the Vệ Quốc Đoàn (National Defense Force), was weak and ill-equipped, incapable of fighting against the Chinese Kuomintang army units. (In 1949, the Vệ Quốc Đoàn was renamed Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam, or the People's Army of Việt Nam.)

Once or twice every week, all students in the city had to attend meetings in the central park. Children were always delighted to have a free morning, even though they had to stay in line and chant slogans once in a while. Speeches from the big wheels didn't concern us, though we were brought there to yell support for the resistance against the French reoccupation of Cochinchina.

As the situation in Sài Gòn developed into war, my whole city was in a fever, clamoring for armed resistance to drive the French away. Hundreds of young men went south each month to fight beside their southern compatriots. They belonged to many groups, nationalist and communist. At the railway station, people, including groups of students from various schools and grades, waved red flags to wish the men victory. It was one of the unforgettable images of my childhood.

Stories of bravery performed by fighting men in the South incited more people to join the crusade for independence. Besides, many women joined military and guerrilla units, mostly in paramedic groups. Every week men in the Association of Youth for National Salvation painted slogans and mottos on any wall or surface they found blank: "We're determined to claim our independence," "Let's not join the French Army," "Let's not supply food to the French," "Long live President Hồ," "Long live Việt Nam," "The Resistance shall gain final

victory." My cousin and I joined them to help with trivial tasks. We were happy to take part in such revolutionary activities in which we felt we were somewhat useful.

THE FIRST SPARKS IGNITE THE CIVIL WAR

Since my family moved to Nam Định in early 1945, my father had devoted all his time to his party. A few blocks from my house was the VNQDĐ local headquarters, in front of which was a large flag, a five-pointed white star in a blue disk on a red background. A unit of several hundred VNQDĐ troops known as "Thiết Huyết Quân" (Iron and Blood Soldiers) was billeted in a building of the city railway station.

At first, people seemed to live peacefully with each other. The Việt Minh military force was a battalion of the Vệ Quốc Đoàn (National Defense Force) garrisoned in the barracks of the former colonial administrative guards. They were lightly equipped with weapons of several makes. The militias of the Quốc Dân Đảng Front, an alliance of the Đại Việt and the Việt Quốc, were stronger than the Việt Minh military. Đại Việt clandestine cells had militia bases in many areas around the country in 1945, while the Việt Quốc maintained a powerful force with cadres trained and organized in China and in the provinces of Việt Nam adjacent to China. Between them, the two parties held an overwhelming military strength in late 1945 and 1946.

The Quốc Dân Đảng Front militias had control over the northern parts of Tonkin, or North Việt Nam. Their strongest base was in Yên Báy province, where bloody battles had occurred on February 10, 1930, and where thirteen VNQDĐ heroes had been guillotined four months later on June 17. They had other strongholds in the port city of Hải Phòng and in the provinces sharing a common border with China, in Nam Định and Thanh Hóa. Much smaller VNQDĐ forces were also present in smaller provinces of Vietnam Central (Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định) and in Sài Gòn.

Not long after my family moved to the city, the conflict between the Việt Minh and opposing Minh forces began to rise steadily. There were shootings around the city, especially at night. People were arrested. Assassinations and massacres committed by both sides occurred more frequently.

In many other places, especially north of Hà Nội, brief skirmishes had been going on since September 1945 and were causing more and more loss of life on both sides. This conflict had actually begun long before 1945; it became more open less than a month after the August Revolution. I think it's not wrong to say the Việt Nam wars in the late twentieth century actually began in September 1945. My cousin and I read reports in the newspapers of both sides that my father brought back home from his party office every day. What I learned from my father and his comrades, as well as from reliable political accounts in later years, gave me a rather clear picture of the long story.

MORE BLOODSHED

That story dated as far back as the late 1920s when the Communist Party and the VNQDĐ initiated their revolutionary activities in Việt Nam. Before 1925, there had been many movements for the independence of Việt Nam, and all were brutally suppressed by the French. The Việt Nam Thanh Niên Cách Mạng Đồng Chí Hội (League of Vietnamese Revolutionary Young Comrades), the first communist movement in Indochina, and the VNQDĐ were among the first few revolutionary parties that were better organized and had a doctrine to follow. The Vietnamese communists gained advantages over the others by having a well-drawn doctrine, experience, and support from the Russian communists.

The VNQDĐ emerged as a sheer patriotic movement, organized by a group of young patriots without any support or influence from outside. They were certainly inspired by China's 1911 revolution and Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People when they named their party after the Kuomintang. However, the VNQDĐ had absolutely nothing to do with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek or the Chinese Kuomintang during that period, as confirmed by all of my father's comrades whom I met and asked later in my life. The Việt Quốc members were mostly devoted to the struggle for national independence and didn't care much for political doctrines and global revolution.

From 1927 to 1930, there were rumors among the ranks of the Việt Quốc that the communists had sent the French Security Service a list of noncommunist parties' members and their activities, particularly concerning the planned Việt Quốc uprising. However, most of the Việt Quốc leaders saw the betrayal not as a deliberate plot by the Communist Party to eliminate its prospective opponents but rather as individual denunciations pried out of others by the French secret police.

On February 10, 1930, the Việt Quốc launched a large-scale uprising in many provinces in Tonkin. The decision was made after French security raids destroyed many Việt Quốc secret cells. The leaders had to do something before the whole movement was eradicated. "Không Thành Công Thì Thành Nhân" (loosely translated as "If we do not succeed, we will have constituted a good cause"), declared Nguyễn Thái Học before the decision to launch the putsch, a phrase that was to become famous. The uprising failed. Many Việt Quốc members fled to China, where they got little help from the Kuomintang. They reorganized the Việt Quốc in southern China and made contact with their comrades who were still free and active inside Việt Nam.

The Việt Quốc's activities subsided until the early 1940s, when it gathered momentum during World War II. Its glorious fame from the bold uprising and

numerous heroic deaths under the guillotine gained it much respect and support from the Vietnamese people. It can be said that the 1930 Việt Quốc uprising greatly encouraged young Vietnamese to stand up to fight for the independence of Việt Nam in many revolutionary parties and movements, including the Communist Party.

There must have been some influence from the anticommunist campaigns of the Chinese Kuomintang that aggravated the hostility between the communist and noncommunist Vietnamese revolutionaries in China. Information about the hostility had not been widely known in Việt Nam until September 1945. Before that, most nationalists took communists for friends—maybe not good friends, but not foes. To my knowledge, good friendship between my father's group and the Việt Minh supporters in our area before August 1945 strongly confirmed those sound relations.

After August 1945, more and more Vietnamese of different parties began to return from China, and many facts were revealed. As early as the 1920s, it was said, the Vietnamese communists in China under Nguyễn Ái Quốc (who later changed his name to Hồ Chí Minh) conducted a secret plot to get rid of eminent young Vietnamese exiles in China who refused to join them. The Việt Nam communists sold information concerning those Vietnamese patriots to the French Security Service so that the French could arrest them as soon as they reentered Việt Nam. In the same way, Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his comrade Lâm Đức Thụ informed the French of the exact whereabouts of the celebrated Phan Bội Châu in exchange for many thousand Hong Kong dollars. Phan was captured in China and brought back to Việt Nam for trial in a French colonial special criminal court.

At first, my father and my uncle didn't believe the story. It was too much to be true. However, a friend of my father from Thái Bình province who was, as far as I could remember, a close relative to Lâm Đức Thụ, confirmed it after Lâm was shot and thrown into the Red River by a communist death squad to stop him from talking about the story. Further information from my father's friend Nhượng Tống also supported the allegation. In 1971, I got a similar confirmation from Ba Liệu, a respectable revolutionist, who was well known for his impartiality and held in high esteem by all patriots, including Hồ Chí Minh. His version about the Phan Bội Châu scandal was not far different from allegations by many other authors.

In the early 1940s, Hồ was imprisoned by order of Chiang Kai-shek. Almost no one discovered that Hồ was the very same communist Nguyễn Ái Quốc who had committed unpardonable crimes against other Vietnamese nationalists in China. It was Nguyễn Hải Thần, a respectable Vietnamese revolutionary and a famous general in the Chinese army, who used his influence to intercede with Chiang for the release of Hồ Chí Minh.[7] He did so against the advice of many others who believed that it was Nguyễn Ái Quốc under another name. Had he not, Hồ would have perished in jail.

Also released at the same time thanks to Nguyễn Hải Thần's intercession was Nguyễn Tường Tam[8]—pen name Nhất Linh—a Việt Quốc leader locked up by order of the local Chinese governor.

As World War II was coming to the end, Vietnamese revolutionary parties in China gathered in a unified front called the Việt Nam Cách Mệnh Đồng Minh Hội (Việt Nam Revolutionary League, known by many Vietnamese as Việt Cách, shortened the same way as Việt Quốc and Việt Minh). Nguyễn Hải Thần led the Việt Nam Cách Mệnh Đồng Minh Hội. Its member organizations included the Việt Quốc and the Việt Minh. Hồ Chí Minh reorganized the Việt Minh (Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội) to be his own after its founder, Hồ Học Lãm, passed away.

My father's comrades who had worked closely with Nguyễn Hải Thần asserted that his league had appointed Hồ to come back to Việt Nam to study the situation and report back to the league so that a plan for a general uprising could be formulated and executed with the participation of all parties. Hồ solemnly swore before the league's colors to carry out the mission. Hồ then slipped back into Việt Nam and seldom reported the situation there to the Việt Cách. He managed to seize power with his own Việt Minh members, or to be more exact, his communist members. Because of the lack of timely communications, the Việt Cách in China was not aware of what Hồ was doing in Việt Nam in 1945 until it was too late. Việt Cách was waiting to repatriate along with the Chinese army corps, which was going to invade Việt Nam to disarm the Japanese troops.

A large number of noncommunist parties' members were sent back separately to Việt Nam, especially after Japan had surrendered. The Việt Minh murdered many of them at the border. Some of my father's friends were among the victims. When Nguyễn Hải Thần and his Việt Cách, the Việt Quốc, the Đại Việt, and others arrived in Hà Nội with their small armed forces, the Việt Minh had already established their administrative system; it was not strong, but it had spread to most of the provinces. It was not that the people preferred the Việt Minh to the other groups. There is an old saying in Việt Nam: The one who strikes first gains the upper hand.

At the time, the Indochinese Communist Party led by Hồ Chí Minh declared its dissolution, and only a Marx-Engels Study Group remained. The Việt Minh in my district persistently denied that they were communists. Its public security office put some in my district area in jail because they had said that Việt Minh and Hồ were communists.

EARLY DAYS OF THE FRATRICIDE WAR

In Hà Nội, the noncommunist parties were fiercely opposed to the Việt Minh government. Nationalist parties rallied in an anticommunist coalition. Nguyễn

Hải Thần, chairman of the VNCMĐMH, became the leader of the coalition. My father said that Nguyễn Hải Thần was a brave, honest, and capable commander, an ethical revolutionary. But, according to my father, on the political battleground he was not a politician who could gain an upper hand over Hồ Chí Minh, who was the most sanctimonious and artful national leader in the history of Việt Nam.

The nationalists published newspapers with articles strongly criticizing Hồ and the Việt Minh Front. The two renowned anticommunist newspapers I used to read were the *Việt Nam Daily,* the official paper of the Việt Quốc, and the *Chính Nghĩa* (Right Cause) of the VNCMĐMH. Việt Minh security cadres tried every way to stop those papers from reaching readers in the countryside. The Việt Quốc had to escort their papers on buses with rifles. Every afternoon, my father and his comrades received the papers from a bus coming from Hà Nội, then redistributed them to different routes, a part of them going on main bus lines to the district towns, under armed escort most of the time. From these papers, readers learned many things that the Việt Minh wanted to conceal. What I liked most was a column in the *Việt Nam Daily,* written by the novelist Khái Hưng. He attacked the Việt Minh and Hồ Chí Minh with ironic humor and ardent satire so simple that, at nine years old, I was able to understand most of his articles.

In one of their campaigns, the opponents of the Việt Minh argued that the yellow star flag represented the Việt Minh, not the national colors. They proposed that a contest be held and that the National Congress would select one of the best entries for the national banner. The dispute lingered for many months until December 1946, when a hastily called session of the National Congress voted that the communist flag and the Việt Minh hymn were now the national banner and anthem. Only communist and pro-communist members were present at the session, while most of the nationalist members and many of the neutralists were absent because they had been eliminated or imprisoned.

At that time, the two sides attacked each other more and more vigorously in the newspapers and on loudspeakers. In a few weeks, more street fighting with rifles and pistols followed. A number of the Việt Quốc were arrested and tortured or killed. To retaliate, the Việt Quốc did the same thing to the Việt Minh. In my city, skirmishes took place almost every week, and nine out of ten times, the Việt Quốc gained the advantage until the Chinese military police arrived to stop the fighting and restore order.

The Việt Quốc was recruiting new members after August 1945 (including some bad ones, according to my father). My father and his comrades regularly held open meetings and handed out their party's newspapers and booklets, introducing its policies and criticizing the Việt Minh. At the time, with the limited perception of a fourth-grader on such matters, I understood that the two sides were using very different ways to build and maintain power. The nationalist parties were recruiting key members from among middle-class people who had

some education. With those members they built a solid core for their parties, but they did not take effective steps to organize and train a large number of individuals who would become the frontline soldiers.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party recruited new members from people of the lowest class, many of whom were illiterate. They were indoctrinated with communist ideology and employed as low-level leaders. They were fanatical elements in the infrastructure of various fields whom the party needed in order to take effective control.

Gradually, the support from the Chinese army decreased. It appeared that the Chinese commanders were not as interested in backing up the Vietnamese nationalists as people had expected. It was well known later that Hồ Chí Minh had bribed the top commander of the Chinese forces, General Lu Han, with a lot of gold from the "Gold Week" so that he would withdraw all support to the Vietnamese nationalists. My father's comrades asserted that one of the gifts given to Lu Han was an opium pipe set made of solid gold; all of the gifts may have amounted to several dozen kilograms of pure gold.

In the last months of 1945, the Việt Minh public security force arrested more people, including my uncle and one of my father's best friends. One morning, my mother and I visited them in the city public security bullpen. While the jailer was busy examining the gifts my mother had brought, my father's friend held me tightly and whispered into my ear, "Tell your dad they're beating me every day." My uncle was released a few months later, but it was the last time I saw my father's best friend. The Việt Minh got rid of him, leaving no trace for his family to track down his corpse. I was sorry to learn that, about the same time, his eldest son had joined the Communist Party against his mother's wishes. He had his own reasons, I thought. In 1954, he became a high-ranking Việt Minh, possibly a regimental commander.

In December 1945, the Việt Cách, Việt Quốc, Đại Việt, and other nationalist parties were about to go to war against the Việt Minh. These anticommunist parties, especially the Việt Quốc, were militarily much stronger than the Việt Minh, with bases in the northern Tonkin provinces and commando units in other provinces. My father and his friends believed that it would take the nationalists a few days to overthrow the Việt Minh government at all levels in Tonkin and a few weeks to establish a new administration all over the country. Later in life, I thought they had been rather optimistic.

Before 1945, facing this dangerous situation, the VNQDĐ and the Đại Việt had merged into an alliance called the Quốc Dân Đảng Front. The Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng's brilliant leader, Trương Tử Ahn, was elected to head the alliance. From the time the Việt Minh had seized power, the alliance had continued to fight against them. The alliance ended after the Việt Minh's political cleansing campaign came to a peak in late 1946.

The nationalist opposition demanded that Hồ Chí Minh reorganize the government so that every political disposition could be represented before the election. The Việt Minh refused. The dispute continued, and the Việt Minh leaders delayed a definite settlement to buy time and to wear out their enemies' patience. The opposition strongly protested against the Việt Minh's "scheme of holding a fraudulent general election," they said. "Down with the fake election" was seen in newspapers of the opposition and on walls and banderoles where the opposition took control. Children and younger brothers of the Việt Quốc activists lent their hands in painting posters. I loved to work with them at menial tasks such as running errands, cleaning brushes, mixing paints, and fetching objects for the elders.

Sometime in December, the tension became extremely high. The opposition threatened to resort to violence to settle the conflict. Nguyễn Hải Thần rejected Hồ Chí Minh's proposal to form a coalition government. On the propaganda front, Hồ appealed to the people for the "Great Solidarity."

An anecdote ran that on a day in December, Hồ came to see Nguyễn Hải Thần and spent the whole afternoon and evening trying to persuade him to approve his plan. Nguyễn, under pressure from the other parties' leaders, kept saying no. According to a version from many of my father's comrades, the two old men talked far into the night. Finally, Hồ hugged Nguyễn and burst into tears.[9] Sobbing, he said that Nguyễn would be fully responsible in history for his unyielding position, which could lead the country to a catastrophe both from colonialist aggression and from civil war, and that the Vietnamese people would never forgive Nguyễn's mistake. Nguyễn accepted Ho's proposal. My father and his comrades held Nguyễn in high esteem. They all said that he was an outspoken respectable old leader but not Hồ Chí Minh's equal in politics. He was afraid of being held responsible, and he took fighting the French as his first task and neutralizing the Việt Minh as the second. Hồ took him and the nationalists as his primary enemies.

Consequently, they reached an agreement to share power. Newspapers reported that 50 out of 350 seats of the National Congress would be reserved for the Việt Quốc. The Việt Cách and other minor parties would get 20. All those 70 seats were to be appointed, not voted for. With a stronger armed force, the Việt Quốc accepted the concession made in that agreement as a victory. Many of them, probably my father included, were somewhat ostentatiously conceited, as if they could eliminate the Việt Minh in a single day. They believed that even though the Việt Minh would play all sorts of tricks to have its men elected, there were a large number of renowned noncommunist candidates who would win a significant number of the remaining 280 seats and would possibly stand by the Việt Quốc in Congress.

FOUR

On the Way to War

GENERAL ELECTION

The new government of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam was officially founded after the general election on January 4, 1946. Nguyễn Hải Thần became vice president to Hồ Chí Minh in the first so-called coalition government. Other nationalist leaders were appointed ministers, such as the famous writer Nguyễn Tường Tam, pen name Nhất Linh, of the Việt Quốc, as minister of foreign affairs, and Vũ Hồng Khanh of the Việt Quốc, vice chairman of the Resistance committee, beside Võ Nguyên Giáp.[1]

Although I was only nine, I did feel happy to see the sign of peaceful cooperation and reconciliation between the two sides. But the election itself left a deep scar in my soul. In my village, primary school kids who had good handwriting were assigned to write ballots for illiterate citizens because the Việt Minh government could not afford printed ballots. The village committee said that it appointed kids to write ballots because they didn't have political partiality. I was one of the selected kids. The evening before the election, a village official gave us a list of many names that we would have to learn by heart. When we were asked to help, if we could be sure that a voter was really illiterate, we would just write down those listed names disregarding the name the voter told us. In fact, most of the voters said to us, "Please write whatever names you think suitable. I just don't know who is who." It was apparent that they voted because they had to, not because they wanted to. That was the first time I experienced a fraudulent election and knew it was a fraud despite all propaganda efforts made to praise it. And before I left for the United States in October 1990, I had never seen a fair election in Việt Nam, whether under the communist or noncommunist regime.

After the election, two of my father's comrades in the Việt Quốc provincial standing committee became congressmen. They were given congressional immunity, but the local Việt Minh Public Security kept harassing them; my father had to leave home and go to Hà Nội to live with a friend to avoid trouble. Only those comrades who were armed remained to run the downtown office.

The conflict between the Việt Minh and the nationalists drove the Vietnamese people into a widening division and then ignited a war of ideology. Some joined a party because of its doctrine of which they had only a vague notion, even a misunderstanding. Many others only followed in their relatives' or friends' footsteps. There were also many who took one side only because their foes favored the opposite. As the struggle was going on, more bloodshed and animosity accumulated.

In late 1945 and early 1946, my father's circle and a number of his friends on the Việt Minh side were still friendly to each other despite the fact that the number of small clashes between the two sides was escalating. Sometimes they got together at our home to discuss various subjects, and they usually ended up arguing about politics. One of those subjects was education. Some of the men, both Việt Minh and Việt Quốc, contended that formal education was not necessary for a revolutionary to fulfill his duty well and that he could learn more from his activities. One of them even said, "Why do we have to learn algebra and geometry? We don't need them. They are for clerks and cashiers."

My father and others from both sides disagreed. They said that formal education, though having some defects, was indispensable to leadership in any situation because it provides general knowledge that could help in making more effective decisions. Still a youth, I did not have any ideas about education and leadership. Not until many years later during the war could I see how communist and nationalist leaders were ruling the country.

FRIENDS OR FOES

While the internal conflict was going on, the French increased pressure on Việt Nam with demonstrations of military power along with peace talks in which the French produced unreasonable demands. News from the South indicated that fighting around Sài Gòn was escalating. My schoolmates had to join more demonstrations against the French aggressors. Everyone saw the country as being on the brink of war. Most of my cousins were among the young men and women who received basic military and first aid training. Some kids were taught to be messengers for combat units.

The nationalist parties were unflinching against the French. They criticized the Việt Minh for being soft on the French in order to have a free hand to eliminate nationalist activists. About mid-1946, the French and the Việt Minh forces attacked many Việt Quốc military units on both sides in the border area. In the

Hải Phòng coastal area, extending to the common border with China near Mống Cáy City, newly arriving French navy ships bombarded a Việt Quốc battalion, while the Việt Minh launched a massive attack on the other flank.

Việt Quốc forces in the province of Lào Kay fell into a similar situation. French remnant troops in Chinese territories crossed the border, assailing the Việt Quốc units, which were confronting a much larger Việt Minh force.

One of my cousins who served the Vệ Quốc Đoàn (national guard corps, or Việt Minh army) was fighting in the battle to overrun a Việt Quốc base northwest of Hà Nội. The Việt Minh command told my cousin and his fellows that the base was held by "ethnic Thái rebels." The fighting lasted several days, and a Việt Minh force of five times larger decimated a Việt Quốc battalion. My cousin met my father and related the story. He said that only after seizing the base did he discover that the "Thái rebels" were Việt Quốc troops.

As for the French, it was apparent that they found it more difficult to talk with the nationalists than with the communists. Meanwhile, the Việt Minh preferred the presence of the French to the Chinese. According to many books and reports concerning Việt Nam, Hồ Chí Minh once said that he'd rather "smell French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of his life."

Some might think it an indication of Hồ's Sinophobia, but my father and his friends took it differently. They said that Hồ was only referring to the Kuomintang Chinese, not to all Chinese. They said this was Hồ's way of winning people's support for his strategy of allowing the French forces' presence in North Việt Nam to replace the Chinese Nationalist Army. The Chinese nationalists were more dangerous than the French to his existence at that time. He meant to incite a streak of Sinophobia in the common Vietnamese people, who always remembered the brutal domination by the Chinese for more than 1,000 years and by the French for nearly 100 years.The explanation was obviously true, as Hồ and the Vietnamese communist leaders slavishly adhered to Chinese communism at least until 1975. He was a Sinophile and a faithful Maoist.

THE FRENCH RETURN

In early March, a French force entered the Gulf of Tonkin and threatened to attack. Then Hồ Chí Minh, Vũ Hồng Khanh, and the French representative Sainteny signed the provisional agreement of March 6, 1946. According to the agreement, the French Army would be stationed in the major cities north of the 16th parallel, including my beloved city of Nam Định, to replace the Chinese Army.

News about the agreement shocked every patriot. An old mandarin, a patriot and a most respected teacher of my father, my uncle, and many others, heard the news while he was playing cards with my father and three other gentlemen. In high dudgeon, he fell down mumbling, "Traitors! Traitors!" and died of a stroke within minutes.

The nationalists strongly criticized VũHồng Khanh for signing the agreement. He was one of the top leaders of the Việt Quốc, holding the seat of vice premier in the coalition government at the time. He later admitted that he was duped into endorsing the covenant. The provisional agreement dealt a deadly blow to the nationalist parties. They would have to fight both French and Việt Minh forces alone. As for the communists, they might claim it as their victory. It should be noted that although the Chinese army was siding with the Việt Quốc as a policy of the Chiang Kai-shek government, the support was merely in terms of politics and was probably limited in financial and military aid.

If the Chinese stayed, the nationalists would soon bring an end to the Việt Minh. If the French returned, Hồ would have to fight just one enemy, whereas the nationalists could hardly survive attacks from both the French and the Việt Minh. As the top leader of his party, Hồ had his reasons for signing the agreement, probably to buy time to consolidate his power and strengthen his party, at all costs, a price that his compatriots would have to pay.

Not long after the agreement was signed, French soldiers arrogantly moved into my city. People were resentful at seeing them riding in Jeeps and trucks on the streets of Nam Định City. They clashed with our self-defense group frequently. Hồ again called for national unity to defend the Fatherland.

The Việt Minh propaganda machine justified the agreement by saying that those newly arriving were the "good new French," not the "bad colonialists." As far as a nine-year-old boy could tell, very few people would believe that.

One day, my father and two comrades, members of the Việt Quốc Provincial Standing Committee of Nam Định, were granted a private audience with Hồ to complain of being menaced by the local Việt Minh. Hồ received them warmly and had his aide send directives to Nam Định Public Security Service to stop annoying the three men, whom he referred to as "my brothers" and said that "you may have a different political position, but you are patriots who should be helped, not hindered." He assured the three men that they would be completely safe, so there was nothing to worry about.

My father offered my family his hope that since Hồ assured them of their safety, there was no need for further worry. He came back home as soon as he was sure that local authorities had received orders from Hà Nội to leave him and his friends alone. In the following months, there was no harassment. My uncle, however, did not think that the threat would come to a full stop.

HỒ CHÍ MINH'S BIRTHDAY

Some events weren't interesting to many children, but I always felt them worth memorizing. On May 19, 1946, my mother and I were in Hà Nội visiting some family friends. In the early morning, without previous notice, Việt Minh cadres went from home to home telling people to display flags in front of their houses. Only later in the afternoon did they explain that it was Hồ Chí Minh's birthday. Over the next few days, the opposition revealed that it was not Hồ's birthday and that the flag display was ordered only to welcome Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, a French representative, on his official visit to Hà Nội.[2]

Today, there is no concrete evidence to prove that May 19, 1880, was his birthday, and written materials found in the last decade firmly alleged that Hồ was not born on that date. Archives found in at least three institutions confirm the allegation: In his petition for enrollment in the French Colonial School on September 15, 1911, he claimed he was born in 1892. At the Paris Police Department on September 2, 1920, he claimed the date January 15, 1894. At the USSR embassy in Berlin in June 1928, his application for a visa listed his birthday as February 15, 1895.

THE 1946 PURGE

In June 1946, Hồ and a Vietnamese delegation departed for France for further negotiation. In September, when Hồ signed an agreement that was a disservice to Việt Nam, all the nationalist parties protested.

While Hồ was in France, the Việt Minh launched a raid against the nationalist parties. They staged a scene at a house on Ôn Như Hầu Street in Hà Nội to justify the raid. It had been the office of a Việt Quốc agency that the Việt Minh had overrun days earlier. The Việt Minh authorities held a press conference and displayed a number of corpses of men they said had been assassinated by the Việt Quốc. They also charged the Việt Quốc with robbing and raping passers-by. The Việt Quốc denied the allegations, of course. The communists used the brazenly staged event for months as a source of propaganda with which to attack their enemy.

When I asked my father whether or not the Việt Quốc did such horrible things, he said, "The Việt Quốc did kill many Việt Minh somewhere else, but they were not so stupid as to do the killing and looting and raping right at their office in the heart of Hà Nội. I know some of the men there. They are not the type that can do such shameful things." Sometime in 1949, a French Army unit captured one of the agents who had participated in the setup of the Ôn Như Hầu scene. He confessed that the Việt Minh had been behind the slanderous plot.

In the Việt Minh's summer 1946 raid, the Việt Quốc and other nationalist parties suffered heavy losses. Some important cadres were arrested, and many were murdered. Their military bases were attacked and besieged. The Việt Quốc fought back bravely and were not completely wiped out as their enemy had expected. In September, when I entered fifth grade, the attacks on the nationalist parties increased. The bloody "cleansing" campaign was conducted while Hồ Chí Minh was in Fontainebleau to negotiate with France. He arrived there on

May 31. He signed the modus vivendu of September 14 with French minister Marius Moutet and came home on October 20. It was alleged by the nationalists that his top aides with Võ Nguyễn Giáp as executor were running the cleansing campaign while Hồ was away so that he would not be fully blamed for masterminding the plot.

More bad news came to my father every day. He became obviously nervous. A Việt Quốc member narrowly escaped death when the Việt Minh security agents brought him and half a dozen others to the riverbank for execution. He told my father the horrible story and concluded, "The Việt Minh selected their victims carefully." Thanks to darkness, he escaped a minute before he was to be executed. According to him, a cool-headed young Việt Quốc calmly asked the executioners, "I'm only a low-ranking cadre of the Việt Quốc. Why do you kill me, not my high-ranking superiors?" He was a former seminarian, a talented violinist, and a fervent Việt Quốc member. Whenever he visited with my father, he gave me some basic music and singing lessons. "Good question before you die," a Việt Minh executioner replied. "You are low-ranking, but will be dangerous in the future. Your bosses will not." A moment later, his head was smashed into pulp.

There may be something to be said for this macabre strategy. From the founding of the Republic of Việt Nam in the South, following the 1954 Geneva Accords, until it collapsed on April 30, 1975, the nationalist side seriously lacked a class of medium- and high-ranking patriotic anticommunist leaders. The communists had systematically massacred the majority of them, and the survivors were not sufficient to fill all key jobs in the administration and the armed forces.

During the atrocious cleansing campaign in mid-1946, many nationalist leaders had no option but to flee Việt Nam. Former king Bảo Đại did not return after a diplomatic mission in China in late March; Nguyễn Hải Thần escaped to China a month later. Nguyễn Tường Tam, VũHồng Khanh, and many Việt Quốc members followed suit in May and June. Other leaders stayed to fight and to share the fate of their comrades.

The notorious communist prison camps such as Đầm Đùn and Lý Bá Sơ were constructed at that time, and many thousands of Việt Quơc, Đại Việt, and Duy Dân quickly filled those camps to the maximum capacity.

NATIONALIST PARTIES WIPED OUT

In the second half of 1946, many of my father's comrades fled to their bases in the provinces north of Hà Nội. The Việt Quốc strongholds in the delta provinces were harassed and besieged.

When going out during these critical months, my father often carried a .25 caliber pistol. He taught me how to take care of the little thing that looked like a toy but could kill. I loved it. He showed me how to disassemble, clean, and use it.

He said if a child knew how a pistol or a gun worked and how it might cause fatal wounds, he would be scared away from curiosity and from dangerously tampering with it. Although I was not allowed to shoot a real cartridge because ammunition was in short supply, handling a real pistol was the greatest thing to a child; it made me feel important. During wartime, as I had to keep my pistol at home, I trained my two sons and two daughters ages five to twelve the same way. I allowed them to shoot at objects like bricks or coconuts to see how dangerous a gun could be.

My father planned to bring me with him to China if the situation forced him to flee. To prepare for my future in the foreign land, he had his remote cousin teach me Chinese characters. This teacher crammed my head with three to five characters a day. In three months, I could remember about 200 words; that didn't help me much except for better understanding a few Vietnamese terms derived from ancient Chinese.

One evening, my father's close friend, who was also a Việt Minh Public Security cadre, stealthily dropped by. He disclosed to my father, "My agency was well aware of your plan to flee to China with your son. You just can't do that." My father asked him, "Do you know why the Public Security did not get rid of me as they killed some of my comrades?" His friend said, "Although you are considered a kind of dangerous Việt Quốc like some of your dead comrades, because you are a member at the provincial level, you've earned significant prestige and popularity in this area. They don't want to make the people feel bad. So you'll be safe unless you do something and they feel it's dangerous to let you flee." So my father gave up his plan to escape.

In autumn 1946, there were more clashes between French soldiers and the Self-Defense Corps in Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and my city, Nam Định. War was impending, and many families left the cities for rural areas.

At that time, Việt Minh units already routed many nationalist units. Most Việt Quốc and Đại Việt strongholds were overrun by Viet Minh's ten-to-one attacks. The Việt Quốc newspaper office in Hà Nội was overrun, although both sides suffered losses. We did not receive the *Việt Nam Daily* anymore. Only the Việt Minh's *Cứu Quốc* (National Salvation) was available in my area.

My father and his friends realized that Việt Quốc organizations in all other provinces in Việt Nam, large and small, were being brutally repressed. The Vệ Quốc Đoàn or national guard of the Việt Minh grew rapidly in personnel strength and won several battles where the Việt Quốc militia units were willing to fight but were seriously outnumbered. The Politics and Military Training School of the Quốc Dân Đảng Front north of Hà Nội suffered heavy casualties after powerful surprise attacks by the Việt Minh with a force five times larger. Most captured instructors and students were killed and thrown into the Red River.

Many prominent leaders of the nationalist parties were abducted and assassinated. The most brilliant among them was Trương Tử Lê Khang, a genius

central committee member of the Việt Quốc. By the end of 1946, the nationalist opposition parties were practically wiped out. Hundreds of nationalist leaders at all levels lost their lives or just disappeared. Thousands of other members were incarcerated. Those who survived the terrorist campaign fled to China. Those remaining stayed in the hope of surviving the brutal cleansing campaign. In December 1946, people were feeling that war was coming near. While tension was rising, the cleansing campaign continued at a higher rate.

My father's two friends who had been assured of their safety by Hồ Chí Minh were arrested. Their Congress member's immunity and Hồ's promise could not save them. One of the two, and a dozen other dissidents, were killed in a rice field a few miles north of Nam Định City. A witness related that the victims were buried alive up to their necks and a harrow drawn back and forth by two water buffalo tore off their heads. My father's other friend was taken away and never seen again.

When I was older, I asked many persons who had reliable knowledge of the matter about which side had started the bloody feud and should be held responsible for the fratricidal war. Carefully and candidly analyzing their opinions, I concluded that both sides should be blamed. However, it is certain that the number of victims done away with by the Việt Minh was many times higher than those put to death by the nationalist parties. Searching farther into the twentieth-century history of Việt Nam, it is reasonable to assert that the early communists of the 1930s started the killing in southern China. The victims were noncommunist revolutionaries whom the communist leaders classified as their future dangerous rivals.

PART II

The War of Resistance

FIVE

Take Up Arms!

When a company-sized unit of French soldiers arrived in Nam Định City not long after the March 6 agreement, the city population was nervous but not in a panic. Neither side concealed its hostility. However, there were no organized firefights. Every week, newspapers reported sporadic exchanges of fire by small units in the three largest cities of North Việt Nam (Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Nam Định). But the joint control teams quickly halted them.

Tension rose. In late November and early December, the French soldiers in my city consolidated their defense in the large concrete building of the former Indochina Bank, situated on the main street, and in the silk factory nearby. Street fights between individual soldiers took place more often. The government once again advised people who had no job in the city to move to the countryside, and ordered the military to be ready to confront any threat by French forces.

On the morning of December 19, 1946, French soldiers became more aggressive. They used their half-tracks and armored cars to clear redoubts, breastworks, and barricades that had been erected on most of the streets by the city's self-defense corps. With little provocation, they opened fire on Vietnamese militiamen and civilians. At noon, my mother, my father, my cousin, my sister, and I left the city for our home village with what we could carry by hand.

Later that evening firefights exploded, starting the real war. The bad news spread far and wide in less than an hour. Most villagers were up all night. Many said that battles would be fought in the city until one side won control, but not in the countryside. They would soon realize they were wrong.

Early the next morning, thousands of city people were seen walking on the main road with all kinds of portable belongings. Many were heading for their home villages or the villages of relatives, and many were fleeing to any place at

all. About ten of my villagers whose houses were rather large offered to lodge those who had no place to go.

Soldiers, militiamen, and public security cadres were busy preparing for war. Everyone worried about what would happen next. Việt Minh authorities set up checkpoints on roads and bridges and in marketplaces; one of them was right at my village's gate. Men passing by were ordered to show their identification. Those who failed to present such papers were detained for investigation, sometimes for a day or two. In some places, many people who had books, papers, letters, or tags in their clothes, or almost anything with blue-white-red marks, the French national colors, were suspected of being traitors or spies. They got little trouble, and all were freed. But I heard that there was one beaten to death somewhere in my district.

The war did not keep the Việt Minh from intensifying its cleansing campaign. A few days after the war broke out, the famous novelist Khái Hưng, a founding member of the Self-Strength Literary Group, was killed and dumped in a river about ten miles from my village. News of his death came to my father in three or four days. Later in the month, my father learned that many more of his comrades had been murdered.

The French soldiers were hemmed in by thousands of Vietnamese fighting men. Some were armed with rifles and pistols, others with hand grenades and cold steel. Every week there were attacks on the French positions. The soldiers and militiamen fought hard and suffered heavy casualties. For months, the French weren't able to break the siege around their two compounds.

Everyone, pro- or anticommunist, was eager to do something for the brave fighters on the front line. Every appeal of the Việt Minh government was responded to quickly and enthusiastically. My father devoted all his time to the task of promoting support for the Resistance, especially for the wounded warriors.[1] He urged his friends to cooperate with the Việt Minh government to fight the French, whom they should consider their archenemy.

HIGH MORALE

In January, Việt Minh authorities announced the implementation of scorched-earth tactics. Farmers were to deliver loads of straw or dry wood to fill city houses that were away from the French positions. Then one night, the whole city was set on fire. In the morning, from three miles away, we could see smoke rising high above my beloved city, the third largest and second best-looking city of Tonkin. People said a large number of public buildings and private houses were reduced to rubble.

Many large brick houses in the countryside far away from the city shared the same fate. The authorities said that if the French came, they could take quarters in them. Our family's brick house in the village survived the policy because it was not large enough for such a purpose, but a smaller, two-story house in the nearby village was torn down. The decision depended on the opinions of local government officials. In this case, the district officials decided that the French would be using the two-story house as an observation post. Rumors had it that the tactics were aimed at a hidden objective to harm the rich rather than to obstruct the French.

The people's morale was very high at the outbreak of war. A great many youths in my city joined the self-defense corps and fought bravely around the French positions, while many young men and women in the villages volunteered for military service in regular army units and the militia. I could see them in military basic training everywhere before they were sent to the city to reinforce the self-defense corps, even though they were poorly equipped.

There were examples of heroism on the front line by young men of every origin. One carried an antitank explosive and plunged onto a French armored car to destroy it and himself. Others slipped into heavily defended French installations around the silk factory at night armed only with daggers, killed several enemies, and slipped out unscathed. And a hundred similar stories encouraged more young men to join the fighting.

Many kids of my age were also admitted to combat units as messenger boys. We all learned the story of a boy in his early teens who had sacrificed himself on a messenger's mission. I used to look at those boys with great admiration because I knew I would never be brave enough to do such a job.

One of those messenger boys had been my classmate. When he dropped by to visit his family for a day or two, all the kids in the village came to say hello and claimed their friendship with him, including those who had always bullied him a few months earlier. He told us combat stories, which we listened to with our eyes and mouths wide open. I didn't know that many of his stories were just lies until many years later. However, the desire to become a hero took root in our little hearts and stayed there for a long time.

Early in 1947, the war was fought only in a part of the city where the French were surrounded in the two separate areas. They could find no supply of water or receive food from the outside. Although well equipped with modern weapons, the French were not able to make a sally to control the city and to link up with French forces in Hà Nội. Therefore, life in villages far from the city was still somewhat peaceful. The presence of thousands of city people in the countryside had a significant impact on the rural areas.

The city people brought with them their modern way of living, which greatly influenced the peasants and altered the appearance and society of the countryside. Many rural locations became busy centers of commercial and cultural activities where a young villager could enjoy a cup of coffee with a cigarette or a bowl of *phở* at reasonable prices. In a prosperous village of my province, which attracted a lot

of war refugees from the city, people could even listen to romantic or patriotic songs presented by pretty singers in coffeehouses. In this way, the provincial city was broken into a dozen rural towns with almost everything left from prewar days from city life except for paved streets, running water, and electricity.

Besides fighting, the cultural front was similarly important. Since August 1945, many songs, poems, and plays had been composed to promote the people's willingness to fight for national independence. Nothing was more attractive to the young than songs. My classmates and I were delighted to learn a new song every week or two, songs that I will never forget because they have become a part of the childhood of my generation. Their lyrics and tunes planted a lively seed of patriotism in our hearts. Patriotic songs played a role in building the extremely high morale that induced people to fight the better equipped enemy with almost nothing more than a few outmoded rifles, their bare hands, and courage.

One day in January 1946, a fighting unit managed to acquire a 75 mm howitzer, although it had just three shells. It was the only thing bigger than an automatic rifle in the whole province of Nam Định. The cannon was brought to a riverside about a mile from the Indochina Bank where the French were besieged. Without any indirect fire training, gunners aimed the cannon at the building. The first shot missed the target; the next hit the building; the third misfired. We got the news in the afternoon that "our brave artillery unit blew off one-fourth of the building and eliminated scores of French soldiers." That evening, a meeting was held at the pagoda to celebrate the great feat.[2]

Tightly besieged in the two narrow areas without food and water resupplies, the French would have had to surrender if the Vietnamese forces had been able to maintain the siege for one more month, people said later. But one day, some French airplanes appeared and dozens of parachutes bloomed in the sky. The French airborne reinforcements quickly drove the Vietnamese out of the city and established a new defense line along the city perimeter.

After a week or so, French ships from Hà Nội and Hải Phòng were able to reach the city river quay safely. With nothing bigger than automatic rifles, the Vietnamese could conduct only harassing fire at French warships moving on the Red River, not enough to do them any kind of serious damage. By mid-1947, the French had consolidated their defense system around the city and expanded their control over adjacent villages.

From their outposts around the city, French soldiers frequently raided the areas outside with squad or platoon-sized operations. What the Vietnamese force could do was lay some mines or set up sniper fire to harass the enemy before withdrawing. In no way could they directly clash with the French for more than thirty minutes. People in my district composed satirical poems deriding our force for always "withdrawing safely," the term often used in news reports of the Việt Minh government's newspaper.

The French forces did not widen their control over a larger area until November 1947. In the meantime, the countryside of the province was still safe, and I was able to continue my education in the district primary school that I had attended since autumn 1946.

At school and at home, we students all participated in any task we could perform to support the Resistance. Local governments offered courses to instruct us in politics, combat skills, first aid, and propaganda techniques. A batch of new Communist Party members in every village strengthened their party. Although their activities were supposedly covert, people could easily tell who those new members were by their manner of speaking.

In the village election, my father became the chairman of the village Ủy Ban Hành Chính Kháng Chiến (Administrative and Resistance Committee), a village chief with a new title. More than 90 percent of voters wanted him to have the job. The job was too low for him, but he accepted it as a tacit compromise with the Việt Minh provincial government. Later, he was elected vice chairman of the district Liên Việt Front (Vietnamese Alliance Front, later known under the new title Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc, or Fatherland Front), which consisted of members of different noncommunist parties, some Buddhist monks and Catholic priests, and prominent notables of the area, nominally representing the various political and social groups. In truth, it was solely a figurehead under the strict control of the Communist Party.

In his jobs, my father took charge of some campaigns supporting the Resistance. Not only did he devote all his time to the tasks but he also encouraged my family to participate in them. During "Disabled Veterans' Week," he had me print thousands of paper stamps using a wooden seal. I had to do it until late at night so that the stamps could be ready early in the morning for schoolchildren to sell to raise money for disabled veterans. I was tired, and my right palm was sore. My uncle asked my father if he was eager to do such tasks just to please the Việt Minh. He was not offended as I expected, but in his usual soft voice he made it clear to my uncle that he accepted the task only for the benefits of the brave disabled to whom he was grateful. He also told me that I should do the same whenever I was required to.

"When the Việt Minh decide to do me harm," he said to my uncle, "they will do it and will never spare me even if I lick their boots a thousand times."

TERRORISM

In 1947, most of the French soldiers were rather friendly to Vietnamese civilians they met in their operations. They paid generously for what they bought and were very polite to the aged. They gave medicine to villagers who were ill and sometimes candies to kids. But that friendliness didn't last long. More soldiers

came from France—the French and the North Africans—and more Vietnamese were recruited from the French-controlled villages. During combat operations, the French soldiers began raping and looting more frequently. There was no competent administration governing the French-controlled villages, and therefore laws were not enforced. The French commanders only cared about military affairs.

On August 18, 1947, my mother gave birth to my second sister while villagers were preparing to celebrate the second anniversary of the Revolution. Much of what a newborn needed was unavailable.

Three months later, the French launched a company-sized operation in the area two miles north of my village. All the villagers moved south along with thousands of others swarming the country roads. Each of my family members carried a rucksack containing the most valuable and necessary objects, and my mother carried my baby sister. We all scurried away while machine guns were barking closer and closer.

After the operation, the French Army established three forts along the wide dirt road one mile north of my village. Most villagers in the French newly controlled area returned home. Subsequently, my village was under the crossfire between French soldiers and Việt Minh troops, and the strip of about ten villages along the wide dirt road became a disputed area where people had no ID card of either side but suffered brutality from both.

Both sides were utilizing terrorism to attain their objectives. The French soldiers would burn a village to the ground if one of them got killed by sniper fire or an antipersonnel mine. In the most serious case, villagers would be shot, hanged, or beheaded and their bodies would be eviscerated or dismembered. Victims of French terrorism rose: five in my village, five to ten in the ten nearby villages in six months. On the Việt Minh side, right after the war broke out, the terrorist campaign conducted against the nationalist dissidents since mid-1946 continued, peaking in late 1947 and 1948. Many members of nationalist parties who had survived the earlier campaigns were imprisoned or assassinated. Anyone who was suspected of having relations with the French or one who was thought to be dangerous to the regime was eliminated. Several times we kids found corpses. Some were eviscerated, chopped up, or beheaded, while most had been shot or stabbed to death.

But the most horrible to see were victims who were buried alive up to the neck in wet soil, their mouths stuffed with rags, and left to die a slow death under the hot sun that burned their swollen faces. No one dared to rescue them, and no one knew who they were as no identification could be found. The owners of the rice fields would have to bury the corpses.

I could say there were probably three people in every village around mine who were imprisoned for months or years by the Việt Minh authorities. Death squads executed a smaller number of villagers.[3]

Since the August 1945 event, I heard that communists would play rough with their opponents according to their motto in the early 1930s: "Trí, Phú, Địa, Hào, đào tận gốc, tróc tận rễ" (Intellectuals, rich farmers, landlords, wicked lords must be grubbed up, all their roots and stumps). However, I didn't believe it at the time, as it seemed to be a slanderous propaganda scheme by the anti-communists. The Communist Party had allegedly proclaimed the motto during the 1930 Nghệ Tĩnh Soviet Movement, an uprising of poor farmers in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces led by the communists.

Only when the cleansing campaign in 1947 expanded did I see that what common people had said about merciless communist policies was true.

SIX

My Dark Years in War Begin

THE FIRST TASTE OF WAR

In January 1948, my family and many villagers moved to a village about three miles to the south. My school moved to a pagoda just a mile away, so I could continue fifth grade. My father continued his jobs in the Liên Việt and as the village chairman in exile. Although he performed his duty well, sometimes he was summoned to the district Public Security Agency to answer questions concerning his suspected anticommunist activities. His job in the Liên Việt led him to make the acquaintance of Catholic priests and Buddhist monks, some of whom were in the anticommunist organization known as the Mặt Trận Liên Tôn Chống Cộng (Interreligious Anticommunist Front). Probably his relations with those individuals alerted the Public Security Agency.

In January 1948, the French military authorities formed many anti–Việt Minh militia units in selected villages under their control and armed them with hand grenades and rifles of WWI vintage (.30 caliber Remingtons and Springfields). At that time, to the common people, a group equipped with ten rifles was a formidable force, more fearful than a battalion would be twenty years later.

Although most Vietnamese people supported the Resistance, a number of those who escaped from the Việt Minh's massacre campaigns had only one way to go. That was to flee to the French side or even to join the French Army or the anti–Việt Minh militias. Between the two enemies, one has to live with the less life-threatening one.

One day in February 1948, a friend of my father from a village in the French-controlled area came for a short visit. He handed my father a letter from the French military authority in Nam Định. The French officer who signed the letter promised my father a job as district chief or provincial deputy chief if he left the

Việt Minh and moved to the French-controlled territory. If my father accepted the proposal, a small-scale operation would be conducted on our village area to bring my whole family to the city. The French soldiers would pretend to capture my family—we would have been tied with ropes, our home ransacked—so that the Việt Minh could have no good reasons to harass our relatives who stayed. At that time the French were looking for a political solution, and they needed a Vietnamese administrative system to assist them in various civil affairs.

My father discussed the proposal with my uncle and my mother, who both supported a positive answer. After a week of pondering, my father decided to say no. He drafted a letter in French and had my most confident cousin and me make it into a clean copy without bearing my father's name or address to avoid any risk to my father in case the letter should fall into the hands of the Việt Minh Public Security Agency. The letter was sent to the French commander through the same friend.

In the letter, my father said that he would not accept the offer because until then, the French were fighting the war only to reestablish colonialism in Việt Nam. As a patriot, he had gained some respect from the population of the area. So he wouldn't betray them by joining the French despite the fact that if he stayed with the Việt Minh, his safety could be endangered at any time.

So we stayed. The two other former public servants in the area who had received similar letters accepted the offer. The French sent a platoon to bring them with their families back to the city, and both were appointed as district chiefs. For years, my family members regretted my father's decision. But I thought he was right when acting according to his heart and his ideals.

In February, I experienced an air raid for the first time. Two black French fighters (later known as the Hellcats) suddenly appeared in the sky and circled the area. Then they began strafing every brick house in the village for about five minutes. At last, they dropped four bombs near the concrete bridge and the pagoda. In those five minutes I was horribly frightened. Each time the planes dived, I prayed that bombs and bullets would hit somewhere far from me. When I saw the four black objects—the bombs—falling from the planes, I was panicked and ran to a bigger stack close by. The bombs hit a rice paddy 100 yards from my home.

When the planes disappeared over the horizon, we found out that only two women had been killed by machine-gun fire. The four bombs dug large craters in the rice field, killing no one. A big bullet hit the floor of the house my family was living in, only a few inches from my aunt, slightly wounding her.

It was my first lesson that bombing and shelling scared people more than really injuring them, except in a carpet-bombing. It also taught me that people could be less afraid of being killed after undergoing numerous attacks by bombs and artillery shells and that with some courage, a soldier could withstand such bombing firmly.

POOR DADDY!

In March 1948, the Liên Việt Front (Vietnamese Alliance) assigned my father the task of founding the Red Cross Association in our district. My cousin and I helped him with some of the paperwork. In a month, hundreds of people registered for membership. Some of them were my father's comrades in the Việt Quốc.

"It's unusual," my uncle warned my father. "The Việt Minh are always sensitive to such matters. You must be careful, though. You don't mean to do anything against them."

On a morning of April 1948 when my father and I were talking about my homework and my mother was holding my baby sister, four Public Security cadres came and produced a search warrant. My father, in an imperturbable manner, invited them into the house and showed them the part of the house my family occupied in a village where we had lived since after the French air raid in February 1948.

They began searching the house carefully, inspecting every object and looking at every piece of paper for more than an hour, but found nothing special. They asked my father a couple of questions, then declared that my father was under arrest. My father quietly put some clothes, a blanket, and a towel into a small bag. My mother slipped a few twenty-piaster bills into his pocket before he followed the four Việt Minh to their office about four miles away.

No one worried much because my father had been summoned many times to that office and held there for a day or two. But I felt something much different this time. By the way the two Việt Minh cops behaved and my father's sad look at me, saying only three short words, "Be brave, son!" I knew that he was in serious trouble. Two days later, my mother and I went to the Public Security office to give him food and medicine, but he was not there. We were told that he had been transferred to the higher agency for interrogation.

The situation gave me a feeling that this time my father would be treated roughly and that his way home would be very, very long, possibly never. It was the first time since he came back to live in our village in December 1946 that he was brought to a security office higher than district level.

My mother spent the whole month of May 1948 trying to find out where my father was being detained, leaving my little sister under the care of my father's older sister. At last, she was permitted to visit him in a provincial jail in the seaside village twenty miles from where we were living. The jail moved every two or three months to a new place. Locating it among a dozen provincial prisons was difficult, and sometimes it was dangerous for a woman frail and meek like my mother.

One of my remote uncles, who had joined the Việt Minh army in 1945 and been promoted to platoon leader, was discharged in late 1947 when the Việt Minh army conducted a political purge to get rid of any military cadre suspected of having contact with the nationalist parties. He wasn't a Việt Quốc member, but he had often visited with my father and discussed politics before he volunteered to join the Việt Minh regular army. A month after my father was arrested, my uncle fled to the French-controlled area one night when the Public Security men came to arrest him. He was then admitted into the anticommunist militia newly founded by the French, although he hated the French no less than my father did.

There is no statistic available on how many nationalist patriots who had been truthfully serving the Resistance but were not anticommunists had to leave the Việt Minh to join the French side because of communist crackdowns on them. But I am certain that it must have been no less than 1,000 as of 1950 in my province.

Toward the end of 1948, the Public Security arrested many people in the villages. Some of them were my father's comrades. Many others were only victims of suspicion. Việt Minh Public Security sent many of those to the prison camp Dam Dun, the frightening name that was well known to kids and most illiterate persons in the lower Red River delta provinces.

On the French side, things were in no way better. The French Deuxième Bureau (G-2, or Intelligence Service) was not second to the Việt Minh Public Security in atrocious interrogation of suspects. To draw information, the French G-2's applied numerous torture techniques to force their prisoners to talk. The most common was to tie the prisoner down on his back, put a towel over his face, then slowly pour water or a mixture of fish sauce, vinegar, and hot pepper into his nostrils. The other ways were to pinch him with a red-hot pincers, to burn his fingers, or to apply electric shock by cranking a small generator or a field telephone.

The Việt Minh Public Security outdid the French G-2 in some torture techniques. For the first time after 1945, people in Việt Nam heard of "to go by air" (hanging the victim upside-down and beating him) and "to go submarine" (to tie up the victim and submerge him in a pond or water tank), performed by the Việt Minh along with many other interrogation methods.

The Việt Minh and the French interrogators often invented new ways of torture that gave victims the most painful feeling without leaving marks on their bodies. One such method was beating the soles of the victim's feet with the blunt edge of a flat piece of wood. This left no mark but caused such pain that the victim was unable to stand or walk for many days.

A villager who was close to my family was one of those who experienced the sole beating. The place where he was locked up in the district Public Security interrogation office was a small brick house, situated in the middle of a large rice field without any other house within 300 yards, half a mile from where I lived. About twenty prisoners were held there at the time, kept by half a dozen Public Security agents. The office was off-limits to the public. But if the agents caught us children

wandering near the house, they would shoo us away without causing us any trouble. Some kids occasionally sneaked into the garden surrounding the house and climbed into the trees to watch the interrogation through an open window. I followed them just once, and it was so horrible to me that I dared not come back to watch it for the second time. The sight of an emaciated prisoner who was beaten with a bamboo stick terrified me. However, childish curiosity prevailed, and we stayed for a few more minutes. When the victim was tortured with some sharp object pushed into the quick of his fingernail, he let out a long, deafening scream that made me fall to the ground. I tore away at full speed. Out in the open field, the ear-splitting scream still echoed in my ears, and I felt pain in my own fingernails as well.

Every week a few prisoners were released. Some of them were unable to walk, and their relatives came to carry them back home. The story of one of them is still in my memory. He was fifteen years old and the son of a Việt Quốc member. His father escaped in time when the Public Security came to get him. The boy was detained and interrogated for information about his father's activities. As a young man detained there at the same time with the boy later related his story to my family, he suffered torture bravely.

When the interrogators asked him whether he knew who encouraged his father to join the Việt Quốc subversive movement, he said, "The sublime interests of the Vietnamese people urge him to fight against you, the communists." To the question "Do you know who are your father's most faithful comrades?" he said he did but he wouldn't tell. The interrogator pushed a needle into his finger quick. He shrilled in pain but said to the interrogator, "Even if you continue at my other nine fingers, I won't tell the names." He was released about a month later. He was carried home and died after many bedridden weeks.

At that time, many others serving the Việt Minh behaved in the same heroic way when suffering French Army interrogation. Some died as a result of torture. They endured unbearable pain but still refused to talk until passing away in agony. Many suspected Việt Minh died during interrogation, and others walked out of detention with deformed bodies. I witnessed such barbaric torment while living a short time in a French fort.

Patriotism at the highest degree gives to some an almost unimaginable will to survive, but it also encourages people of the same forefathers to kill their compatriots more eagerly and savagely. That is a reality of the armed conflict from 1945 to 1975 in Việt Nam.

LIFE IN THE CROSSFIRE

In the summer of 1948, my family returned to our native village. As a farming family, we had to cling to our land, although our village was under the constant danger of war.

Until 1948, there were not many Vietnamese soldiers serving the French side. In the area about five miles around my village, four of some twenty villages had anti–Việt Minh militias. Three of those were composed of Catholics, and one consisted of Buddhists (or non-Catholics, to be more exact). The militias were armed with bolt-action rifles and received no salary or any assistance from the French. While fighting the Việt Minh, they were always friendly to villagers—no looting, no abuse, no unscrupulous killing.

The so-called partisans were different. They served as Vietnamese hirelings and were paid a relatively decent salary. Many of them would behave well to peasants, but others felt free to loot, to rape, and even to kill without being sanctioned and punished by their French commanders. Their atrocities were second only to the North Africans and the Legionnaires in the French Army.

By the end of 1948, a considerable number of Vietnamese had returned to the city to live under the French military authority. Many ran out of money and were not able to continue living in the Việt Minh area; the others fled to avoid being killed or imprisoned, and former officers and NCOs of the French Army returned to the city to reenlist for active duty.

Every village in the area outside French control had a team of about ten men and teenagers who each in turn took sentry duty at the top of a tall tree. The sentry would sound the alarm, usually with a gong, when the French Army soldiers moved southward in the direction of our villages. It was easy to detect movement of even one soldier across the wide rice field separating the French-controlled area and my village, but at night it was a difficult task. One day, about fifty French Army soldiers raided my village. They came under cover of dense fog at 4 AM, and none of us had time to escape.

They ransacked every house and took away everything they liked. In my house, they found some hundred books in Chinese characters, in French, and in Vietnamese, left by my grandpa, my uncle, and my father. They destroyed all of them, tearing them up or burning them to ashes. They were happy to find some antiques we had hidden underground and a wall clock. I was held prisoner and brought to the fort. An hour after my arrival, a Vietnamese sergeant in the French Army heard that I was captured. A son of my father's friend, he had lived with my family from 1935 to 1937. The sergeant immediately called on the French lieutenant, commander of the fort, and interceded with him for my release, to which the French lieutenant agreed.

A sergeant in 1948 might have had the power of a viceroy in the Middle Ages. While a private could kill and rape almost anyone in a Việt Minh–controlled area, a sergeant could do more than that. People addressed him as "Ngài," a word equivalent to "Your Excellency," only used in connection with gods and mandarins. So the fact that I was a close relative of a sergeant earned me respect from people in the fort. The sergeant told me to stay in the fort for a time so that he could arrange to send me to a school newly established in the city.

In the fort, there were three Frenchmen: the second lieutenant, the sergeant in charge of the African platoon, and the corporal operating an 81 mm mortar. The Vietnamese personnel consisted of two sergeants, two corporals, and about forty troops. The soldiers, Africans and Vietnamese, all lived with their Vietnamese wives and children inside the fort.

The French lieutenant had a new wife. She was a pretty girl about twenty years old from a noble family. The family had been captured while returning to the city from the Việt Minh area and had been brought to the fort to be interrogated. She was a ninth-grade graduate and a fluent French speaker. Not many female citizens earned education degrees that high at the time. The lieutenant asked her to be his wife, but she refused. So he had her and her family sit on a bench against a thick brick wall in front of a French-made automatic rifle FM 24/29 and its gunner. On the other side was a Vietnamese corporal of the French Army. He had been caught working as a spy for the Việt Minh. He was tied to a bamboo pole in front of another automatic rifle and a gunner.

When the two gunners were ready, the French lieutenant told the girl that if she said no to his marriage proposal, all her family would suffer the fate of the convicted corporal. At his sign, the machine gunner pulled the trigger, and the bursts of many dozen rounds chopped the corporal up into bloody pieces. The young lady immediately accepted the lieutenant's proposal. A wedding ceremony was held, and she became his legitimate wife. Her family was released and helped to find good jobs in the city.

Although he had a lovely and well-educated wife, the French lieutenant still kept a harem in the basement of the main building, formerly the house of a rich mandarin. About ten young women captured in operations were living under armed guard. They were well fed and clothed and had nothing to do except serve the lieutenant any time he wished. When he captured some new girls during his operations, those who had been in the harem the longest would be released and given a gift of about 200 piasters (about US$300 in 2005).

Every day, the villages around the fort had to provide some fifty men to do chores at the fort such as repairing the bamboo and barbed-wire fences, cleaning the yards, and filling the water tanks. Those villages also had to provide laborers for military operations. Failing to provide the required laborers, a village would be fined a cow or several pigs.

The fort had a small room in which to interrogate prisoners. They were often tortured for information by a Vietnamese soldier. Sometimes at night I was unable to sleep because of the prisoners' cries of pain. My room was close to the interrogation room.

A few weeks later, the sergeant who had interceded for my freedom took me to Nam Định City. We rode on a military truck. The road was rather safe, but houses along the two sides were vacant. There were no people, and moss and grass grew freely all around. Clashes in the area had driven the inhabitants away. At last we reached the city after crossing the river by ferryboat beside the headquarters of the southern subsector, commanded by a French first lieutenant. He also had a little harem and sometimes held girls captive for a night or two. He was also famous for his sanguinary passion. Spies and stiff-necked prisoners did not live long under him. Sometimes he himself handled the executions, usually with his dagger.

In the city, we visited a friend of my family who had just returned from the Việt Minh area three months earlier. The population was in the thousands, much less than one-fifth of that before the war. The city market had revived, and one primary school was to open in September. Curfew was imposed from 8 PM to 6 AM. Many blocks had no residents, and after 8 PM they looked like a ghost town.

After three days, I followed the sergeant back to the fort. The family's friend tried to persuade me to stay so that I might continue my education, but the atmosphere of the city frightened me. Moreover, as my father was still in a Việt Minh prison, I was afraid that my staying would cause him more trouble.

In the next few days, I moved to a village close to the fort to live with the uncle who had fled my village a few months earlier. He didn't want to let me live in the fort, where I had to see many things injurious to a child's mind. This was a typical village armed by the French Army to fight the Việt Minh.

RELIGION

Since August 1945, the Catholics had been overtly anticommunists. In Hồ Chí Minh's appeal for "Great Solidarity," the Catholic population was one of the principal objectives. In the 1946–48 terrorist campaign, a number of Catholic priests were killed or imprisoned.

After 1946, the French Army treated the Catholics carefully to win them over to their side. In military operations, ones who could say a few prayers fluently were usually taken as friends. So many non-Catholics wore the cross when the French soldiers came. One of them was a friend of mine who couldn't recite a word of any Catholic prayer when a French Army Vietnamese soldier asked him to. He was shot right away, but the bullet only slashed his belly slightly; the wound bled a lot without killing him.

The Việt Minh, on the other hand, were doing everything to create hostile feelings against the Catholics, and they were successful, owing to their skillful propaganda techniques to exploit the differences between the religions.

The southern area of my province was one of the first sites the European missionaries visited in the sixteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, the kings ordered the ban on Catholicism that resulted in the execution of

thousands of its followers. Despite the massacre, non-Catholics in our area lived peacefully with the Catholics without any clash, large or small. In the 1850s, by order of the king and the province governor, each non-Catholic village in our area had to execute leading members of Catholic parishes who refused to step over the cross, an act to affirm their decision to renounce their faith. The district governor ordered my village to perform some of the executions. But instead of killing them as instructed, the village notables decided to save them and secretly hid them after killing some pigs and spreading their blood over the riverside to prove to the district authority that those Catholics had already been put to death and thrown into the stream. Years later when the ban was lifted, those Catholics returned home safely. After that, in every Tết (Lunar New Year) season, their relatives came to visit my village and offered gifts to villagers. The practice continued until the fighting spread to our area in 1947.

Most of the Catholics in our area (Bùi Chu diocese) had been converted before the French occupied Việt Nam in the 1880s. When the French established its colonial regime over all Việt Nam, the Catholics won the French government support and their priests gained some power. Under the French colonialist regime, a part or all of some villages were converted only because some Catholic priests had helped them win lawsuits against other individuals in the same villages or in other villages. But that did not create any serious rancor.

Until 1945, the number of Catholics who joined the movements for national independence was rather small compared with other religious groups. Việt Minh propaganda exploited that fact as much as possible, along with their usual Marxist indoctrination, to instill hatred against the Catholics. When the French returned to Việt Nam, it was easy to see why many Catholic villages sided with them, founding militia units and fighting the Việt Minh.

Besides defending their villages, the militia units sometimes were given tasks to reinforce the French Army soldiers' raids in other areas. The village where I was living temporarily with my remote uncle had about fifty young men with basic military training, but only sixteen were armed with Remington rifles and lots of hand grenades. They fought bravely and beat off many Việt Minh night attacks. In raids, they showed good discipline.

They had a lot of friends and acquaintances in the operation area not very far from their village. The militiamen had to do farm work for their living. They got no pay from the French Army even when they were wounded or killed.

After a month, I asked my uncle to let me go back to my home village, and he agreed. On a morning when farmers were working in rice fields, I slipped through the strip of uncultivated land separating the two areas and walked back home. My mother held me for a minute and cried. She had just come back from a trip visiting my father, who had been moved to another prison camp.

IN THE VIỆT MINH–CONTROLLED AREAS

At the beginning of the 1948–49 school year, my uncle sent me to a school farther south. I had to walk three miles to school and three miles back every day from the home of my first cousin's husband, where I lived. Held in two classrooms located in a large pagoda, school began at 10 AM and closed at 2 PM so that students from far away could attend.

By that time, the French had more bombers. From their base in Hà Nội, the planes made air raids in my district more frequently. The students sitting in the last rows of the classroom had to alert the school when they heard the sound of the approaching airplanes. At the sound of the alarm gong, teachers and students rushed to take shelter in foxholes all around the pagoda. In any alert, I was always calmer than my classmates, not because I was brave but only because I had been in similar situations.

In 1948, the Resistance was in high spirits. The Resistance army units began reacting actively against the French Army raids. Some ambushes were laid successfully, killing a number of French soldiers. The French Army soldiers also suffered casualties, more from land mines than other weapons. The Việt Minh produced the largest number of land mines in the world, according to some friends of my father.

At the same time, the Việt Minh government did its best to consolidate the infrastructure in the villages under its control. Political courses were held for members of mass organizations of men, women, senior citizens, and teenagers. Many more young people became Communist Party members. I could tell every one of them by listening to them talk. A communist neophyte always liked to talk of something big such as Darwin's theory of evolution: "long ago, a monkey living on the shore of the Danube . . ."

In 1948 and 1949, the Communist Party local committee was recruiting illiterate young men from the poorest families, particularly those violent and ill-mannered characters who had had problems with the pre-1945 colonialist local authorities.

In the village where I stayed, there was a class for propaganda cadres from many villages of the district given by instructors coming from the provincial office of information. Although I was not old enough to be a student, I was permitted to listen to the lessons because I had helped the village official in charge of the class. He let me sit in the last row of the twenty-student classroom, actually a thatched roof earthen-walled house measuring eighteen by thirty-six feet.

The students were taught how to practice the technique of "three-together" (eat together, live together, work together with the targeted family) to persuade the family to support the Việt Minh government. They learned how to speak to an audience, to run an armed propaganda mission, to print leaflets and booklets by lithography,

to write slogans on walls, and to use bullhorns to deliver antiwar messages to the French Army soldiers at night. Most of the students had a second-grade education; only a few had graduated elementary school. So the instructors gave model speeches that they had to learn by heart so they could use them in different situations. Some trainees were very clever in writing slogans on large walls in darkness that looked neat and beautiful as if they had been done by professionals in daylight.

Cultural activities in 1948 reached their peak with hundreds of songs, poems, plays, and novels. The best songs, especially patriotic songs in Việt Nam, were composed during this period. They still move millions of Vietnamese hearts today. In my opinion, the composers of those songs (Phạm Duy, Văn Cao, and some others) contributed the best and greatest parts to the Vietnamese culture, far more than all of the Vietnamese politicians and statesmen after 1945 both in North and South Việt Nam.

I will never forget the evenings when the district cultural group entertained the Resistance units with songs and plays a few hours before they departed for the night attacks on the French forts. One of the plays presented the story of a Resistance soldier coming home to find his house burned and his wife gone insane after being raped and seeing her baby stabbed to death and thrown into the flames, all done by the French soldiers. The actress performed her role so well that many people cried and forgot to applaud for a few seconds after the curtain dropped. Such propaganda work was successful because the audiences were mostly simple-minded peasants whose imaginations made up for the lack of supportive scenes and costumes. With talented actors and directors performing on a makeshift bamboo stage, any clothing and any instrument could deeply move such audiences. Days later, I learned that the attack that night, actually a harassing operation, had been fiercer than ever.

The địch vận action (enemy proselytizing) was one of the successful efforts of the Resistance. Spies were planted everywhere. Many women were assigned to such a mission in the French military outposts or headquarters, where they had to get married to the French, African, or Vietnamese soldiers. In most cases, they only collected military information. But in some forts, they were successful in persuading the soldiers to surrender to the Resistance or to help the Resistance attackers overrun the fort.

By 1948, there were many great changes in the rural society. Young men and women eagerly endorsed the new way of life in which they had more freedom and new values and backward traditions were done away with. Although they were not in a majority, many women claimed equality with men and their reasonable status in the husband's family.

People learned several new words, mostly Sino-Vietnamese political terms. Cadres working in government agencies and members of mass organizations were fond of discussing politics and of calling each other *đồng chí* (comrade). I heard

many young, ill-educated peasants who were communist neophytes saying, "One is equal to every other, even to his or her parents." Some even said that they had no reason to be grateful to their parents because they were born solely out of their parents' sexual pleasure. They dubbed that attitude "revolution."

THE LAST TIME I SAW MY FATHER

In December 1948, my mother and I visited my father. The moving prison camp was then in a seaside village fifteen miles south of my home village. My mother, my first cousin, and I went on foot for nearly ten miles before we could hire a small bamboo boat to complete the remaining five miles. The next morning we were permitted to meet my father in the local Public Security office for only half an hour. The Public Security cadres carefully examined the food and medicine we brought for my father.

During the precious thirty minutes we were permitted to spend with him, my father held me tightly on his lap while talking to my mother. A Việt Minh Public Security guard sat beside us. When the guard went to do something outside for half a minute, my father quickly pulled up his pants and showed me his knees. In a low voice he said to me, "They have been beating me here for the last few weeks." It was why he had been hobbling along the small road from the small prison camp to the office to see my mother and me.

His knees were black and blue. I couldn't hold my tears, though I had promised myself that I wouldn't cry. He looked at my eyes and said quickly when he saw the guard returning, "Try to complete a university degree, and you should become either an engineer or an officer in a good army to work for the bright future of our country." I did not have enough time to ask him what would be a good army as the guard took his seat beside us again.

Five minutes later, the cadre showed us the door, and that was the last time I saw my father. Sometimes, in my dreams, I still see him in brown clothes trudging along the country dirt road and looking at me without a word, his pants pulled up showing his knees, bruised and swollen.

Not long after the visit, my father's friends in the area managed to have all the families in the village sign a petition asking the Việt Minh authority to release my father. One of my father's friends, my uncle, my mother, and I went to see the district public security office one morning with the petition. A man who must have been a high-ranking cadre received us. After reading the petition, he said, very softly with a refined language, that my father was a man dangerous to the Democratic Republic regime in time of war, although he had done nothing wrong after 1946. Therefore, he would be released only when the war ended.

On the way back home, my father's friend told us that he was very disappointed. "As far as I am concerned," he added, "you should bring your family to

the city so that the kids can go to school for a better education." My uncle and my mother kept silent, but I didn't think it was a good idea. In the Việt Minh area we had freedom, although living conditions grew worse and worse and French troops and bombers occasionally caused some danger. In the French-occupied area, people had better living conditions, but they were under permanent threat from the French soldiers and the French Security Service.

My family still had a faint hope that my father would be released, so we weren't thinking of doing anything against the Việt Minh.

By the end of 1948, many more people were leaving the Việt Minh for the French-controlled areas or Phát Diệm, a small town under Bishop Lê Hữu Từ, who had declared his diocese to be autonomous from both the French and the Việt Minh. But my family stayed put.

THE CRUMBLED IDOL

I was still attending school but at a new location in a temple large enough for forty students. Textbooks were not available, so the teacher had to dictate lessons to students. Every week, we had an hour or two for citizenship lessons, in which we were taught to worship Hồ Chí Minh. Once while the class was singing a song praising him, I looked out the window at a beautiful rainbow. At the end of the hour, a girl whose father was a Việt Minh big wheel rose and bitterly criticized me for showing no respect to "President Hồ" by looking at something outside the window and singing reluctantly. Some others supported her opinion, but many stood by me, saying that my inattention for a few seconds was not a good ground for such severe criticism. My classmate from my village whispered to me when we were walking back home, "I know you don't like him as much as I do, but you should conceal your thoughts as much as possible."

After August 1945, Hồ Chí Minh had been my great idol. In him I saw not only a national hero but also a god, omnipotent and polyvalent. It seemed that every kid of my age was always yearning for someone of greatness to idolize, and that was Hồ. But that didn't last long. Since I learned more about Hồ and the contemporary personages from my cousin, my father, and other sources, my idol crumbled without anyone to replace him in my heart. The noncommunist side was making no effort to deify any of its leaders. Even though I was a kid, I couldn't stand the cheap propaganda schemes vigorously praising Hồ, such as about his having "twin pupils," as I have mentioned.

The Việt Minh propaganda agency also released a poem reportedly composed by Hồ in which he compared himself to the thirteenth-century hero Trần Hưng Đạo, who drove away the Mongolian aggressors in a great battle on the Bạch Đằng River. Comparing oneself to a heroic ascendant is in no way the manner of an educated gentleman, let alone a national leader.

Worse than that, in the poem he addressed Trần Hưng Đạo as "*bác*" and called himself as "*tôi*." In Vietnamese, *bác* (uncle, or you) in pairs with *tôi* (me, I) is used between two people who are equal in age and in rank. However great Hồ Chí Minh could have been, his words addressing Trần Hưng Đạo in the poem sound extremely insolent to the ears of a Vietnamese. Realizing that such arrogance hurt the people's feelings, some Việt Minh cadres said that someone else, not Hồ, might have composed it. Even if this were so, I thought, Hồ should not have permitted his subordinates to circulate that poem if he was really as modest as his Việt Minh propaganda agency always asserted.

After the 1946–48 cleansing campaign, I hated him much more when I heard of people killed or saw someone buried alive by the Việt Minh, especially after my father was imprisoned. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh continued to disseminate a lot of stories idolizing Hồ as if he were the god of Việt Nam. The propaganda was very successful with the peasants because of its simplicity and sensationalism. In a few years, Hồ ascended to the throne of a wise king in the minds of many Vietnamese and of some of his ill-informed opponents as well.

Since then, I have rarely taken anyone as my idol. I have never trusted anyone to be a national hero and have always been skeptical about great personages of other nations. Sometimes I ask myself if what has been written in history books about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon, Lê Lợi, and Quang Trung is true, or if their stories are just big lies like those about Hồ.

IF THE FRENCH . . .

One of the provincial Resistance military units in charge of our area was the Seventy-seventh Company. It was conducting guerrilla operations to hinder the French Army's activities, and whenever possible, it laid small ambushes to cause some loss to the enemy soldiers in a group of three or four. They frequently shot at the French platoons.

Several nights, the company gathered in the large brickyard near where I was living to conduct night sessions, and I was one of the teens who were always present. We were not members of the company, but we offered them assistance even when the company was in action, such as carrying the routine messages, cleaning weapons, and hauling ammunition.

I didn't like the Việt Minh leaders, but I sympathized with the soldiers who were friendly to everyone, very brave and patriotic, especially with a French lieutenant who deserted to the Việt Minh side and served in the Seventy-seventh Company as an advisor. I liked to talk to him with my little French. His

name, which I have forgotten, appeared many times in French-language newspapers before 1954.

It should be noted that a great number of the brave small unit commanders were sons of the middle and upper classes. They were bold in fighting and brilliant in other tasks directly supporting the war.

In my district, there were a few cultural groups whose members were high school students from bourgeoisie families. They moved from village to village, performing programs of music and plays that attracted an audience of several hundred people every night, thus enhancing public enthusiasm for the Resistance.

In the French-controlled area, life was under the iron hands of the French soldiers. After 7 PM, no one could stay outside the village. At night, no light was permitted. A lamp of any kind had to be partially covered so that no light could be seen from the fort; otherwise, a few mortar shells might be fired at the place as punishment.

In late 1948, the Việt Minh forces were stronger, as they had had time to be intensely trained. The people's morale was higher after some victories on the Lô River and in the northern border area. Propaganda supporting the Resistance produced the largest effect. More songs, the best patriotic songs in the history of music in Việt Nam, were on the lips of men, women, and children. However, there was no big battle in my district area, because the Việt Minh forces were not equipped well enough to confront the French, and the French did not try to expand their control beyond the line they had established in late 1947.

After 1954, in books I was reading, some military historians wrote that if the French forces had concentrated their efforts to pacify all North Việt Nam delta provinces in the first two years (1947 and 1948) instead of wasting time trying to control the northern border areas, they could have won the war or at least ended the war more in their favor. After almost two years of fighting, the French had left the large region of Nam Định and Thái Bình provinces intact. The region was the granary of North Việt Nam, which supplied the Việt Minh not only with food but also with manpower. Therefore, the Việt Minh gained much time to establish control over the population, train and consolidate their units, and organize an effective system of food supply for future battles in North Việt Nam.

I think the French could have won the hearts and minds of the population if they had conducted the war with an adequate effort to take care of the people's welfare and safety, particularly prohibiting their soldiers from committing war crimes and treating the Vietnamese so savagely.

SEVEN

Between Hammer and Anvil

CAMP #5

In 1945, the Việt Minh established several prison camps and named them Trại Sản Xuất (production camps). In 1954 they were renamed Trại Cải Tạo (reeducation camps).

In February 1949, my father was moved to Camp 5 in Thanh Hóa province. It was the most notorious prison camp in all of the areas under Việt Minh control. It still exists today. It was also known as Camp Lý Bá Sơ, named after its chief jailer. Hồ Chí Minh himself selected Lý Bá Sơ and other jailers.

According to sources from the Communist Party history books, among the first things Hồ did after ascending to power in August 1945 was to appoint his most faithful party members to be provincial public security chiefs, who were the backbone of his regime, and then to select the chief jailers of important prisons. Lý Bá Sơ was an illiterate who was said to be a most formidable Việt Minh official for the rough way he treated prisoners. He quickly became the Việt Minh jail chief known for his iron fist. Every adult in the northern lower delta provinces knew his name.

The inmates were given complex labor tasks and were severely punished if they failed to fulfill them. In such cases, their daily food allowance was reduced, and in more serious cases, they were even beaten or tortured with newly invented techniques.

After my father was moved to Camp 5, my mother had to go visit him every three or four months to provide him with dry food, medicines, and clothes. Camp 5 was about seventy miles from my home village. It took my mother nearly a week to walk there, and a few more days to finally see my father for just half an hour. Then it was another week to get back home to prepare for the next visit.

She had to travel through many lonely roads and forests, some dangerous with poisonous snakes and even tigers. She used to go along with two or three women whose husbands were detained in the same prison camp. Each had to bear about seven certificates to get through a dozen checkpoints of Việt Minh Public Security. My mother and her friends could obtain only five of these certificates from local authorities. The other two were unavailable, so she had to pay bribes to get the sixth certificate. I helped her with a fake copy of the seventh.

On one visit, my father told my mother that the camp guardians beat him with a bamboo stick for several days in a row. His right side was so badly hurt that he wasn't able to move his right arm for months. He failed to fulfill the given tasks because he was too injured to work. The turnkeys didn't think so and said that my father was a malingerer.

Upon coming back, she didn't tell the story to the family. She told it only to me and asked me not to share it to anyone, especially my grandma, who was ill, because such a story would make her health worse. My mother was exempted from other work at home so that she could prepare dry food and procure medicine for the trips. My father's elder sister, who was a childless widow, took care of my little sister, so my sister was closer to her than to Mom until our aunt's death in 1979.

LIVING UNDER FEAR

In February 1949, my family moved to a place three miles from my home village. My mother and my aunt had to find any work available to earn a living. I helped them spin processed cotton into thread using two sets of spinning wheels. Thanks to our dexterity, the thread we produced drew a lot of textile weavers. We could earn some money; it was scant, but we could make ends meet with it.

I came back to my home village often after school to be with my grandmother. At her age, she preferred staying at her home with the ancestors' altar. Her ten-year-old great-niece was taking care of her.

My village was located about a mile from the French-controlled region where a row of three French outposts marked the disputed line between the two sides. French soldiers frequently made raids in our area and also into the area from which the Việt Minh launched harassment attacks.

Beginning in mid-1948, my village came under attack from both sides. Babies were born, young men and women got married, and people died without being registered. We had no ID cards from the French or from the Việt Minh, children had no school to go to, and wounded and sick people were treated with herbal medicines. The nearest aid station was 5 miles to the south, and no better medical facility existed within the whole region of about 150 square miles. The French authorities didn't have any humanitarian or charitable program to help the Vietnamese population under their rule. The provisionary administrative authority, made up of Vietnamese civil servants under French military command, had no adequate budget to provide health care. There was one medium-size hospital with limited capacity for the whole province of a million people.

In mid-1949, via news from the French-controlled area and some leaflets dropped by French airplanes, we learned that King Bảo Đại had established the national government and signed a covenant with the French president that recognized the independence of the state of Việt Nam.

My villagers did everything during the day. After 7 PM, we all had to stay inside the village bamboo hedge. The French forbade light. For their part, the Việt Minh did not allow us to keep dogs because their barking could help the French detect guerrilla movement. So at night we had to keep our only dog inside and train him not to bark at anything, and he obeyed. War affected even animals' instincts. Every night, from 7 PM until 6 AM was the time of fear during which I had to speak softly and make no loud noises. My gate to the road outside the bamboo hedge was closed at 7 PM, and it seemed to be the boundary between safety and danger. The darkness outside the hedge was full of risks that frightened me whenever I had something to do near the gate.

After so many years, I still dream about getting back to my village in the time of war, probing my way in darkness at the wooden gate, while something frightful is wandering outside. Great fear wakes me up.

I used to get up early, summer or winter, and stay in until there were people on the road, walking and talking. I would dash to the gate, open it, and run outside to do some exercises and breathe the sweet morning air. Then the day's work of every family began.

Human beings and animals alike got used to life in war, and their senses also developed to adapt to the safety of every living soul around them. Day or night, most healthy villagers were ready to flee whenever an alert was sounded. Some single men and women without children or elderly parents to take care of always kept a bag of clothes and a little food while working in the field, in case they should have to run away without having time to get back home.

Whenever the French soldiers came, all kinds of sounds subsided. Even domestic animals—beasts of burden, pigs, and dogs—seemed to try to make the least noise. All kept quiet and acted frantically as if they could apprehend fear conveyed by the behavior of panic-stricken villagers. Most dogs ran about to find a nook of safety in dense bamboo groves. Some pigs sneaked into concealed holes when their owners yelled, "French coming!" Two of the dozen buffaloes in my village would act accordingly to the shout "Lie down!" when they were under fire while fleeing the village. When the French soldiers were gone and the villagers returned to their normal activities, all those animals became lively again and made their usual noises and sounds.

Several times I was met by gunfire from the French Army soldiers at a range of only 300 to 500 yards, and I had to run for my life, crossing the dry field so fast that I thought I could have achieved some national track records. Other times I hid in any safe place I could find. Once, running under fire from four or five French soldiers from less than 100 yards, I saw a thick bush in the dense fog. With all my strength, I plunged into it, leaving everything to fate. It was a little brook about four yards wide, covered with dense briars. Thorny branches ripped my pants and shirt and scratched my skin all over my body. Cold winter water made the scratches more painful. Mosquitoes bit my face, and leeches clung to my legs. An hour passed before the French soldiers withdrew. It took me only a second to plunge into the brook, but I was able to get out of it only after about five minutes with some more painful scratches on my legs and arms. Such confrontations with imminent death taught me that it is not easy to kill an escaping person and that it is not very difficult to be a guerrilla.

Although I had never had any intention of becoming a guerrilla, the few guerrillas in my village taught me how to use booby traps, spike pits, and antipersonnel mines. We had a dozen ways to fool the enemy with spikes and traps combined with mines, well camouflaged in places that the enemy could hardly expect. But we never placed them in the vicinity of the village.

WHITE TERROR

After two years of fighting against the guerrillas who hit and ran like ghosts, the French Army turned to more *terreur blanche* (white terror). A mine found in a village would cause all houses to be burned. If a French soldier was killed in a hamlet, the whole population could be subjected to ruthless retaliation.

One day, an antipersonnel mine in a small hamlet a mile and a half from my village went off and killed two African soldiers. After the soldiers had burned down all the houses and left, we teens and young men gathered at the killing field to offer help as we often did when a raid was over. In the large brick yard of a rich family, forty-eight heads of men, women, and children of all ages, including some newly born babies, had been placed in line on the house veranda. Strewn all over the yard and the garden were the forty-eight bodies without heads, all naked, some eviscerated or impaled by bayonet. Blood covered the entire brickyard. The odor of blood and the sight of goggling eyes struck great fear into my heart and I felt faint. Only the scores of hamlet people who had fled before the soldiers came survived the massacre. The survivors brought the corpses of their relatives back home to bury. They could recognize the heads, but many could hardly tell whose trunk was whose.

Once a guerrilla laid a wire-controlled mine on the road leading to a neighboring village. When the French soldiers reached the place, the guerrilla pulled

the wire, but the mine was a dud, so he ran away with the remaining wire on a reel. He dropped the reel in the garden of an old man and ran to safety. The French Army soldiers found only the reel, but they tied the old man on his bed and cut his throat, catching his blood in an earthenware basin.

Beside killing and looting, raping women of all ages was common. Some victims were sixty years old, some twelve. A few of those were then killed. Therefore, when the French soldiers came, young women were the first to run away. Some smeared their bodies with anything dirty or stinking, even dung or human waste.

One early morning I went to the neighboring hamlet to trade rice for some chicken. A platoon of African soldiers surrounded the area, and we had no way to escape. They came searching the houses, not for Việt Minh but for women. They found us five teenagers in a house, kicked two of us, and then left us alone without saying a word. The only young woman who failed to escape was caught and brought to a house only ten yards from where we were sitting in fear. The black soldiers punched and kicked her until she collapsed. One tore up her clothes, and all the seven soldiers raped her in turn for about fifteen minutes. When they left, she lay unconscious on the floor, her abdomen swollen. As there was no healthy woman around, we five embarrassed teens had to carry her back home. Some old women took care of her. She was bedridden for weeks.

The scene shocked me greatly, and since then I have always taken it that rape is the worst crime in war. I said to myself that if I were an officer, I would blow out the brains of any soldier who committed rape.

In war, killing in a fight was not as gruesome as the way a man was put to death. The longer the war went on, the dirtier and bloodier it became. One summer afternoon, a few Vietnamese soldiers of a French unit conducted a patrol far to the east of my village. The Việt Minh guerrillas encircled them, and in half an hour they killed two and captured one. The captive had two gold teeth. A guerrilla stabbed him with a spear and tried to pull out his gold teeth. He failed to do it by hand, so he ran to a nearby home to get a pair of pliers, and a minute later he had what he wanted.

I had seen many corpses beheaded, dismembered, eviscerated, even scalped, but nothing more disgusting than the sight of that guerrilla holding the two gold teeth, his face beaming with savage contentment.

THE VIỆT MINH'S WATCHFUL EYES

Meanwhile, the Việt Minh government strengthened its security system. The Public Security Service employed many informers in every village, including many teens. They were to keep watch over some persons or families by order of the security agents and report everything those persons and families were

MY BABY SISTER

In September my school moved ten miles farther south. It was too far for me to follow, so I had to drop out. I stayed home with my mother, my aunt, and my sisters in the home of a distant relative who lived three miles from my village.

When my mother was away visiting my father, I had to help my aunt take care of my twenty-month-old sister. My most difficult task was to feed her rice porridge or soup. Babies of her age are disinclined to eat. I spent a lot of time trying to have her consume a regular meal.

One day, I brought her back to my home village so my grandma could see her. At about 5 AM, the alert sounded and I hastily carried her piggyback to join the other villagers on our way south. With a piece of cloth, I tied her to my shoulders the way Chinese women carried their babies.

On the country road narrow and muddy, there were hundreds of people along with a dozen cows and water buffalo jostling against each other on their way to safety. I fell several times but still tried to keep my baby sister from getting wet. Under early daylight, I could see a long line of people and domestic animals moving on the road. My sister was awake, and she cried, asking me for food. Suddenly, machine guns from the village about 500 yards to our left barked deafeningly at us.

At that time, most kids my age could tell whether a gun was shooting at us or not by its reports. Under the rain of fearsome whizzing bullets, two men and a buffalo fell dead on the roadside. Three men and an old woman hobbling along the road were wounded, and their clothes were stained with blood. I put my entire mind to the road with a belief that I would be lucky not to get hit. We reached a small river. It was not more than twenty yards wide, but the stream was rather swift. The bridge had been destroyed in the 1947 scorched-earth campaign; only its middle concrete pier remained, on which two pairs of rails were laid for a footpath about two feet wide.

While the hundreds of people were slowly crossing the slippery makeshift bridge, mortar fire followed. A dozen shells whizzed over our heads and exploded somewhere in the villages and the fields around them. The crowd panicked. Crossing the river with my sister was my only concern. The swift river frightened me, as I couldn't swim. When I got scared, I saw a young woman with her baby in her arms fall into the river. In a few seconds, they were carried away, and no one tried to rescue them.

While I was sitting on a stump and weeping, I heard a voice calling my name. It was a friend of mine who was with his buffalo. He said he would help us cross the river. Without delay, I rose and followed him. He rode on top of the animal and I held fast to its tail. At his sign, the buffalo waded into the water and swam. I could hear my sister getting choked with water, but I was unable to

do anything more than pray for our safety. In only half a minute, we got to the other side. My good friend quickly took my sister from my back, and without knowing any emergency technique or CPR he held her upside down by the legs and shook her violently. A lot of water poured out of her mouth, and she cried. "Thank God," I said to myself. "So she is not dead." Twenty-two years later at her wedding party, memories of this scene moved me again to tears when I told her husband to take care of her at least as I had done.

UNDER TWO YOKES

News about the victory of Mao Tse-tung in China came to my village and encouraged the Việt Minh and its supporters. Before 1950, the Việt Minh had been very careful when referring to the Chinese Communist Party; now they were overtly praising "the Red Orient" and "the great Chairman Mao Tse-tung." But Mao's victory offered very little hope to our peasants, who only wished for peace of any kind.

As the war began a sharp turn, French soldiers became more and more brutal to the innocent civilians, driving most of the fence-sitters over to the Việt Minh side. However, as the Việt Minh also became more heartless toward the people, their measures drove more Vietnamese to the French side as well.

In spring 1949, news of the birth of the nationalist government under King Bảo Đại reached our village. At first, the people had hope, but the new government appeared unable to change their miserable plight.

The French side utilized almost no psychological warfare. A small number of leaflets dropped from airplanes had far less impact than the Deuxième Bureau and the wicked French soldiers, who scared more people away from the newly established Bảo Đại government. From the rice fields north of my village, we could see the Bảo Đại nationalist government banner, three red stripes on yellow, streaming on the pinnacle of a Catholic church in the French-controlled area. But most people did not expect much from this government, which seemed to have very little power beside the French terrorizing army.

If the French or the Bảo Đại government had been able to afford anything similar to the RVN civic action program in the Việt Nam War (1955–75), and without so many war crimes done by French Army soldiers, the Việt Minh would have been wiped out long before 1954, despite the fact that the majority of the people hated the French. And the nationalist government was slowly drawing to its side a number of Vietnamese who could not live under the Việt Minh for one reason or another.

Meanwhile, the Việt Minh was trying hard to control the countryside. Its secret service successfully classified the population into categories and closely watched individuals whose loyalty was felt to be uncertain. More suspects were

arrested, but there were fewer murders, as most dangerous persons had already been eliminated.

Still, life in the buffer zone became more and more difficult and risky. In every village, there were some people who worked as spies for either side. In my village, a man of thirty years old volunteered to play a double agent to protect the village from both French and Việt Minh terrorism. With help from some villagers, he regularly reported military intelligence information to the French by a "secret letter box," an intermediary, in the adjacent village. At the same time, he provided the Việt Minh intelligence service with what he collected in the French-controlled area. Sometimes the French paid him money for his information.

Among the teens, I was the only one he trusted. He told me about some of his tasks in exchange for my help in writing short messages for reports. I was sure that my village had some others who worked for both sides. Owing to those spies, my village was not terrorized in the second half of 1949.

On the bright side, those years of fear and hardship taught me many useful things. From mortar shelling, I was taught that there never were two shells or two bullets that hit the same place. So under artillery attacks I felt totally safe in a new shell crater. From the French habits, we learned several ways to escape their raids. When French soldiers came, we moved aside from their advancing route and waited. When they passed, we followed them. Staying behind the enemy was the best way to be safe, except for the case of a cunning French commander who left behind a squad to lie in wait for us.

Some of my cousins and I dug a secret underground hideout below the thick bamboo grove. It was about six by ten feet, and three feet under the surface. There were several small bamboo tubes leading to the surface for air, and a narrow opening leading to the nearby pond below water level. To get in, we had to be very careful not to trouble the water and mud for fear that the French soldiers would detect the hideout. They could do so by observing the bubbles and unusual pattern in the duckweed. I hid myself only once in that hideout along with another man for an hour or so. It was a horrible experience to stay in the stuffy narrow space in total darkness while the French soldiers sounded as if they were right over our heads.

In only one year, I learned most of the guerrilla techniques to survive and to fool the enemy. Once I followed a propaganda team to a place already cleared and protected by armed guerrillas where they used tin speaking trumpets to read newsletters and propaganda materials and to sing to the French Army soldiers in the fort. Team members used Vietnamese only, as none of them could speak French or an African language. The speaking trumpets were made into periscope shape so that the speakers could hide deep in foxholes while speaking. And as no light was allowed, they had to learn the texts by heart before departure.

The French Army soldiers in the fort often answered our call by opening fire with machine guns and sometimes mortars. Free to move in the wide field, we were not scared much by their firepower, and it became our game to tease them. The more they fired at us, the more we felt delighted as if winning a game.

The village guerrillas invented several ways to make the enemies nervous. One of the tricks was to twist dry straw into a big rope to be used as a slow fuse that would ignite gunpowder in a container in half an hour. The explosion or even just the flame of the fuse would draw a torrent of bullets from the French soldiers.

I was allowed by the guerrillas to join those activities only a few times without permission from my family, as none of my relatives would let me go on such risky adventures. It was on one of those nights that a guerrilla let me shoot a real cartridge for the first time. Each guerrilla squad was armed with only one or two old French rifles, each with about twenty or thirty cartridges, so it was a great favor they did me. I felt as great as when I received the beautiful toy car my father bought me during the Tết season when I was six years old. We were half a mile from the fort, but I aimed the rifle at the fort and pulled the trigger. A large dazzling flame burst out at the muzzle, and the rifle kicked my shoulder so hard that I thought I had broken my collarbone.

On the night of August 19, the fourth anniversary of the 1945 revolution, under the protection of darkness and a dense fog, a group of men in the village east of mine skillfully pitched a small bamboo arch of triumph, colorful with paper flags, flowers, and posters, only 500 yards from the fort. I could never do anything so bold. Another night, a team from a neighboring village went into a village in the French area for armed propaganda tasks. One of the boys in the team, a year older than I, was caught by French troops who lay waiting on the pathway. The others in the team weren't aware of his absence until they got home. The next morning the African soldiers hung his head on a long bamboo pole erected in the middle of the road. Rumors had it that he was very brave, refusing to say any names before he was tortured to death.

Because of these experiences, in the later years of the war, I was not surprised that guerrillas or sappers could sustain their enemy's dreadful firepower and conduct hit-and-run attacks or sniper fires so skillfully. In war, man and animal easily find the best way to survive. Under permanent pressure of war, well-seasoned guerrillas find the enemy's firepower less frightful. Harassing French Army soldiers was a risky but playful game. The guerrillas were afraid of bombs and artillery, but not so much as western people might have guessed. Most Vietnamese believe in destiny. They think that no one can avoid his fate. Life or death, good luck or bad, all are unavoidable. Like many others, in a dangerous situation, I always ask myself, if I am about to die, what do I have to be afraid of? If that belief doesn't give me any courage, at least it helps me maintain my composure in combat. The guerrillas were no different.

EIGHT

The Shaky Peace

YELLING AT THE EARLY MORNING SUN

In December 1949, the French Army launched a large-scale operation in the southern area of my province. While foot soldiers penetrated the Việt Minh sanctuary further toward the seashore, the French river force sent its boats patrolling the main rivers and attacked the Việt Minh from the rear.

My mother, my first cousin, and I decided to go back to our village. We hired a man to take us up the small river on his sampan. At a high price, he accepted. But when we reached the concrete bridge that had been left intact after the scorched-earth campaign, the French soldiers in a nearby hamlet opened fire.

The man pushed all three of us onto the muddy shore and dashed away with his sampan without waiting to get paid. We three slowly followed the river to cross the main road. In the twilight of a late winter afternoon we could see many mines tied to the piers of the bridge exposed by low tide. On the road, there was a mine crater about three feet in diameter and, nearby, blood and pieces of flesh, the biggest of which was a human leg clean cut at the knee. A battle between the Việt Minh and the French had ended only an hour earlier. The two opposing forces had withdrawn to take position in the two small villages away from the river.

We dared not cross below the bridge, as it was too risky with unseen mines and traps, so we decided to cross the road instead. We chose the portion of the road that we thought the safest near the bridge, worrying that it might have several live mines under the surface. Although the scene and the odor of blood frightened me, I had to take the lead. My mother knew nothing about traps and mines, nor did my cousin, who was two years older than I.

When it was dark enough to cover us from the French but we could still see the ground, we started to go on all fours, very slowly and carefully. I felt the

ground to avoid the mines with all my senses. My mother and then my cousin followed, putting their feet and hands exactly at the places I had put mine. It took us almost five minutes to cross the road of about 40 feet and we all were sweating. In darkness we went on for three miles to reach the rice fields of my village. We slept in a vacant fisherman's hut because no one in the village would open the gate for us at night.

In the morning, we were told that the French Army soldiers had raided the area the day before and declared their permanent control over the large region previously in the Việt Minh's hands. All members of my family were safe and returned to our home to live together as before. I disliked the French, but a little peace under them was better than none, even one day or one month.

The next morning, a Vietnamese sergeant and fifteen soldiers in the Bảo Chính Đoàn, a paramilitary corps of the newly established Bảo Đại government, came from the district headquarters. On behalf of the district chief, the sergeant conducted a quick election of the village committee that would represent the village under the nationalist government and informed the villagers of some new rules and regulations.

After concluding the meeting, the sergeant and his troops dropped by my home to chat with my uncle. I was sitting in a corner of the room. At a point, I rose and asked him, "Am I permitted to yell loudly when I wake up early in the morning?"

He turned to me and said, "Why do you ask? Of course you are, if you don't bother your family. But why?"

I knew he wasn't able to understand what I was yearning for. The next morning, I woke up at about 6. I ran to the gate, opened it, and yelled at the early morning sunlight to the east.

Some farmers on their way to their paddies and peddlers to the market all looked at me as if I were insane. But this was the first time in almost two years that people could go out so early in the morning without fear of being shot.

In the first week of January 1950, after our village came under the nationalist government's control, my mother and I went to the city to visit with our relatives and friends. The city was then much better than it had been when I was there in 1948. Streets were crowded, and electric lights brightened the noisy avenues. The central market was busy.

My mother gave me some money. The first thing I did without a second thought was to buy five red apples, the only thing that I had been hungering for since 1942 when imported fruits stopped coming from France. I ate two and carefully wrapped the other three as gifts for my sisters and my eight-year-old cousin. Sitting comfortably on a bench in the city park under the morning sun of midwinter, I relished the sweet smell and taste of an apple, something that I had enjoyed only in my dreams.

* * *

In the first few months under French control, my village and others in the area recovered most of what we had had before the war. Religious ceremonies could be conducted even at night; children went to schools; country markets reopened. Rice production increased, and goods from Hà Nội, Sài Gòn, and some foreign countries reappeared in stores.

My mother, however, was facing much more difficulty going into the Việt Minh area with dry food and medicine for my father. She faced much more danger as war escalated and French bombers attacked suspected areas more frequently.

My father suffered all kinds of maladies and became weaker. My mother and I lost the tiniest hope of seeing him back home, but we never spoke our thoughts. My uncle used to be more optimistic, but he also saw nothing better for his brother. Only my grandmother was always confident that her son would be home someday.

As for my aunt, the first thing she did in January 1950 was to buy a woolen coat for me and new clothes for my sisters. My uncle didn't wait long to send me to school.

Because the provincial government wasn't able to establish its education system down to district level and below, we had to rely on private schools. So I was sent to a teacher who was my father's friend and who lived in a village two miles north of our home. My uncle went with me. I brought my clothes and a few of my belongings, all stuffed into a leather bag my aunt had bought me. I would be boarding in the teacher's home and would be permitted to return home for a short visit on Sundays.

Before I left, I said good-bye to everybody in the family including my paternal great-uncle, who always saw in me the honor of the Nguyễn family. My grandmother held me tightly in her arms. Her eyes were full of tears. Although I was going to a place not far from my village, everybody knew that it was the first step that would take me farther and farther from home.

For a minute, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, and my grandmother kept silent. At last, my grandmother said to my uncle and the family: "You all say, as your father always did, that we'd better give the kids a good education than riches. So I'm not against sending this only grandson of mine to school. However, if I were to decide this matter by myself, I would let him stay home to do farmwork instead. Because of your medium degree of education, you [she pointed at my uncle] and your brother [my father] have already been in great trouble. Illiterate farmers have to work hard to make a living, but they live a peaceful life, and no one cares about them."

My uncle strongly protested, saying that it had been the greatest hope of my grandfather to have his grandson well educated. As for me, what my grandmother said that Sunday afternoon would never be forgotten.

Years later, I met some people who had fled North Việt Nam long after the 1955 Land Reform Campaign. They told us that the reform had resulted in the execution of tens of thousands of landlords and notables after summary trials. According to the communist theory, the Revolution had to get rid of the landlord class, which had been the ruling class for thousands of years, in order to establish the proletarian dictatorship. Most members of the landlord class were educated. Naturally, they had been holding the leading jobs in a society where 80 percent of the population was illiterate.

Consequently, after the Land Reform, many rural families did not send their kids to school beyond the third grade and decided to let them do farming jobs instead. They had had the same opinion as my grandmother, especially when most communist leaders from village, district, and higher were third-grade dropouts. But contrary to my grandmother's guess, illiterate farmers were not "living in peace" and were suffering a lot of hardships under the communist regime.

So in Việt Nam, education brought calamity, not happiness, to a segment of its population.

THE NORMAL LIFE RETURNS

The large area south of Nam Định province enjoyed a rather peaceful life after the Việt Minh withdrew farther south to Thanh Hóa province, leaving it in French hands. However, the nationalist government was too weak to maintain peace. It had very limited power to protect its citizens from war crimes and mistreatment by French Army soldiers, especially in remote villages. The propaganda front was weak and ineffective, probably because of the lack of money, faith, right cause, and motivation.

The war had been too horrible to everyone, so common people had some hope that the Bảo Đại government might do something to ease the disaster. I didn't see in Bảo Đại a hero or a good national leader or a rival to Hồ Chí Minh, but I still expected him to contribute something to the independence of Việt Nam. The Bảo Đại government formally wielded the ruling authority over the entire country, but in the North it actually controlled only the cities and some rural areas of the Red River Delta provinces. North Việt Nam, formerly Tonkin, one of the three autonomous regions of Việt Nam beside the Central and the South (Annam and Cochinchina), was under a governor.

In 1950, a Bảo Chính Đoàn platoon of forty soldiers and a sergeant replaced the French Army unit in the fort near my village, assuming control of the area. One or two battalions were assigned to each province to be in charge of security in the territory controlled by the nationalist government, occupying the small forts that dominated many villages.

The Bảo Chính Đoàn were armed with World War I weapons, mostly British .303, U.S. 1917 Remington rifles, Springfields, and .30 caliber Browning automatic

rifles, commonly known as BARs. They had no machine guns or mortars and no communication equipment. However, they fought the Việt Minh with great courage and success.

Most members of the Bảo Chính Đoàn were volunteers. Unfortunately, they were not sufficiently trained and equipped to confront the Việt Minh, who were gaining more military assistance from Red China. People were well aware that to win the war, the nationalist side had to improve its appearance by promoting psychological warfare. But any attempt to win the people's hearts was nullified by the French Army soldiers' crimes and the way they treated people.

Meanwhile, the coastal region of my province came under control of the Catholic paramilitary force. Dozens of Catholic villages were armed to defend themselves. Their diocese of Bùi Chu became the area of responsibility of the anticommunist Catholic forces and later was officially reorganized into the new province of Bùi Chu, which began from two miles south of my village to the coastal villages of the Gulf of Tonkin.

In 1950, the area enjoyed full security. People could go anywhere at night, and market activities were normalized. Under the Catholic militias, Bùi Chu had an air of an independent country without French soldiers terrorizing innocent people. Both currencies of the French Indochinese Bank and of the Việt Minh Bank were officially accepted in Bùi Chu province.

Since the first days of the Việt Minh in power, many Catholics were overtly anticommunists. After the war broke out, the Catholics in Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm dioceses didn't officially collaborate with the French, although many Catholic villages were armed by the French as early as summer 1947. After Bảo Đại government was formed, following the agreement signed by King Bảo Đại and French president Vincent Auriol on March 8, 1949, Phát Diệm officially sided with the nationalist authority and Bùi Chu followed suit. Catholic militias fought the Việt Minh successfully and two infantry battalions in the new regular army were activated, mostly with Catholic recruits. The Eighteenth BVN (French for Battalion Vietnamien) in Phát Diệm and the Sixteenth BVN in Bùi Chu were once dreadful foes of the Việt Minh forces.

The Catholic militias behaved well toward the people. There might be killing by mistake, but no rape or looting. So they got support from the Catholics as well as the Buddhists to some extent. Until late 1951, life was peaceful.

THE CITY IN WARTIME

In 1950, my mother and my uncle decided that I should be sent to the city for better schooling. For the first several months, I lived with the family of my father's best friend, who had been assassinated by the Việt Minh in 1946.

After many years in war, we had lost most of our belongings. I spent the winter with inadequate warm clothes and was given very little money to spend for what a kid would need. For months, I didn't go to the movies because I couldn't afford the cheapest ticket.

I quickly succeeded at school and had many new friends. We had devoted teachers. Some of my teachers as well as many of my classmates were Việt Minh sympathizers.

The city was a strategic military stronghold of the French Army Southern Zone (south of North Việt Nam). It had many camps, an airfield, and large prison camps. Thousands of French Army troops—Frenchmen, Africans, and Vietnamese—from several corps (infantry, Legionnaire, armored, amphibious, airborne, engineer, artillery) roamed the streets day and night.

Nam Định had the greatest number of bars and nightclubs in Việt Nam. Brothels were legal and could be discerned by red lights hung above front doors. Bar girls wearing strong perfume and heavy makeup and flashy thin clothes occupied a few blocks of a downtown side street. Drunken soldiers made the streets noisier, and several times a week there was fighting between troops of different units, sometimes with guns. Bars and restaurants were covered with wire mesh to prevent hand grenade attacks by the Resistance secret cells in the city.

Although curfew was not imposed before 11 PM, young women were seldom seen on the streets after 7 PM. It was okay for teens like me to go out on the few main streets after dark, but not for my female classmates. Aside from these challenges, life in the city was fine. Once a month, my closest friends, who were sons of affluent families, would take me to a coffee shop for a glass of strong black coffee and cigarettes, usually the popular brands 999, 555, or Phillip Morris. We also enjoyed listening to music from a new hi-fi record player. That was the little happiness we could have in a country at war. Clad in cheap nylon raincoats, we loved to walk in a cold drizzle along bright sidewalks with close friends at night just to talk. It was such little pleasures that would beget many writers and poets of my age many years later in South Việt Nam and now in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe.

MY DADDY GONE

My mother came to the city to see me once every month to resupply me with rice and money to pay for my boarding and a little pocket money. One day, on the way to the ferry station, she stopped me and said, "I don't want to tell you the bad news, but I love you so much that I can't keep it my secret anymore."

I knew right away that what I had been anticipating had come true. She continued with a choked voice and quick words as if she were afraid she couldn't

complete the sentence. "Your Daddy is no more. He died a week before I came to visit him last month."

She handed me his cigarette lighter, the only thing the prison returned to her after my father had passed away from exhaustion. She told me not to let my grandmother and other members of my family know the bad news. However, she could not keep it from them more than a few weeks, as she knew she wouldn't be able to lie to them forever. It was the greatest shock in my life.

I knew how much my mother suffered from the death of her husband. During the Vietnam War a decade later, I saw many soldiers of our side, Vietnamese and Americans, killed in action. Their bodies were to be brought back home. They always made me think of my mother and other women like her on both sides whose sons and husbands died in battle and in jail but who were not able to view the bodies even once before they were buried. Those women suffered a great deal from war.

OUR POOR NEIGHBORS

In summer, my mother and my two sisters moved to the city and we rented a tiny ten by twenty foot room, wide enough to put a bed for my mother and the two sisters, my folding cot, and my small table with a chair. I often came back to see my grandmother, and once I got into trouble with the African soldiers, as I related in the first chapter of these memoirs. After that, I only returned to see her in daylight and left before 3 PM to get to the city before 6 PM, half an hour before the ferry boat stopped operating.

My nine-year-old sister went to a girls school. Sometimes during the month, French Army units whose rear bases were not nearby came to the city after operations to rest. They often displaced the students to bivouac in the school for two or three days or even a week.

Every morning, my mother went to the open market to sell fruits and vegetables she had procured the previous afternoon at low prices. She often earned enough money to provide us with rice, boiled vegetables, and a little meat or fish. Once a month, she went back to our village and got some rice, which helped us for many days, in addition to the money she could earn from her vegetable stall. Sometimes she even traveled as far as to Hà Nội, fifty miles away, to do some trading.

One day, she wasn't able to get back because of a heavy battle that interfered with civilian transportation on Highway 1 from Hà Nội to Nam Định for three days. My sisters and I ran out of rice after the second day. We were so hungry that my youngest sister, who was four, cried all day long. My older sister was old enough to understand our problem. She didn't cry, but she looked miserable. At lunch and dinner times, my nose was so keen that I could smell a pot of rice being cooked in a home twenty yards away. I decided not to ask for any help from our neighbors, although they were friendly. I thought that doing so was shameful.

On the fourth day my mother came back. That evening I ate until my stomach was full and went to bed early. I hadn't done my homework, and the teacher gave me four hours of detention on Sunday. I didn't tell him the story, although I knew for sure that he would have forgiven me if I had.

The place we were living was a poor neighborhood, a slum area in every way much worse than what I learned later in books describing the workers' quarters of the nineteenth-century Marseille, London, or New York. Before that, I had been familiar only with the life of poor farmers. After three years of war, my family became one of the city workers and shared with them the poverty and hardships of war. People in my new neighborhood were mostly workers in the large textile mill in the city. The others were cyclo drivers, peddlers, carpenters, masons, and petty traders, including balloon and ice cream vendors. However, there were no prostitutes, hooligans, or thieves.

The people in my neighborhood were mostly honest and friendly. Poverty bound the poor together. Sometimes they were indelicate and unrefined, but they became the best friends we have ever had. I learned many good lessons from them.

WHEN PRISON WAS TAKEN FOR A SAFE HAVEN

The city of Nam Định had two large prisoner camps controlled by the French military. Only a small part of each camp was reserved for prisoners captured on the battlefield. The rest was for healthy male civilians apprehended in operations and brought to the camps as war labor. Many were only my age, fourteen years old.

Civilian prisoners had to do manual labor to support the troops in military operations such as carrying food and ammunition or building forts and bunkers and cleaning barracks. Sometimes they were killed or wounded in operations. Their regular tasks at the camps were hard, but not as toilsome as farmwork. They were well fed with rice galore and raw or dried fish and meat. The meals were in no way luxurious but much better than scanty bowls of rice in their villages. Most of them were burly and much healthier than at home.

The war laborers who stayed there the longest would be released when new prisoners were brought in from operations to replace them, usually after one year. They were given release certificates so that the French Army would not capture them again. Once a week on Sunday, their relatives were permitted fifteen-minute visits. Some of the prisoners were from my village, so I often visited them when their relatives asked me to help them in handing out little gifts. Many times I heard parents saying to sons something like this: "Sonny, they said you'll be released in three months, so try your best to stay here. I'll pay the bribe if it is not too much. Try not to be sent back home. Our village is between hammer and anvil; you won't

be safe from either side." So I understood why very few prisoners here tried to escape. Only years later did I realize that the French treated their prisoners not as brutally as the Vietnamese did to their compatriots. It made me sad to see our people suffering so much from war that prison became a little paradise to them. Back at their villages they might be killed or wounded, and they would certainly be hungry unless they volunteered for the Việt Minh or the nationalist army or French combat units. Any place to avoid early death was alright.

One day, a large-scale operation named "Mandarin" searching for Việt Minh units was conducted in Thái Bình, the most densely populated province in Việt Nam (more than 1,500 persons in a square kilometer). Thái Bình was also the granary of North Việt Nam. Unable to do any quick screening on the spot to separate Việt Minh suspects from common peasants, the French headquarters ordered a roundup of all villagers from newborn babies to octogenarians with one foot in the grave. Several thousand people were transported to Nam Định by trucks and dumped onto the large tarmac yard of a prison camp. Many died on the trucks because of dehydration, as no water was supplied even though the temperature was over 90 degrees Fahrenheit. On the tarmac yard, heated by the scorching sun, more old men and children died.

A quick relief program was set up. Contributions in cash and kind were given in an hour. Responding to the call of some charity groups, my classmates and I took part in the emergency actions to help the victims, but we were not allowed to enter the camp.

When bread was delivered, we made sandwiches stuffed with meat, ham, canned fish, sausage, or anything people brought to us, tied them with rubber bands, and threw them to the crowd. At the same time, many car-washing stations brought in their powerful pumps to spray water over the victims and conic hats were thrown to them. With the conic hats they collected water to drink.

The work continued from noon until curfew at 9 PM, and yet scores of prisoners died. Although I had seen much death in war, the scene was still a great shock to me.

THE NEW PHASE

While attending school, I still had contact with some friends serving the Việt Minh in my village area. Although I hated the communist leaders, I still sympathized with the Resistance against the French occupation. In the ranks of Việt Minh units and agencies, there were so many brilliant and respectable people who stayed to serve the Resistance, despite having to suffer hardship and privation.

Many other civil servants, former employees of the colonial government, left for cities where they could find jobs in the nationalist government. A reliable nationalist source asserted that Hồ Chí Minh himself gave a directive to his

subordinates that those civil servants should be allowed to go wherever they wanted. Hồ contended that those people were a burden to his government, and their joining the French side would cause little harm to the Việt Minh. I knew he was right only when I was older.

Meanwhile, the Việt Minh became more active in 1951. After Mao Tse-tung took complete control over mainland China, the Việt Minh got his direct and overt support, and the political atmosphere in the Việt Minh areas changed significantly. Việt Minh cadres returned to my village in daytime to reorganize the party system and reactivate guerrilla cells. There were no clashes with the French or nationalist forces, but behind the bamboo fences, the Việt Minh actually controlled the population. I could see how things were going every time I went back to my village for a short visit.

The Vietnam Communist Party under the name of Indochina Communist Party, which had declared its dissolution before 1945, then officially reappeared with the title Lao Động Party (Workers' Party). Communist teachings were given overtly; Mao and Stalin were worshipped beside Hồ Chí Minh as if they were omnipotent. New terms, such as the "Uncle and the Party," were heard from every Việt Minh cadre and soldier and quickly became a kind of political prayer. Most speeches at villagers' meetings began with "Thanks to our Uncle and the Party." It irked me to read or hear that phrase. It was against what I learned at school and from my family. It eroded the remaining sympathy I had for the Việt Minh.

TURNING THE TIDE

It was well known to us high school students that many Việt Minh units were sent to China for training and to be armed with better weapons. Some young men in my village who joined the groups going to China to transport military supplies told me many stories of their trips. Troops were newly equipped with recoilless rifles and bazookas, which greatly assisted in attacks on bunkers and fortified positions and against light tanks and obsolete armored personnel carriers, the half-tracks.

A Việt Minh offensive campaign was conducted along the Đáy River south of Nam Định and along the defensive line north of Hà Nội. Cities in the North were shaken; many rich families moved to Sài Gòn. Then General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny appeared on the scene. I read reports about him in newspapers at the city Public Information Office almost every day. De Lattre ordered heavy bombardments during fierce battles even at objectives where soldiers of both sides were engaging in close combat. Thus air firepower killed many of his troops, but the tactic also caused heavy losses to the Việt Minh units. Soldiers from my village came back and told me how dreadful the battles had been.

The Việt Minh forces everywhere became much more aggressive. Many bold attacks were launched at hard-to-reach objectives.

Since 1950, French local military authorities had formed several commando units, most at company size. The soldiers of those units were Vietnamese volunteers who served with auxiliary status just like the partisans in previous years. They signed in, were briefly trained, were given weapons, got paid, and walked out any time they felt like doing so. They fought well, but they were often brutal to civilians and POWs.

The most renowned unit was the Black Tiger Company in Nam Định, activated in 1950. Most of the company soldiers were former Việt Minh troops born in Nghệ An and Thanh Hóa provinces who were captured by the French Army. They were recruited from prison camps to serve the company as mercenaries and were paid on a monthly basis. The company's NCOs were Vietnamese from the French Army, and a French lieutenant known for his courage was appointed company commander. The company conducted many successful commando raids deep into the Việt Minh areas. Black Tiger troops disguised themselves as Việt Minh regulars to sneak into selected objectives, using Việt Minh tactics to get rid of their enemy and then withdrawing quickly before the Việt Minh could react. Because all of the soldiers had been Việt Minh soldiers, their disguise was usually a great success.

The company commander was Roger Vandenberghe, twenty-three years old in 1950, who had been directly commissioned to lieutenant from sergeant after a famous battle in Ninh Bình province in 1950. He was then a favorite of many French top commanders and became a very haughty officer.

His soldiers went into restaurants, bars, and cinemas with rifles and submachine guns or even .30 machine guns, and often won in fighting against troops from other units, owing to their boldness and brutality. One night, a mutiny occurred. The revolting soldiers broke into the company commander's room and riddled him and his pretty mistress with bullets before the couple knew what was happening. The company barracks was on the outskirts of the city, not far from the zone headquarters, but the mutiny was so quick that nothing could be done before the mutineers withdrew to the Resistance zone, leaving only some dead soldiers who refused to join them.

After the event, curfew began at 9 PM. Business in the city was greatly affected, the streets were deserted too early at night, but students seemed to achieve more in school than their fellows in Hà Nội.

THE MASS CHANGING SIDE

Because the communists overtly controlled the Resistance, many people changed sides. In 1951, I did not need to be a statistician to see that the number of people who left the Resistance zone increased at a very high rate. Many had long been active anticolonialist activists, skilled specialists, and military cadres. The nationalist bloc took on a better appearance with more respectable figures joining its side.

The population of the major cities of North Việt Nam grew much faster than in the previous two years. More shops opened, as well as more private schools. The city of Nam Định recovered some of its prewar aspects, except for the ugly appearance resulting from the war. Military track vehicles and tanks cracked the main roads. In winter, streets were muddy, and in summer, winds blew dust into every house. Most homes destroyed in the scorched-earth campaign in 1947 were not rebuilt. Buildings of the water supply company were still large heaps of rubble, so people had to live on river water from man-drawn carts.

Once my mother and I went to Hà Nội, the former capital of the French Indochinese colonies, to see some acquaintances for information about her mother, brothers, and sisters, with whom we had lost contact in 1946. I knew very little about the relatives on her side.

Hà Nội was still colorful and peaceful as ever because the scorched-earth campaign had not been actively implemented there. Many rich people seemed to be unaware of the war going on a dozen miles away. Streets were as beautiful as before the war with restaurants, theaters, nightclubs, bars, and dance halls flourishing. Drunken soldiers fighting and assaulting women were seldom reported. There was no curfew, and it felt great to go out at night. Việt Minh attacks near its outskirts were almost impossible. But there were a lot of secret pro–Việt Minh cells, a fact that everyone knew.

I had come back to the capital after almost five years and felt at a loss. The war had thrown me out of the middle class and turned me into another kind of boy: a skeptical, sarcastic, and somewhat gloomy teenager.

THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT

Like anyone else, my school days were the best time of my life, full of memories and unforgettable fancies. Most of my classmates were older than the age supposed for the grades because of delay by war. A great number of us were interested in politics. At breaks, we often talked about world events, and before long we found ourselves on opposite sides.

My class consisted of twenty-nine boys and sixteen girls. Four of us were sons and brothers of ranking Việt Minh officers and officials; six were children of nationalist public servants of different ranks; five were from families who suffered from Việt Minh's atrocities one way or another. About ten of my classmates were pro-Việt Minh, openly or not, and about twelve (including me) opposed the Việt Minh and French colonization. The remaining students, including the girls, were fence-sitters.

It was apparent that most children of rich families in the city didn't care much about anything besides enjoying their easy lives, except for some who were pro–Việt Minh. On the other hand, many from the countryside bitterly hated both the French and the Việt Minh. The two sides in my class and probably in every other class at that time had something in common: we all were supporting the struggle for a better life for the poor and to build a prosperous and independent Việt Nam after driving the French aggressors out of the country. Although we knew we had different points of view—the politics of teenagers—we never had any quarrels.

On the propaganda front, the nationalist government under King Bảo Đại was nothing more than an underdog. Bảo Đại himself, in the fourteen-year-old boy's eye, was in no way Hồ Chí Minh's equal. Many people considered the members of his government and his army officer corps to be French collaborators. Only a few were renowned patriots. Most civil servants had been employees of the pre-1945 colonialist administration and were not strongly anticommunist patriots. They did good work in administrative affairs but did little to help in politics. Corruption, a remnant of the colonial era, continued to undermine the credibility of the regime. There were many civil servants who were members of some nationalist parties, but they could do very little in the administration without independent authority.

The government was just a noncommunist administration and nothing more. Beside the cabinet, there was neither a legislative body nor a supreme court. It didn't advocate any ideology or call for any specific policy attractive enough to us young people to serve our country.

Many nationalist army officers I knew had joined the French colonial army before 1945; others volunteered for French officer candidate schools after 1946. They were mostly good gentlemen, but I only saw a few of them as patriots. Many took bribes. Some even were famous torturers in the French Deuxième Bureau. I had a feeling that many were against the Việt Minh not because of any ideology but because the Việt Minh treated them badly. Besides, they saw the Việt Minh as rebels fighting against the formal and legitimate authority, even though that authority was the French colonialists.

Even so, a significant number of the officers were genuine patriots who fought the communists as if in a crusade, but none could make great changes in the general makeup of the nationalist army. Because of a personnel shortage, the army assimilated a small number of members of the French colonial army (the Régiments Infanterie Colonial, Régiment Artillerie Colonial, and others) and even employed some French officers to command its units. It had to apply the French-styled organization, training, and administrative management. However, as more and more Vietnamese officers graduated, they began to some extent to contribute to incorporating Vietnamese specialties into the nationalist army.

The military academy in Đà Lạt and the officer candidate schools in Hà Nội, Huế, and Sài Gòn, training Vietnamese officers for the nationalist army, began introducing new individuals into the anticommunist front. The proportion of true patriots in the nationalist administration and the army began to grow—but not quickly enough.

In late 1951, the nationalist government issued a decree drafting young men into the army. Students above eighteen years old who had graduated ninth grade were called to the reserve officers school in Nam Định, where they were trained for nine months and graduated as second lieutenants of the Army of the State of Việt Nam. Draftees with less education were trained in four NCO training centers and four boot camps in each of the four military regions.[1] They brought a new face to the NCO corps. Until 1952, the reserve officers school was located at one end of my city. Many of the cadets were friends of my cousin, some four to eight years older than me. They represented a young generation that had grown up in war and lived in the areas under French control. Most of them had an equal dislike for the French and the Việt Minh.

MUSIC AND WAR

The year 1951 saw a lot of changes on both sides of the conflict. One of them was in music. As I have said, songs played a significant role in the wars. Such a change was one of the landmark events in the history but rarely noticed by researchers' and writers' works on the wars in Việt Nam.

On the anti-French front since 1945, patriotic songs, poems, plays, and novels were written to support the fighting for independence, promoting contribution to the war, and even urging prompt implementation of government policies. By 1951, patriotic songs composed in the Việt Minh area were written with only anti-French lyrics. In the French-controlled areas, we were not allowed to sing them in public, but we were free to sing them with modified or rewritten lyrics.

Sometime in 1951, the Việt Minh banned many of the love and patriotic songs we liked to sing because they were not compatible with the new Lao Động Party's policy concerning cultural activities. The ban aimed specifically at music with themes of love and patriotism composed before 1951 not asserting support for the party's cause. The banned songs were by different composers, including the famous Phạm Duy, who left the Việt Minh to return to Hà Nội in 1951, and Văn Cao, author of the communist national anthem.[2] Ever since 1951 in the Việt Minh areas, the communist cultural branch introduced many new songs to praise Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Hồ Chí Minh, the Communist Party, and the "noble" objectives of the party. Most of these new pieces sounded Chinese. Many were set to Chinese tunes.

In general, the new cultural policy of the Communist Party upset the spirit of the Resistance that encouraged people to support the fight against the French. Literary works smacked of Chinese communist teachings. Besides songs, the Red Chinese group dances found their place in cultural presentations and weekly get-togethers of young men and women in villages in the Việt Minh areas. It could be said that in 1951–52, a great many cultural and literary works of the Việt Minh side began to imitate Chinese communist style to an unacceptable extent. That was why many Vietnamese believed that Hồ Chí Minh and his assistants were true Sinophiles. Hồ was no more a devoted patriot than a faithful communist as some of his admirers claimed.

Besides cultural reform, the Việt Minh launched a remarkable change in education. The new ten-year education system replaced the twelve-year system, which had been in place since the colonial era and was still maintained in the nationalist-controlled regions.[3]

CATHOLIC MILITIAS' FAILURE

The area from my district to the coastal region of Bùi Chu diocese had enjoyed peace since winter 1949. However, peace didn't last long after renewed attacks by the Việt Minh. They also launched a skillful propaganda campaign against the villages' militiamen, who were mostly Catholics. As in any war, once they got their hands on guns, some men seemed drawn to excesses of power, and abuses were thus committed. A Catholic militiaman killing another Catholic civilian was a pure homicide, but a Catholic militiaman killing a Buddhist was labeled "religious oppression" by the Việt Minh. There were also reports of Buddhist pagodas burned, statues broken, and sacred objects looted and blasphemed by some militiamen. Such incidents were rare and might have happened in any country in any situation. However, exaggerated by the Việt Minh propaganda, the events stirred resentment among non-Catholics. Though calling for "great solidarity," it was the Việt Minh that covertly fostered a feud between Catholic and non-Catholic people.

At the same time, Việt Minh secret agents slipped back into the area after more than a year since they had withdrawn to their security zone in Thanh Hóa province. In many villages, guerrilla units were reorganized to conduct skirmishes and sniper fire against Catholic militiamen.

Meanwhile, as far as I could understand the situation with my little knowledge of military affairs, the militias had very little training and were commanded ineptly. The priests gained their highest obedience, but clergymen were not supposed to be good military commanders. Under enemy high pressure, the militia units in Bùi Chu diocese had to reduce their territorial control, and they gradually lost their ground to the Việt Minh. At last, most militias could only control their villages in daylight. At night, militiamen gathered in the church or chapel fortified with earthen or sandbag walls and bunkers where they staged the defense.

After a year, the situation deteriorated quickly. French Army units were sent to the diocese areas to control growing Việt Minh activity. There were many better fortified villages built with thick bamboo quick hedges, thousands of blind ditches and foxholes, and numerous bunkers, trenches, and systems of tunnels to be used for safe withdrawal from the villages. But there was no hope of reestablishing the favorable situation. Bùi Chu soon became the fiercest battleground in all of Indochina, according to national newspapers.

NINE

Bloodier Battles

THE SHORT PEACE ENDS

In 1952, after only two years under the nationalist government, the peaceful period in my village area came to an end when the Việt Minh took control. I was still able to come back to visit my grandma and my uncle during the daytime when there was no military operation, and the Việt Minh guerrillas were still friendly to me.

The Việt Minh returned to the region with more weapons, especially new antitank recoilless rifles and bazookas. Ferro-concrete bunkers were no longer safe shelters for soldiers in forts and barracks. Armored cars and tanks lost their superiority. Việt Minh soldiers in my home district were equipped with more weapons from China. In addition, specialists of all classes, most of them from the bourgeoisie, helped the Resistance government produce materials that had previously been imported, greatly improving the war effort of the Resistance. One such effort was the local production of low-grade TNT to supply the Việt Minh with small mortar shells (40 mm), antitank and antipersonnel mines, hand grenades, and explosive packets.

In the countryside not under French military protection, the Việt Minh introduced more harsh measures to control the peasants. The patriotic atmosphere of 1947–48 now blended with the darker side of communism. More new propaganda schemes were devised to idolize Hồ Chí Minh and his Workers' Party with a language too cheap for my ears. Agricultural taxes were raised, much higher for those who owned half an acre and more. Tax assessment was carried out mainly to do harm to rich farmers and landlords. Security agents were increasingly snooping around at night to find out how much targeted families spent and what they ate.

My mother had to pay the Việt Minh tax even though she was not living in the village anymore, while my two sisters and I weren't allowed to be claimed

for a reduction in her taxes. In the garden of our home in the village, we had twenty betel nut trees. For years since the war broke out, we hadn't taken care of them, so they yielded little fruit. The five grapefruit trees, eight jackfruit trees, and five custard apple trees were in the same situation. But the tax assessor from the Việt Minh district tax agency estimated the production five times higher than the best trees could ever yield. My uncle had to sell something else to pay the tax on the imaginary fruit production.

Farmers who failed to pay taxes would be severely punished. A handful of Việt Minh cadres in a village held supremacy over the population and had become the most proficient tax collectors. The peasants quickly noted that taxes were much higher and more brutal than under the colonialist regime.

The Việt Minh security service proved to be similarly adroit. Political indiscretion seldom escaped the agents' notice. Spies and many suspects were more harshly treated. A barber was chopped up by machete with his death sentence written on a piece of paper pinned to his hat. He was charged as a traitor for giving information to a nationalist soldier who had been an old friend of his when both had been barbers at the same shop. His other close friends asserted that he had nothing to do with such reckless behavior. The two old friends ran into each other in a market and just said hello. But that was enough to bring him a violent death only a few days later.

Death squads executed many wicked village chiefs who served the French too faithfully and treated the people heartlessly. One in a village two miles from mine was notorious for killing Việt Minh cadres. He stayed home during the day and slept in the French fort after 5 PM, only coming back the next morning at 8 AM. The Việt Minh death squad failed to reach him several times.

One night, members of a death squad sneaked into a corner of his garden and hid in a thick bamboo grove. They dug a small underground hiding space, concealed by a bush, and left a squad member behind to wait. At noon the next day when most people were taking siesta, the death squad member with a pistol approached his victim, who was sleeping on a hammock. He kidnapped him and hid him in the secret underground. Even the chief's two bodyguards weren't aware he was missing until late afternoon.

That night, he was brought out of the village as quietly as when he was abducted. He was then beheaded, eviscerated, and dismembered at a place under a big tree not far from his village. A paper sheet stating his crimes was pasted on the tree close by.

Not only wicked lords but also many village chiefs who had been compelled by the local nationalist government to take the job and had done nothing willingly harmful to the Việt Minh were also accused of imaginary crimes and assassinated. One of the cadres in my village told me that the "anti-traitors campaign would eliminate every village chief until no one dared to take the job."

The Việt Minh gained on the propaganda front when they got rid of the wicked lords. But when more innocent persons were done away with, they turned more people against them. Such acts did, however, frighten many people away from collaborating with the French or the nationalist government. Blood always calls for more blood, and it was one of the incitements for the expansion of the war after 1954.

South of my village, the Việt Minh forces overran a large number of Catholic self-defense villages. Only villages near cities or forts survived these attacks. A half dozen newly organized nationalist units were sent to the area. But the Việt Minh could still do what I thought was their highest priority: control rice sources to supply other areas and to store for future campaigns.

A new fort seven miles south of my village had been besieged since late 1951. For six months, the French soldiers were trapped in their underground defenses. The only way to resupply food, ammunition, and even water was by parachute. The Việt Minh force made several attempts to destroy the fort, but all failed because the underground defense system was very effective against bazookas and the like. It had a surrounding ditch about thirty feet wide and ten feet deep with steep banks, mines, and underwater spikes that frustrated every attempt to capture it. After six months, the French Army unit in the fort quietly withdrew. The Việt Minh pursued, but only captured the commander.

BLOOD CALLS TO BLOOD

The war drove more young men to take sides. Some in my village joined the Việt Minh regulars, and others volunteered for the French Union units or the nationalist army battalions. As far as I could find out, the first thing that impelled most of them to become soldiers was not ideology or patriotism. The countryside in war was full of danger from both sides. Just earning a living had become more and more difficult. The young men decided that they would rather be soldiers than stay at home to suffer from war and hunger. Many of them picked up arms primarily because they thought they could lead a better life as a soldier. If they had any loftier reason, it would come to them later, if at all.

A number of men joined the French or the Việt Minh side to take revenge on individuals who had killed their parents or relatives. A good example was a Vietnamese sergeant of the French Army unit, Trần Văn Loan. (His actual rank was unknown, but people called him sergeant.) He was a brilliant high school student in Hà Nội while his only elder brother stayed home in a rural area. His brother had raised him since their parents had died many years before and now supported him at school. One day a Việt Minh death squad assassinated the brother as a suspected spy, something that his villagers knew he was not. After the burial of his brother, Loan enlisted in a French "partisan" unit and asked to be assigned to the fort a mile from his native village. Although his formal education could secure him an officer's position in the French Army after training, he only wanted to be able to fight the Việt Minh as soon as possible, even as a private. Of course, the French were pleased with him, and he was assigned to serve at Fort Núi Gôi, a company-sized stronghold built on a hill, seven miles southwest of Nam Định City.

One day, a few months after his arrival at the fort, he armed himself with a pistol, a submachine gun, a lot of ammunition, and grenades. Without telling anyone, he went into a village a few miles from the fort looking for the guerrillas who had butchered his brother. The French force would never enter that village with less than a platoon. Surprisingly, none of the guerrillas noticed his coming. In less than fifteen minutes, he used up all his ammunition, killing many surprised guerrillas—maybe a dozen—and left unscathed, with only a few pistol cartridges set aside for committing suicide if he were captured.

After that, he became a bloodthirsty demon. If he captured an enemy who was a Communist Party member, he would cut his or her arm to get a glass of blood to drink; then he left the victim to bleed out. My friends in the area said they could not forget his eyes, which were always bloodshot. He killed many communists that way until the French commander decided to get rid of him. In a fake ambush, the French killed him, or at least that was what people speculated had happened.

Except for the case of the nationalist army and administrative guards who had some ideological motivation, most of the French Union units' will to fight was very low. No political indoctrination taught them why they had to fight, and little discipline on behavior toward the people was enforced. It should be noted that most of the soldiers from Africa were fighting the war reluctantly. They were brutal to civilians, raping women and even young boys, but they seemed to have very low morale. Sometimes I saw them hiding deep in foxholes when facing the Resistance forces and firing carelessly with their heads down.

The French soldiers themselves were better, and the Legionnaires fought bravely, but they, too, were brutal to both their enemy and civilians. Some of the nationalist battalions known in French as Bataillion Vietnamien proved to be more efficient combat units that caused heavy losses to the Việt Minh regulars. But their morale was not high enough to neutralize the effects of the enemy's propaganda. However, they were not committing serious crimes during operations.

HOW TO KNOCK OUT A BURLY FRENCH SOLDIER

On April 30, 1952, the French Legionnaires celebrated their anniversary of Cameron, the heroic battle fought by Legionnaires in 1863. Those whitecap soldiers were cut loose in my city. Three of them entered a barbershop on my street and used a hatchet to cleave the skull of the barber while he was giving a haircut to a customer, who was then killed with the same hatchet. The three Legionnaires took money they found in the barber's till, which was not a great sum.

From early in the morning until late in the afternoon, hundreds of Legionnaires raided the city, looting shops and houses. More civilians were killed, but we heard of no rapes. Every door was closed and bolted. Many people ran into the countryside near the city. French military police patrols that had been cruising the streets day and night completely disappeared from sight.

At around 5 PM, hundreds of Vietnamese soldiers from French Union and Nationalist Vietnamese units garrisoned in the city gathered in the market area on whose instructions no one knew. About half an hour later, two Legionnaires attacked a Vietnamese policeman guarding the police department and destroyed some office equipment and a window. Like a spark igniting a fire, the event started violence against the Legionnaires. Vietnamese soldiers at the police department beat one Legionnaire to death, whereas many others attacked them on the streets.

My four classmates and I followed the Vietnamese troops. At first we just watched, but later we joined the fight. We stopped a Legionnaire who was trying to get back to his barracks along with many others on a side street. The strongest Vietnamese soldiers flew at him and hit him with stick and rocks. Although he was rather burly—no less than six feet and 180 pounds—he could not stand for half a minute. As he collapsed, a torrent of rocks and other objects found at hand fell on him. I felt furious when an old woman told me that the Legionnaire had broken a shop window to loot and hurt the owner badly. So I snatched a club from one of the men and hit the Legionnaire on his chest and legs, aiming at the parts that were the most painful. He was unable to resist; his hands covered his bloody face. Of course, I could hit him only because he was drunk and had already suffered a savage beating.

Images of the hundreds of war crimes committed by French soldiers I had witnessed came to my mind, clear and provocative. I didn't feel anything immoral in my act or any compassion for the man lying there unconscious and soaked in blood. I just drained my animosity on him, beating him with all my strength while people around me were doing the same.

When a French Army ambulance arrived at the scene, the poor man was nothing more than a red rag. I thought he was dead. A few French stretcher bearers carried him into the ambulance and drove away without a word.

Everywhere in the town, scores of Legionnaires were beaten, and some died. Only when the situation became serious did the French military police appear in their patrol cars to evacuate the injured Legionnaires.

From then on, some of my classmates and I often joined the Vietnamese soldiers we knew to conduct hit-and-run attacks aimed at French soldiers, especially the Legionnaires and the Africans. We selected ones that were dead drunk on whom to vent our fury. How could my classmates and I, no more than five feet three inches tall and around 100 pounds, have beaten them if they had not been under the influence? We lured them into dark streets by playing pimps and promising to bring them to nice prostitutes. Many others of our group laid in wait and hit them without a bit of compassion.

The best time for us to do so was on festive occasions such as Christmas, New Year's Day, Tết, or July 14 (Bastille Day) when many soldiers were drinking like fish. Once we stopped a tall French soldier staggering on a dark corner. When we flew at him, we quickly realized that he was not drunk. In a second, I found myself at the other end of the block, running for dear life and having no time to think where my friends were. Years later, I still felt ashamed of having acted so cowardly.

Although I hated the French Legionnaires, one of them was a good friend and helped me with my language study. In March 1951, the French Army sergeant whom my father had fed and helped to continue his primary education (mentioned in the first chapter) invited my family to move into a home next to his so he could take better care of me and my sisters. We moved into a better house. Across the street was the barracks of a Legionnaire unit. After a few weeks, I noticed a Legionnaire corporal who was very friendly to us boys and girls in the neighborhood. Before long the corporal and I became friends. He told me that his mother was British and his father was German. He had been born in England and lived there until he was eighteen, when he and his family moved to Germany before the start of World War II. He later became a German officer. He was captured before the war ended, and his parents died in Germany during an air raid.

After the war, he joined the Legionnaire corps and was sent to Việt Nam in 1950. He laughed a lot when I read my English lessons. My pronunciation was mostly incorrect, neither British nor American, he said. During my time in high school, our teachers rarely met any native English speakers.

So he began teaching me English. Though he was not a professional teacher, he did help me much. On my birthday, he gave me a pocket dictionary and began talking to me only in English while encouraging me to do the same. My pronunciation improved a lot, but my grades in the English class dropped. My English teacher once scolded me for "incorrect" pronunciation—the way my Legionnaire friend had taught me.

Six months later he was killed in an outpost up north in the Tu Vũ battle (Hòa Bình Province, west of Hà Nội). I only got the news a month later. I remain thankful to him for initiating me into a language that opened my eyes to the world and led me to some successes in later years.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES GROW

As the war went on, my classmates were splitting into sharper divisions on ideological matters. We used to discuss politics, and pro–Việt Minh arguments always seemed to gain an upper hand. Communist theories appeared to be

reasonable in every topic of social life. The Việt Minh produced solid evidence to prove that capitalism exploited the working class of their plus-value. In the same way they accused the Americans and their allies of "creating war to foster war" for the interests of arms brokers or warmongers, whereas the Soviet Union and Red China were appreciated as true friends of the poor and of the oppressed peoples. They said that the United States often supported corrupt regimes and only helped poor nations with consumer goods, whereas the USSR gave the people of these nations the means to produce on their own.

One of the best-selling Vietnamese detective stories at that time introduced the lead character as a hero who fought social evils and did marvelous acts against corrupt officials to help the poor. At the conclusion, he turned out to be a revolutionary who was struggling for the international cause of the oppressed peoples. It was the ideal of fighting for social equality and the better life for the poor that charmed us teenagers. Not only the Việt Minh but almost all of the noncommunist revolutionary movements in Việt Nam also advocated some kind of socialism, although the nationalists were much less fanatical.

In the countryside Việt Minh areas under the sign of revolution, the Lao Động Party (Workers' Party) overtly exerted oppressive measures against the middle-class farmers and the upper classes, measures that were sometimes unreasonably crude and brutal. They apparently were aimed at pleasing the poor to win them over to the Việt Minh side when more and more people of all kinds left the Việt Minh–controlled areas fed up with—and frightened by—communism.

Little by little, I realized that communism was not as beautiful as it was eulogized. The Việt Minh were becoming more and more attached to the Soviet Union and China. What I learned from anticommunist books was actually happening on the Việt Minh side. The factual comprehension brought me some new light: communist leaders disguised as patriots became an internal enemy, more dangerous and perilous to Việt Nam and more difficult to get rid of than French colonialists, the enemy from outside.

In another aspect, communist propaganda also proved how illiteracy and ignorance contributed to the growth of the Communist Party. Thus a large portion of the common population accepted pro-communist arguments. In such an environment, my conviction against communism was not convincing to my friends. It lacked concrete and obvious supporting evidence until many years later.

At the time, I only had a simple opinion, which was that a tricky and brutal dictatorship is always harmful to the people and only promotes the interests of a small group of leaders. Moreover, building a better society by violence will eventually destroy everything successfully constructed.

MOURNING STALIN

The death of the Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin did not make big news in the nationalist government areas. However, to us students, a poem mourning Stalin we received months later from the Việt Minh areas drew more interest. It was written by Tố Hữu, a talented and renowned poet, known to the nationalists as "the genius verse maker" of the Việt Minh Front. He mourned Stalin with the tone of a child to a father at the funeral:

Vui sướng thay khi nghe con hoc nói,
Tiếng đầu lòng con gọi "Xit-ta-lin."
Xit-ta-lin ơi! Xit-ta-lin ơi,
Hỡi ơi ông mất Đất Trời có không?
Thương cha thương mẹ thương chồng,
Thương mình thương một thương ông thương mười.

How happy it is to listen to my baby learning to speak.
In the first word of his life, he called "Stalin."
Oh! Stalin, Stalin!
Oh! You have gone! Are there Heaven and Earth?
My love for you is ten times greater than
my love for my parents, for my husband, and for myself.

He was the first and only Vietnamese who has ever cried his heart out over the death of a foreign leader. The poem was widely circulated in Việt Minh publications, but it was withdrawn at the start of the Khrushchev era. It has not appeared again, either in Tố Hữu's recent biography or in any publication out of Hà Nội. The poem was so servile that even my pro–Việt Minh classmates had to admit that it could be considered an indelible black mark in Tố Hữu's career, although he wrote many excellent poems supporting the national struggle and the communist ideology.

VNQDĐ ACTIVIST

I met several of my father's friends who had fought against the French and later against the Việt Minh. They were working for the reorganized Việt Nam Quốc Dan Đảng (VNQDĐ, or Việt Quốc) in cities all over North and Central Việt Nam and some in the South. I came to see some of them every week to ask questions about the VNQDĐ's struggle, which had always been the most beautiful image in my heart since I was quite young. From them I found something lofty,

heroic, and attractive. They were rather poor, but their exemplary lives won my highest respect and easily led me in their way.

Growing up in war and amid ideological conflicts, many boys were tempted by the romantic image of a warrior devoting his life to the nation, disdainful of luxuries. In early 1953, I became a member of a Việt Quốc's student organization in the city. There may have been some other Việt Quốc cells operating in the province, but we were not permitted to know about them. We also knew that other nationalist parties were operating in the area.

Because of the party's Francophobia, the French authorities did not always tolerate the Việt Quốc in the French-controlled area. The French-backed nationalist government did not ban its activities, but gave it no support, and its Public Security Agency would take us into custody and try us in court if we were caught distributing anti-French leaflets. The Việt Minh secret inner-city cells posed another threat. If we proved to be an obstacle, our lives would be in danger.

Restricted by the situation in a French-controlled city, we couldn't do much. We gathered at a different place every week, holding formal sessions in which we exchanged opinions and received indoctrination. A part of each session was devoted to criticism and self-criticism. These sessions looked like those of any revolutionary organization including the Việt Minh, but we tried to conduct them differently. We discussed an issue cordially in an informal tone and criticized one another with a friendlier manner. However, the communists proved that their way was more effective than ours because theirs was associated with "iron discipline." Sometimes we were ordered to distribute leaflets to the people and even to the French Army soldiers. We were trained to safely hand propaganda materials to people on the streets or in their homes.

Once I sneaked through a thin barbed wire fence around a temporary barracks of a French Army Moroccan unit under total darkness. The few electric bulbs in the kitchen area were not strong enough to scare me. The leaflet called on the Moroccan soldiers to treat the Vietnamese peasants with humanity. A Moroccan corporal friend of ours wrote the text in his language, and we printed it with help from a small printing house. We paid the corporal 100 piasters ($3 in the early 1950s) for his help. I quickly dropped dozens of leaflets around the kitchen backyard. Two minutes later, I was out again.

My two comrades completed their tasks at the other barracks and a private school. We met at the other end of the main street, reported on our work, then were about to go home when I realized that I had dropped my student ID card along with the leaflets when I took them from my breast pocket.

Getting into the barracks the first time was in no way a pleasant game. Getting into it the second time to search for my ID card in darkness with the possibility of being caught was really horrible. It was in early winter, but I felt sweat trickling along my backbone as I searched for the ID. I found it and sneaked out without being discovered. During my nineteen years in South Việt Nam military service later on, nothing ever frightened me more than that.

Owing to high motivation, we quickly expanded our organization to nearly twenty members. Two were schoolgirls of my age and older. Although it looked small, an organization advocating anti-French nationalism made up of so many teens in my city was significant. Among our group members, the most fanatical were the two from pro-Việt Minh families. Their brothers were high-ranking Việt Minh cadres, and their fathers covertly supported the Việt Minh side.

We had a monthly publication for internal indoctrination and also for propaganda, printed secretly in jellygraphy (a printing technique similar to lithography, but the printing surface is gelatin instead of stone). We produced about 100 copies of each issue (40 pages, half letter size) and distributed them to our cells. Some were sent to the province chief by mail and even to the prime minister's office in Sài Gòn, although I didn't expect that those big wheels would ever glance at it. Nothing has ever excited me as much as what I did to have that clandestine publication circulated. We were sorry we couldn't sneak it to the Việt Minh areas.

Like in any other urban area at that time, there was at least one secret Việt Minh student organization in my city. Those students were fervent patriots, and we were certain that most were serving the Việt Minh because of sheer patriotism, not communism. Their activities were merely in propaganda.

Some of my comrades were skillful in gathering intelligence. They infiltrated a Việt Minh student group and supplied our superiors with a list of its members. We were also informed of some of its activities, sometimes a few days ahead. One of my comrades was approached by a nationalist government secret police agent who asked him to provide the police department with the list of Việt Minh students. We didn't know why the police knew that we had the list. My comrade categorically denied his knowledge. With help from one member's brother, who was also working for the national police, we were safe. "If we want to eliminate them, we would do it ourselves, but we don't because they are only patriots," we said, showing that we would rather play gentlemen, or Wang Tao (the Way of the King), rather than Pa Tao (the Way of the Lord).

Although we decided not to harm any Việt Minh students, whenever possible we neutralized their activities. A few times Việt Minh activists slipped into the classrooms of a school at night and put leaflets into student table compartments. About one hour later, our comrades would slip into the same classrooms to collect their leaflets and replace them with ours.

We were very proud of what we did, even though they were insignificant deeds as trifling as a high school romance. However, such acts would contribute a great deal to our political and social behavior years later.

THE AMERICAN FIGURE

After the war in Korea broke out, we began to learn more and more about the Americans. Every week, the information service of the city showed outdoor news and documentary movies in a large schoolyard, and I was one of the free moviegoers in the neighborhood. The pictures of war always attracted kids like me.

However, the news of war did not help my side. It only showed that Red China was growing stronger and the Americans were unable to defeat it. At that time, Việt Minh propaganda praised Mao Tse-tung as Red Asia's hero. Lin Biao, his general, was called a "military genius" who had invented the tactic of "one point two sides."[1]

American aid began to trickle in with some health programs, such as one to cure trachoma among students. Colorful and funny cartoons were being used successfully to teach people how to prevent diseases. U.S. aid came in many projects: housing, water wells, and food with the sign on the containers in which the American and the Vietnamese flags were joined under the overlapping French tricolor in the middle. It meant U.S. aid was controlled and redistributed by the French. After 1954, the French colors were removed from the logo.

There were the American and British information services in Hà Nội that did not exist in my city. However, we still could find several books published by the two services. Stories and pictures about the United States attracted me more than anything about France, probably because I had suffered too much from the brutality of the French Army. At sixteen, I was old enough to appreciate the value of French culture and the peerless spirit of liberty in France, but images of war crimes were still vivid in my mind.

There was an argument at the time for supporting better relations with the United States among those who were against both communism and French colonialism. Some said that if we had no way to avoid being someone's younger brother, we had better accept the more generous one. I objected to the idea because I didn't want my people to be anyone's servant. We must be independent, and if we struggled hard, we would certainly achieve our goals. Like any other boy of my time, I believed in the moral strength with which our ancestors had driven off powerful enemies from China. We should find a friend—maybe not a very good friend, but not a boss. And that could be the United States.

From the books I read, I believed that the Americans might be at least better than the French. First of all, the United States didn't advocate colonialism and had reestablished independence in the Philippines. It had fought bravely in the two world wars for the freedom of its allies. I was sure that like any other country, the United States must have had some interests when it helped its allies, but such interests might have been reasonable. The Americans seemed to be generous and not too miserly in assisting poor countries.

It could be said that, at that time, more and more Vietnamese who didn't side with the Việt Minh looked across the Pacific hoping for some assistance from the States. Those who truly supported the French were just a minority. We also praised Great Britain for having granted independence to many of her former colonies after World War II.

After 1946, people who opposed the communists and were against French colonialism found themselves at the crossroads. Which of their two enemies did they have to fight first: the communists or the French? Some said the French had to be driven out first, whereas matters concerning the Việt Minh, who were our fellow countrymen, could be handled as an internal affair. The others disagreed, saying that the French were easier to defeat and less dangerous and that the communists posed a greater threat to the nation with their tempting theory and tricky but brutal politics. They felt that communism would bring havoc to our people and to our culture, particularly under the disguised domination of the Red Chinese.

A friend of my uncle, a member of the Đại Việt Party, said to me that the French would leave Việt Nam sooner or later because the movement of the oppressed nations for independence grew stronger every day. The United States and Great Britain would certainly support the movement. Therefore, the nationalist Vietnamese should fight the communist forces first to eliminate the greater threat to the nation. Then they would struggle peacefully and persistently against the French for independence, which we would eventually win.

THE VIỆT MINH GAIN GROUND

News from Korea about the Chinese human wave attacks strengthened Việt Minh propaganda. No one thought it was possible to win a war against China, where the loss of a few hundred thousand lives meant little to its leaders. Even when the Chinese advance was checked, Việt Minh propaganda claimed the Panmunjom cease-fire as a victory of its giant ally. I found no way to deny that.

At that time, the war in my area entered a new phase, with more ground yielded to the control of the Resistance forces. There was no successful anti-guerrilla campaign to tip the scale. In some forts, French Union and nationalist army soldiers set up intelligence networks and laid ambushes at night. They also disguised themselves to conduct surprise attacks deep into the Resistance area or night raids far from their bases, frightening their enemy and keeping the area under control. But such operations required soldiers with high morale and firm anticommunist convictions. Unfortunately, those soldiers were not easy to find.

While the French and the nationalist forces relied on strongly constructed fortifications with dense barbed-wire fences and mines, they conceded the areas outside their forts to their enemy at night. The Resistance forces were free to select

the battleground and time of attack. The militias who concentrated their defense in forts or churches were eliminated one by one. Only militia units that dispersed their men all over the villages and defended every inch of their ground with booby traps, spikes, and alert systems could beat off attacks, even of battalion size.

The fort next to my village was attacked one day from 9 PM until 4 AM without being overrun. The militia unit in a village half a mile from it provided good protection to the west side. In the morning, the enemy withdrew, leaving more than fifty bodies at the fence.

The next morning, three companies of the French Army and the administrative guards were ambushed one mile from the fort. A Resistance company half-naked and armed only with machetes emerged from underground hiding places and killed half of the spearhead company and captured most of its other half in about five minutes. The other companies escaped. A few hours later, the soldiers and the militiamen withdrew to the city.

Underground ambush, which required extreme courage and strength, was a successful Việt Minh tactic. It depended on accurate intelligence information to select the exact location of the ambush, usually along a road. When everything happened as planned, the ambushed side would hardly survive the engagement. It worked best against enemy soldiers who did something habitually, such as patrolling at the same time along the same road every day. If the enemy were moving even fifty yards away from the predicted pathway, the whole thing would certainly wind up in a total disaster for the ambushing side.

After 1951, the Resistance forces conducted more and more bold attacks against the French side. Sappers infiltrated enemy forts or barracks, or even the French air base near Hà Nội, to cause heavy losses to the French personnel, military equipment, and morale. In other places, sappers penetrated into fortified positions across many yards of barbed wire and mine fields under powerful protective fire to inflict heavy casualties on the defenders.

Back in 1949, I was allowed to watch a training session given to sappers who were required to crawl through a dense barbed-wire network with simulated mines, flares, and other devices. They moved about a foot per minute, carefully cut the wire, defused the mines and flares, and deactivated the alarm system. However, it was not the technique that counted. I could sneak into a barrack to drop leaflets. Although it was a less risky operation that any Vietnamese peasant could perform, what counted in performing such dangerous tasks was very high morale and a strong will to fight.

At the same time, in an attempt to obstruct and to harass surface communications, the Resistance troops launched a campaign to attack their enemy's convoys, trains, and ships. Every morning, soldiers from the forts along the main roads had to send troops to clear mines with mine detectors and to search for enemy ambushes or snipers before normal traffic was allowed. Every month during the

campaign, civilian buses were blown up by land mines, killing dozens of innocent people. The guerrillas laid mines deep below the roadbed, and only heavy vehicles could activate them. Sometimes as many as three buses were destroyed in one day, with so many dead and wounded that the city hospital was unable to take care of them. Volunteers had to be called in to help victims lying in hospital hallways.

National Highway 5 from the port city of Hải Phòng to Hà Nội was called "the bloody road." Several Việt Minh attacks were directed along this highway, the backbone of the logistic system supporting all the French forces in North Việt Nam via the port of Hải Phòng, but the French still held it firmly. National Highway 1B from Nam Định to Ninh Bình was a similar objective. The village of Hào Kiệt, seven miles from Nam Định, stretched about one-third of a mile beside the highway; it was a place where French units were ambushed many times. All French efforts to maintain security in the area failed. Finally, the French brought in bulldozers and razed the village.

Many other roads were abandoned, and waterways were relied on instead. The Resistance force could harass but was incapable of controlling the rivers.

WAR LABORERS

Since 1952, my villagers had to pay heavy taxes to the Việt Minh authority. They also had to provide the so-called *dân công* (people's laborer; in effect, war laborer).[2] Each month, the village had to provide some 2 to 3 percent of its labor force (healthy men and women ages eighteen to forty-five) to the people's labor program. The policy was part of the "People's War" and has since become one of the key efforts of the communist regime to support wars in Việt Nam.

The war laborers would have to transport supplies—mainly rice—to the battle areas up north. Each carried about fifty-five pounds of rice to a place about 100 miles away in the mountainous area northwest of Hà Nội. The round-trip took them about twenty-five days, and each consumed some thirty-three of the fifty-five pounds of rice, leaving only twenty-two pounds at the food storage site on the front lines. Each village also had to provide laborers for three-month and six-month tasks to transport weapons and ammunition from the border with China to logistic stations inside North Việt Nam.

Although my mother had already moved to the city, her name was on the war laborer list of my village after the Việt Minh returned. When her turn came, my family had to pay a fine for her absence.

Many villagers knew that they were on the Việt Minh authorities' blacklist, so they would have to go anyway. In the village meetings to select war laborers, they quickly asked to put their names on the list instead of waiting to be chosen. Eventually, almost all of the war laborers had registered; some of my villagers called them "compulsory volunteers."

Life in my village lost its usual atmosphere. No one trusted anyone. Some could be in trouble because of something they said or rules they didn't follow as required. Some who were convicted of having intended to join the French or nationalist armies could be severely punished. The Việt Minh security agents would chop off their right index finger so "they could not pull the trigger," they said. In more serious cases, the hand or even the head would be the price.

THE NEW TERROR

After Tết 1953, the Resistance force conducted an attack on the boot camp where draftees selected for technical branches were given basic training. The camp's barbed-wire fence was no more than 300 feet from where my family was living.

At 1 AM, a deafening explosion was followed by bursts of submachine-gun fire and yelling. In less than ten minutes all was over. The French armored units and infantry reinforcements came too late; the attackers had already withdrawn without any casualties. Only a handful of draftees were injured; however, 100 rifles in the warehouse were stolen.

The French pursued with no luck. The Resistance force dispersed quickly, leaving no trace. On the nationalist side, many more army units were activated and more Vietnamese officers were appointed commanders of battalions and higher units. A few "mobile groups," tactical units similar to the U.S. army's separate brigades with embedded artillery, armored, and engineer elements, were commanded by Vietnamese colonels.

With hundreds of newly graduated officers, the appearance of the nationalist army gained some public favor, although it was not enough to win significant popularity. Psychological warfare was taken into consideration with some effort to win the people's hearts and minds and to promote the troops' willingness to fight. But it appeared to be too weak in comparison with the Việt Minh's.

Before 1953, I had only heard of the communist class struggle in which landlords and rich farmers were treated as enemies. In 1953, the Việt Minh declared the Movement of Mass Motivation, but my friends and I were unable to tell what the movement would actually do. The Việt Minh started the land reform campaign as part of the Mass Motivation. Later, it was said that the campaign started in December 1953, when Hồ Chí Minh signed a decree to activate it. But I knew it had been carried out a short time before that in the "experimental phase."

At that time, the situation for the people in the Việt Minh areas became critical. Farmers were controlled by the tax system. The village tax collectors did not spare even trivial farmers' products, such as a bunch of vegetables or a pound of small crabs. Trading of other stuffs of higher values such as poultry and pork were under the monopoly of the state-run trade agency. Farmers began showing bitter dissatisfaction. Inflation galloped. Prices were so high that a pack of cigarettes

cost a bag of Việt Minh bills. People suffered from the severe shortage of medicine, even medicinal herbs. Wounded Việt Minh soldiers and civilians relied only on miracles to survive. The nationalist hospitals in cities had to provide treatment for many injured peasants evacuated from the Việt Minh–controlled areas.

Not long before the land reform began, I returned to my village to see my grandmother. While walking across a cornfield, I found a leather bag. At first I thought that it belonged to some low-ranking communist cadre because there was nothing special in it except for a few notes vaguely referring to "land reform." I told the story to a cousin who was a Communist Party member. He still had good but discreet relations with me, as he owed my family much for its help during the 1945 famine. He said that from the notes, an insider could tell that the bag must have belonged to a high-ranking party member. He explained to me that "land reform" would soon deal a hard blow to the landlords. That was what he had heard from a reliable source of his party cadres, and it was also confidential.

Upon his advice, I returned the bag to the place I had found it. An hour later, the guerillas in my village were ordered by the Việt Minh district security agency to search for the bag with the highest priority, exactly as my cousin had anticipated.

From the event, my cousin also taught me a lesson that would be useful many years later. He told me that if high-ranking cadres had to cross an area under enemy control with only a few paths to take, they would rather move on a route closer to the enemy position. Should they be captured, the enemy would certainly think that they were just unimportant privates.

The policy of eliminating the landlord class started in mid-1953. According to people who fled the Việt Minh areas, the policy was activated first with the so-called Land Rent Reduction Movement, although at the time nearly all landlords had reduced rent to the lowest rate possible or had simply given up the land. So the reduction movement was solely an initial step that had to be launched before other phases followed as the Việt Minh land policy dictated. The second step was the organization of all farmers into "mutual aid groups," a foundation for agricultural co-operatives after 1954 in North Việt Nam. At almost the same time, the Lao Động Party also carried out "Thought Reform" with intense indoctrination in communist ideology and the implementing of a cultural cleansing.

These programs were actually taking place in areas deep in the Việt Minh–controlled territory (in Ninh Bình, Thanh Hóa, and Nghệ An provinces to the south of my home province). My home village, too close to the French-controlled areas, only experienced a little bit of the campaigns.

The land reform campaign was launched in many villages in Thanh Hóa province, and the campaign then spread over a larger area in what was called an "oil-stain tactic." News from Thanh Hóa reached my city, but the details about what was happening were very confused. Many people in my city believed the

stories of brutality, but others didn't, because it seemed too excessive to be true. I heard a lot about the campaign, but I had only a vague notion of what was actually happening.

Victims who fled the Việt Minh areas in Ninh Bình and Thanh Hóa reported horrible scenes of the so-called *tố khổ*, or denunciation. The denunciation session was often held in the evening in a large yard of a rich family's house or in a pagoda. Almost all villagers as well as landlords were forced to attend. Poor farmers were brought forward and compelled to denounce the landlords' crimes before the "people's court" presided over by a Việt Minh cadre. A session might last far into the night and over several evenings. The people's court had power to pronounce death sentences, and a firing squad would carry out the execution right away. In some places, those convicted were stoned to death, hanged, left to die of thirst and hunger, or even buried alive.

I finally believed the reports when I met many victims of the campaign. Among them were the two brothers of my next-door neighbor who fled their native village in Ninh Bình province in June 1953. Each had owned about ten acres inherited from their parents. Both were eager Việt Minh supporters working in some district agencies and had given up most of their land to the Việt Minh local government in 1947. When their village was selected as an experimental site for the land reform campaign, they didn't know that they would be among the accused. Their family, including old parents and babies, were brought to the people's court. They were charged with many counts; most of the charges were completely fabricated. During the "denunciation," hundreds of farmers accused them and abused them with the worst language, whereas they were not allowed to enter a plea.

When the defendants argued that they had "supported the revolution" and handed over to the government all their land, the presiding judges simply told them that "all your land was of the people; we don't need you to hand it over. The trial tonight has nothing to do with your land, only with the crimes that you, your parents, and your ancestors have committed against the poor farmers for thousands of years."

Some landlords were given death sentences, but the two brothers along with their wives and parents were ordered to kneel on pebbles with a bamboo pannier full of rocks on their heads for three consecutive days and nights. One of the two women, who was in her third month of pregnancy, miscarried the child on the spot and was released when she collapsed. She died from hemorrhaging a few days later. After that, they were allowed to stay home waiting for further decisions from the district land reform office. The landlords were so frightened that some committed suicide. One night, with help from a few close friends and relatives, the two brothers, the surviving wife, and the children fled to the French-controlled area. One of the brothers then volunteered for the nationalist army. In April 1975, they were among the first to flee Sài Gòn.

The land reform campaign caused great shock among people of all classes. It drove many people serving the Việt Minh to the opposite side. Many had been fervent patriots and active Resistance cadres. Consequently, the nationalist government was reinforced with many enthusiastic new anticommunist citizens. Some of my cousins who had been serving the Resistance in military and civilian agencies returned to the city to find jobs in the private sector or in public services or in military units.

The realities of the land reform campaign were too horrible for the common people to believe. Anyone who wasn't assured by a witness he or she trusted would certainly discount the stories as French propaganda. Even my villagers who had suffered so much from communist brutality didn't believe them, let alone my classmates, who were just city boys and girls with no experience of rural life.

For the first time I learned that truth is not easy to find, even though it is in front of you, and that lies are often welcomed instead.

The barbaric land reform was the last blow that drove me definitely to one side of the line. I hated the sight of children joining hands in collective dances and singing about the Chinese communist style. Furthermore, I couldn't hold my anger when talking to poorly educated Việt Minh cadres who loved to use big nonsense political terms and Chinese words and phrases when Vietnamese already had more than one simple way to express similar ideas.

So 1953 saw another sharp turn of the conflict. Eventually, it was the communist atrocities that reinforced the nationalist side and promoted stronger anticommunism.

* * *

In late 1953, the war reached a new level with several heavy battles fought in areas around my city. But to my own observation, the most important development was the logistic campaigns of the Resistance. The Việt Minh was collecting great amounts of rice from the southern parts of Thai Bình and Nam Định provinces, the rice granary of Việt Nam North. Every month, war laborers from both sides of the Red River transported hundreds of tons of rice along the Việt Minh–controlled corridor to the mountainous locations in the northwest.

My villagers who came back from serving in the labor force told me that rice was stored in many caches all over the large areas close to the common border with Laos and China. On the way carrying rice from the Red River coastal areas to the mountainous region, many were killed by French ambushes, air raids, and artillery attacks. I was certain that the French headquarters must have known that a major battle was being planned.

Sometimes the French forces won sporadic victories. Once, a French task force conducted a deep thrust into a heavily defended Việt Minh logistic base

in Lạng Sơn province near the common border with China. The French destroyed a large quantity of weapons and ammunition before withdrawing unharmed. However, a single victory seemed too little to affect the military situation that was increasingly favoring the Việt Minh.

LUCK COMES TO MY FAMILY

In the summer, my family fell into much narrower circumstances. My mother used all of her money for a trading business between the city and the Việt Minh areas. The profits she made were barely enough for the four of us to live with scanty meals. She had built up a small capital of some 7,000 piasters (US$200 at the time), which ensured her a larger profit, when one night she lost all of it. A French patrol accidentally discovered the bales of goods on the way to the Việt Minh areas and destroyed them. The next morning, when a friend of hers came with the bad news, my mother almost fainted.

In the following months, she could do very little to support us. The small amount of money that we relied on was no more. Now she had to return to a small stand in a corner of the city central market, selling vegetables and collecting pennies to feed us.

Then one of my father's friends located us and offered help. He had been close to my family when working in the same district office with my father before 1945, but we had lost contact with him when war broke out in December 1946. He searched for a year before he found us. He helped me get a part-time job coaching some children in the third and fourth grades. He also gave us some extra money to pay our house rent. Thanks to his help, we could manage with less difficulty. But he was not wealthy enough to help us more than that.

Life in a city in war became harder as fighting intensified every month. We couldn't keep up with the high cost of living. Many times I thought of dropping out of school to find some menial work to help my mother. One night I wrote a letter bearing the name of my mother to the North Việt Nam governor (nationalist government), explaining our plight and asking for assistance. When mailing the letter, I had almost no real hope. After a week, I nearly forgot it.

About a month later, a police officer came to see my mother to ask her questions concerning her biography and political background. She was frightened at the idea that he came to investigate her trading with the Việt Minh. Only after fifteen minutes did she find out that the officer came just to complete her security clearance for a job in a government office.

We learned later that an assistant to the North Việt Nam governor, the mandarin who had been my father's boss before 1945, found my letter in a clerk's desk by chance, about to be discarded. He immediately asked the personnel branch to give my mother a job. He said to my mother and me when we visited his home that

he never forgot my father and others who had actively raised their voices to protect him when the Việt Minh militia threatened to execute him on August 18, 1945.

One month later after training, she was employed as a correctional officer in the city jail, in charge of a dozen women prisoners. With her pay equal to that of an army sergeant, she could take better care of the family. My sisters and I were given more food and better clothes. And I didn't have to worry any more about whether to continue my education. My happiness was equal to that of a man who had won the lottery. I taught my two sisters to pray to Buddha and God for help. I believe that when we live honestly, are helpful to others, and do nothing harmful to anyone, we will be rewarded by a divine power.

In the city jail, there were more than 100 prisoners; half were Việt Minh who had been arrested not as prisoners of war but as members of clandestine organizations operating in the nationalist government's areas. Many of them were hard-core communists. The nationalist government intentionally recruited individuals whose close relatives had been killed by the Việt Minh. The government expected those officers to treat the communist prisoners with strict discipline. My mother, however, was doing her assigned duties with her kind heart. As any pious Buddhist, my mother said she would treat the prisoners well to soften their suffering, including the communists whose party had brought peril to her family. To return good for evil was what she always told me to do.

In a few months, she was highly appreciated by most of the prisoners. On weekends, she checked out some inmates, who would stay the whole day in our home, helping us with some chores, having lunch with us, and getting paid generously—more than jail regulations required.

LOOKING TO THE SOUTH

As the war went on, we boys were drawn farther to one side or the other. My comrades and I were yearning for a territory where we could fight both Vietnamese communists and the French. Then we heard of General Trình Minh Thế in Tây Ninh province, Việt Nam South.

The war in South Việt Nam before 1954 was not as intense as in the North, and communism did not prosper well in the South, where people were leading easy lives. However, since 1945, the Resistance in South Việt had produced numerous heroes. The most famous was General Nguyễn Bình. Many of us teenagers knew his reputation.

Nguyễn Bình had long been a nationalist revolutionary, a VNQDĐ member before joining the Communist Party. After the Việt Minh took power, he became one of its talented military leaders who fought against the French. He quickly became a famous military commander of the Resistance Southern Theater of Operation. He planned and conducted many successful attacks, including one on

the large ammunition warehouse in Sài Gòn, next to the zoo. A legend ran that he had notified the French about the attack several days ahead.

His popularity was rising in the South and that brought him trouble.

Later the story circulated that in 1953 he was ordered to go north to receive the highest commemoration from Hồ Chí Minh. His journey was made known widely, and there were ceremonies honoring him along his way to the North through Cambodia. That was what the French were looking for. Not long after he entered Cambodia, he and several of his bodyguards were killed in an ambush. His diary, which the French found among his belongings, was published in *Paris Match* magazine. And people who had had experiences with Hồ Chí Minh's tricks knew the scheme. To many students, Nguyen Bình had been their favorite hero, especially after he was killed.

General Trinh Minh Thế of the Cao Đài sect was renowned as another young hero of the South. He led the Cao Đài militia from a base near Núi Bà Đen (the Black Virgin Mount) in Tây Ninh province. Several friends and I used to listen to the radio programs of the National Allied Front of General Trình Minh Thế. Although the signal was rather weak, we could still listen to the broadcast when the weather was fine. Besides, the father of a friend of ours, who was serving in General Trình Minh Thế's small army, came back to visit his family. He told us hundreds of anecdotes about how the general's forces were fighting the French as well as the Việt Minh.

We heard that Trình Minh Thế's troops were generously supported by the people in the region and that they conducted many commando-type raids, causing serious losses to the French and the Việt Minh. Some also said that the forces were backed up secretly by the United States.

After my friend's father left for South Việt Nam again, I heard that some young men in my city had followed him to Trình Minh Thế's secret bases in Tây Ninh province. And there grew my dream of going to join his forces.

TEN

The Geneva Accords

ĐIỆN BIÊN PHỦ

One night in February 1954, the Việt Minh forces made a bold attack deep inside Nam Định City. They infiltrated the city by several routes. Some disguised themselves as pilgrims joining the annual religious procession to get into the suburban neighborhoods.

At midnight, they opened fire on a security patrol and attacked an outpost in the suburban area to lure French reinforcements out of the city into their ambush. Việt Minh soldiers positioned themselves on the roofs of several houses in my block. However, a nationalist army armored unit frustrated the Việt Minh scheme by encircling them from behind, directing powerful gunfire at the rooftops, and sealing off their way to retreat.

The attack was a Việt Minh military failure, but it was a forceful blow to the French morale. It proved to the people that the Việt Minh could thrust their spear deep into the French inner defense systems. On the nationalist side, the battle was an indication of the nationalist army's better combat capability, even though it was not a very big victory.

In mid-March, the French suffered a stunning reversal at Điện Biên Phủ when Việt Minh artillery decimated the French command and set up a siege around the isolated French forces. Fierce fighting would continue until May 5, when the Việt Minh overwhelmed the remaining French troops. Điện Biên Phủ became the major battle that drew international attention. We students knew that there would be another sharp turn in the course of war. An already large number of war laborers in the area of my native village who had been activated several months earlier to support the battle were now augmented by two to three times. More were killed on the way to the front line.

Some distant relatives from my village who had come back from the battle areas told me that many Chinese communist military cadres disguised as Việt Minh officers were present around Điện Biên Phủ. They were advisors to the Việt Minh staffs and artillery units, even commanding some Red Chinese artillery batteries directly supporting the Việt Minh units. The Chinese never spoke to people when they were away from their units. The presence of the Chinese was confirmed by other sources in my area. Unfortunately, the mass media did not report the information. The presence of Red Chinese military in Điện Biên Phủ was ignored until the 1990s, when some Red Chinese generals confirmed the allegation.

While delegations from all parties were negotiating in Geneva for an end to the fighting, other battles were being fought elsewhere. My friends and I all felt that the French would have to concede much ground to the Việt Minh under pressure from the French people. There was no possibility that they could win the war.

NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT POWER

I had mixed feelings about the nationalist Vietnamese government under King Bảo Đại. It seemed to be a legal institution with formalities and titles. But it was too weak to have a decisive voice against the French. I felt ashamed being under a government that was too dependent on the French, a feeling that I shared with many people. Besides, the nationalist government was not able to get rid of the corruption that made it more and more unpopular. Meanwhile, the Việt Minh appeared as a patriotic organization and gained sympathy as well as support.

Under King Bảo Đại were his prime minister and a cabinet that governed with limited power. Foreign affairs, national defense, and currency management were still in the hands of the French High Commissariat. France provided little economic, medical, educational, and social aid to Việt Nam under the Bảo Đại government in addition to the support necessary to maintain 150,000 nationalist army soldiers. At that time, U.S. aid was scanty. However, the French did not impose harsh measures on the Vietnamese people as they had done before 1945 to exploit the country. The citizens under the nationalist control had to pay taxes only to the Bảo Đại government, and the tax was very low. The government had very little money to cover public expenses.

A governor was appointed by Chief of State Bảo Đại, the king not called a king, to rule each of the three regional governments of Việt Nam: North, Central, and South. Each consisted of several provinces. There was no national parliament. The press was under strict censorship, and nationalist opposition and criticism were not permitted.

As I have mentioned before, we students were not as proud of our top leader as the Việt Minh supporters were of their idol, Hồ Chí Minh. To the average

Vietnamese, Bảo Đại was more or less a French puppet. The nationalists sided with him only because they had to fight the communists for survival, not because they supported French neocolonialism in disguise. The situation was a great dilemma to many nationalists. The government had no clear and acceptable policies to end the war and to rebuild the country, let alone an ideology. Its control over the population was superficial, allowing some degree of freedom to the Việt Minh for various activities, especially in the propaganda domain.

Public health care was poor, and social services were extremely inadequate. However, education efficiency was maintained at all levels up to the university degree, although the primary and high school systems were not large enough to admit all eligible students. Private schools filled part of the gap.

To consolidate the administrative system at village level, the nationalist government launched several Quân Thứ Lưu Đông groups (mobile administrative operational groups). They were supposed to help villagers in the government-controlled areas organize the village governing authority, the self-defense corps, health care, and educational services. This was all done with limited success. The campaign could have worked well if there had been adequate moral and material support. U.S. aid was just for show, and France spent its money only for military purposes.

After four years, the nationalist military was better organized and somehow asserted its identity. Better-trained personnel joined the armed forces. However, the French still held a decisive role in military operations. A small number of commanders were French officers. The French control of the nationalist military at this time probably contributed to the misperception—encouraged by communist propaganda—that American officers were in command of ARVN units during the Việt Nam War between 1955 and 1975.

By 1954, the anticommunists gained more momentum in their cause after the Vietnamese communists overtly exercised their control over the people, culminating in their effort to terrorize the masses with the Land Reform Campaign. The lives of the people in the Việt Minh areas continued to deteriorate. Besides the shortage of food and basic consumer goods, cultural and educational values were deteriorating. For years after 1947, there was no university education. High school curriculum dwindled into the ten-year system like the one in Red China; even textbooks were translations from the Chinese originals.

For half a century, students had been pronouncing the music scale "do re mi fa sol la si do." Since 1951, people in the Việt Minh areas had to say "*to le* mi fa sol la si *to*" as did the Chinese, who could not pronounce the consonants *d* and *r*. To many of us students in the city, local communist leaders were behaving in a servile way with their constant flattery of their Chinese comrades.

The patriotic atmosphere of 1945 had once pervaded every walk of life in the Việt Minh–controlled areas in the first years of war. That atmosphere waned

after many years of terror, poverty, and dictatorship, especially after the Lao Đông Party overtly claimed total power. The new Việt Minh personnel policy brought many ill-educated party members into important jobs. Well-educated cadres and public servants from the middle class and higher, who had previously contributed greatly to the success of the Resistance, were employed in subordinate positions. It was the first time in the history of Việt Nam that the intelligentsia were serving under a class of ignorant bosses.

As nationalist parties in North Việt Nam suffered heavy losses after the Việt Minh's great terrorist campaign, the party members who survived the campaign and fled to the French-controlled areas reorganized their parties and resumed their activities. However, they were not as strong as they had been.

Most nationalist parties were divided into smaller groups, each claiming the same title. Some leaders became ministers in the Bảo Đại government; some refused to cooperate with it. But none of them was prominent enough to gain large support from the people while they had to confront both the French and the Việt Minh. Various nationalist movements and parties failed several attempts to establish a strong, unified anticommunist front to win the right cause over to their side and to claim total independence from France. It seemed to me that such a task was impossible, although I couldn't say why.

I was proud of being a Việt Quốc, of having the right to claim relation to the 1930s glory. I was hoping that my party would be gaining power so that it could lead the great struggle of our people not only to independence but also to liberty, democracy, and prosperity. At eighteen years of age, I had more dreams than reasons.

Almost all of the nationalist parties in Việt Nam adopted some kind of socialism, even though they never claimed the title "socialist." Besides independence and freedom, millions of people were hungry for a better life where the poor wouldn't be too poor and the rich not too rich. So every party more or less supported the idea of a welfare state in a noncommunist style.

THE GREAT RETREAT

In early May 1954, Điện Biên Phủ fell as we had expected after several fierce battles. The Việt Minh victory shook confidence in the French power. However, the Việt Minh suffered heavy losses in exchange for the triumphant victory. No accurate figure was given by the press, but from what we were told by war laborers and Việt Minh wounded soldiers coming back to my village, we could say that many thousands of the attacking forces were killed and a much larger number were wounded. Until May 1954, I still had contact with my villagers, those of my age in particular. They found no difficulties in visiting the city. Civilian travel to and from the Việt Minh areas was not prohibited.

Furthermore, the economic situation in the Việt Minh areas was in an incurable crisis. Rice production, the key factor of the rural economy, was too low, while the Việt Minh required a large quantity to supply the army units and, as some of my villagers asserted, to supply the Chinese in the districts bordering Việt Nam, who were on the verge of a famine as well. A large number of war laborers transported rice across the border into China and then carried military equipment back to Việt Nam.

Tension rose high in the cities of North Việt Nam. A lot of rich people sold their homes in the cities to move south to Sài Gòn. As for my friends and me, we praised the victory of Điện Biên Phủ. Although we were anticommunist, we saw the victory as a great feat achieved by the heroic sacrifice and courage of our compatriots. The Communist Party's leadership played a significant role, but it was not the absolutely indispensable factor of the victory.

After Điện Biên Phủ, I was certain that some big event would be coming soon. Since June 20, the French Union army and Vietnamese nationalist units in Nam Định began dismantling their heavy equipment and moved them to Hà Nội. The population was shaken by the idea that the French forces would withdraw from Nam Định. However, the French headquarters was still preparing for a large military review and parade in the city on July 14, the national holiday of France. On June 24, large-scale movement started with logistic supporting units. Hundreds of trucks headed for Hà Nội, leaving several barracks empty. Military cargo airplanes took off every ten or fifteen minutes, moving personnel and equipment to Hà Nội.

It was no longer a secret that the French forces were about to withdraw from the southern part of North Việt Nam. People from all walks of life filled every bus going north to Hà Nội. In a few days, bus tickets were sold at a price several times higher than normal. Other city people who didn't see anything wrong with living with the Việt Minh worried about these events but remained in the city to wait and see.

Minutes before 7 AM, June 30, five large civilian trucks and a military truck with a squad of the government administrative guards reported to the city's prison. The squad leader, a sergeant, carried a written message from the top military authority of the city that ordered all members of the prison staff and their families and all prisoners to move to Hà Nội. The trucks had to be at the city checkpoint at exactly 7:30 AM. And we knew this time the French military police would be extremely punctual.

A second after receiving the message, we were in a hurry to pick out what we should take along with us. It was a difficult task because everything seemed to be indispensable. At last, when everything was in a few suitcases, we still had fifteen minutes.

I asked my mother for permission to go see my "friends" living a kilometer from us for a minute, "just to say good-bye to them." My aunt said no; she was afraid that I would be late. But my mother calmed her and told me to go as

quickly as possible. She knew where I was going. I got my bicycle and rode it at full speed, almost hitting some pedestrians and bikes and a truck on my way.

In less than five minutes, I stopped at the corner about fifty yards across the street from the home of the girl I loved. She was my classmate, and I had fallen in love with her the previous summer. I had never said a word to her, but I was sure she knew what was in my heart. In the traditional society of the early 1950s, it took time and a circuitous path for a young man to approach a girl and declare his love, even when everybody knew his feelings.

On the small French-style balcony of the second story, she was sitting on a chair drying her long black hair in the morning breeze. In anticipation that it would probably be many years before I returned, or even that I would never see her again, I felt pain in my heart. Gathering all my courage, I blew her a kiss, to the surprise of some passers-by. And without seeing whether she was aware of it or not, I beat a hasty retreat.

Five minutes later, I was on the truck with my family, who had been nervously waiting for me. And in exactly five minutes, the small convoy of six trucks began the trip to Hà Nội. It was a miracle for many Vietnamese to observe such punctuality.

The convoy, along with many others, covered the fifty-one miles to Hà Nội in two hours. The highway was rough with puddles, the best speed-limiting device since the scorched-earth campaign in 1947. Road security was taken care by a large force seen every few hundred yards. Mines had already been laid on all bridges, which would be blown up when all withdrawing convoys passed, the engineer soldiers told us.

Only later did I learn that it had been a marvelous retreat under French Army colonel Paul Vanuxem (who was promoted to general a short time after the operation), with extremely precise timing, perfect secrecy, and surprisingly few losses. Vanuxem was one of the French celebrities who supported an independent and prosperous noncommunist Việt Nam. Nearly twenty-one years later, he witnessed the last days of Sài Gòn in April 1975, when there was no way for his Vietnamese friends to continue fighting and had to flee in panic after the communist forces overran South Việt Nam.

That night of June 30, the foremost part of a Việt Minh force sent from the northern region to cut off the retreating route of the French forces launched its bloody attacks at Phủ Lý, a small town thirty miles south of Hà Nội. The fighting lasted all night and destroyed a large part of the town of tens of thousands of inhabitants. When the French Army and the nationalist government and military hurriedly withdrew, they left behind many militiamen in anticommunist villages without giving them the order to withdraw to safety. A number of those betrayed combatants fled on foot, but many others were captured, and some were later executed by the Việt Minh.

WAITING FOR AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

Before leaving the city, I had too little time to do anything for my Việt Quốc comrades. I could only give some of them my address in Hà Nội and advice about how to ensure the safety for our members who stayed. In a week, about half of my comrades contacted me in Hà Nội. The party hierarchy temporarily assigned us to serve on the Hà Nội Party committee. We got orders from our leaders to consolidate our organization and to stay fully alerted. We were to be prepared for actions required to cope with any special situation.

I had to report to my party bosses for orders once every evening and sometimes early in the morning. Now and then, my group was assigned a leaflet mission. Such missions had long been duck soup for my fellows and me, so they were usually given to the greenhorns as a primary exercise. The leaflets conveyed nothing great, just appeals to the population and Vietnamese soldiers to heighten their vigilance and be ready to support our party in the struggle for total independence from the French and against the communists.

During the first weeks of July, Hà Nội was bubbling with rumors. A lot of anticommunists were happy to hear that Ngô Đình Diệm would be prime minister of the Bảo Đại nationalist government. We didn't know much about that former mandarin, but still believed that as a well-known patriot, he would be capable of doing something for the country. Many thought that he would possibly be a rival to Hồ Chí Minh. Such was the attitude of many people in Hà Nội when they stood along a boulevard to welcome Diệm on his visit to the old capital a few days after he was appointed.

Meanwhile, it was said that there would soon be a cease-fire and that each side would hold on to its territory until nationwide elections could be held. That seemed impractical, because in 1954 many places around the cities were under the control of the French and nationalist government during the day and of the Việt Minh at night. Such a situation would make any cease-fire almost impossible to be implemented.

Another rumor that frightened many nationalists was that Việt Nam would be divided into two parts after the cease-fire. No one liked that idea. It meant we would have to leave the North for the South. Diệm established the Committee for Defense of North Việt Nam with instructions to continue defending the North should the French and the Việt Minh decide to divide the country. Police forces in Hà Nội and other northern cities were armed with military equipment and prepared for actual combat. All nationalist parties supported Diệm's decision.

Since the last days of Điện Biên Phủ, rumors were circulating that the U.S. Seventh Fleet—some of its warships already in the Bay of Hạ Long—might give direct support to the nationalist army to defend its territories in North Việt

Nam. Some of my friends laid hope on the American intervention. The others did not believe that U.S. involvement would be the solution when the French still held full power. But all agreed on one point: it was unlikely that the Americans could save the French from defeat.

The French Army celebrated Bastille Day with a large-scale military review and parade in Hà Nội. Posters displayed the picture of a clenched fist along with the information that the French withdrawal from the five provinces south of Hà Nội was a new strategy intended to concentrate military forces for more powerful offensive actions. The strategy was compared to a clenching fist instead of spreading fingers. This propaganda ploy seemed weak and unconvincing. There was no way to make anyone believe that the French would gain anything more than what they were presently holding. Việt Minh popularity was already at its peak, and no propaganda could harm them significantly.

For many consecutive nights, we dropped leaflets all over Hà Nội, especially near the French barracks, including those of North African soldiers, calling for support of our nationalist cause. Personally we knew it was a hopeless task unless the Americans intervened. But we had to do it anyway, at least to show the readers of our leaflets that there were true nationalists who were more patriotic than the Việt Minh.

Obviously the French were aware of the nationalist intentions. Heavily armed North African soldiers were deployed at many key military and civilian installations for safeguarding.

THE PAINFUL NIGHT

On July 21, four of my friends and I heard Radio Hirondelle, the French Army radio station in Hà Nội, announcing that France and the Việt Minh had signed the Geneva Accords. The Vietnamese nationalist government and the United States did not sign the pact.

Although we had expected that the French and the Việt Minh would come to some agreement and that the nationalists had no way to affect their decision, we were still shocked at the news. For more than a minute, we fell into sorrowful silence. We knew we were witnessing an event that would change our lives forever.

According to the agreement, Việt Nam would be temporarily divided into two areas by the Bến Hải River at the 17th parallel north. The two opposing forces would have to evacuate to their sides within three hundred days. The Việt Minh would take over Hà Nội in October 1954 and Hải Phòng in May 1955.

That night, two friends and I stayed up late. We went to the historic Lake of the Sword, sitting on the grassy bank until midnight, talking. One of my friends wept. We returned to my home and did not sleep that night. The painful feeling of leaving my beautiful native land for a long, long time, possibly forever, kept me awake.

So the war would come to an end. We didn't know for how long, because the situation in Việt Nam in no way ensured a cease-fire forever, but we hoped it would last, the longer the better. Our discussion came to another topic: if there had not been the communist Việt Minh, what would the Resistance have become? We didn't come to any firm conclusion at the time.

* * *

Only many years later when I had learned more about different matters did I have an answer for myself. If there had not been a Communist Party, or if the Resistance government had been run by the nationalists, we could have won the war sooner with greater victory and much less death and destruction. I always believe that a noncommunist Việt Nam would have gained total independence from France with much less bloodshed, difficult but peaceful like India and Indonesia. The free world and the United States would have supported Việt Nam, and France would have had to give up recolonizing Indochina. The high morale of our people would have enabled any leadership to lead them to victory. It did not need to be the Việt Minh. I guessed that with such a scenario, Việt Nam would have become a democracy like Thailand, or even the Philippines—not very stable politically, perhaps, but with greater economic development.

* * *

In the last week of July 1954, the nationalist government in Sài Gòn announced a program to help the northerners who wanted to go south. My mother asked a friend of the family to return to my village and bring my grandma, my uncle, his wife, and his adopted son to Hà Nội in order to join us in moving to Sài Gòn. She said she would pay him a lot of money, almost all of what she had saved after eight months on the job.

Once the Geneva Accords took effect, moving from Hà Nội to the Việt Minh areas and back was relatively easy. The Việt Minh forces could not impose strict control over the large areas and the great number of people who were crossing the line between the two warring sides every day.

Our friend shuttled between Hà Nội and Nam Định every week and had succeeded in getting out many people who lived deep inside the Việt Minh areas. But he failed to bring the four members of my family to us. My uncle was under the close scrutiny of the Việt Minh village authorities, and there was no way to get him out. My grandmother would have been able to join us, but she refused to leave. She said she was too old for anything, so she would rather stay and die where she had lived as a good wife and mother and be buried beside my grandfather. Furthermore, she wanted to be with my uncle, as she felt that he would surely be in trouble.

In Hà Nội, my mother and my aunt feared for the safety of my two sisters. Việt Minh agents kidnapped the children of some families they wanted to keep from leaving. So my aunt and my mother never let my sisters out of their sight for more than a few seconds.

While we were preparing to leave, many former Việt Minh cadres came to urge us to stay. They had known my mother while they were imprisoned in the Nam Định city jail and were grateful for her help. They had been released in early July in an amnesty. They assured us that as they had rejoined the Việt Minh ranks and held medium-level jobs, they could protect us at any cost, so we should not worry. But nothing could change our minds. In the Land Reform Campaign, we knew many "good" landlords who contributed the best of what they had to the common cause of fighting the French and whose children served as high-ranking Việt Minh cadres, and yet they had been executed. Any sympathy with the Việt Minh had long faded away.

A few days before my scheduled departure for Sài Gòn, some of my first cousins on my mother's side visited with us. They were all Việt Minh cadres and had come to persuade us to stay. My mother firmly rejected their proposal that our family should move and live permanently with them in my mother's native village where they would protect us. The husband of my mother's eldest sister, however, advised us to go south. He had served in the Việt Minh for more than twenty years in another area. He said to my mother, "You should bring the kids to the South. You wouldn't be safe if you stayed anywhere in the North. I say so because you are my wife's blood sister. I have to stay because I am a Communist Party ranking member, otherwise . . . but you know what I mean."

MY LAST DAYS IN HÀ NỘI

By the end of July, a large number of people left Hà Nội for South Việt Nam at their own expense, while official announcements were made that North Vietnamese who wanted to leave would be helped with transportation and resettlement, beginning in a few weeks.

In early August, men in my group were ordered by the Việt Quốc leadership to join the government social services. We would be sent to Sài Gòn to help with the refugee program, establishing and running reception centers for the refugees from the North. My mother and the family would depart for Sài Gòn a month later.

I spent the last days in Hà Nội visiting my favorite places. The streets were crowded with people from everywhere, including many Việt Minh cadres. The nationalist army and police didn't bother to control the enemy infiltration unless someone did something excessively unacceptable.

Early one morning my two friends and I were relishing hot black coffee at a small street cafe beside Thiền Quang Lake in the southern part of the city. Since

people had begun leaving Hà Nội in large numbers, the streets in that area had become open marketplaces where people were running collective "sidewalk sales." Those who were about to leave were trying to sell everything they wouldn't be able to take with them. Almost anything could be found on the sidewalks, from a broken sewing needle to a brand-new bicycle. The sellers were trying to collect every penny possible for their new homes far away.

My two friends and I were the first customers of the street cafe, located at one end of the "sidewalk sales" area. It was 6 AM, the blue sky was waiting for the rising sun, and the air was cool. Peddlers from the suburbs carrying loads of goods with poles on their shoulders were on their way to the inner-city markets. And the sidewalk sellers had already displayed hundreds of miscellaneous articles.

When daylight came, people around the corner from the cafe noticed that a Việt Minh flag was hanging from the top of a low tree. Some men and women yelled, "Get that dirty rag down and destroy it!" A boy of my age responded to the call right away with a loud "Yes sir." He climbed the tree with ease and reached the flag in half a minute. At the same time, a French officer in his khaki uniform passed by.

When the boy came down from the tree, he laughed heartily and began to tear up the red flag while others cheered. The French officer snatched the flag away while shaking the boy by his collar, saying something loudly. People standing nearby told us that the officer said the flag represented a government and should not be humiliated. The poor creature must have had very little background about the situation in Việt Nam, especially about the people who were selling their junk along the sidewalks. His actions—siding with the communist Việt Minh and accosting the boy—ignited the crowd.

At one cry, a dozen men flew at the French officer with whatever they could get—sticks, locks, carrying poles, and especially rocks from a pile on the sidewalk that a public works contractor had prepared for road mending. Within seconds, women and children joined in the mass beating. I also flew into a rage but tried to restrain myself. I didn't know which way to react, so I just stood watching. After a minute, the crowd stopped beating the Frenchman. They returned to their places, leaving the poor man lying on the sidewalk. His face was bruised, and blood tainted his uniform. When a French Army ambulance came to pick him up a few minutes later, he was still unconscious.

On the afternoon of August 11, my friends and I visited our favorite shrimp fries kiosk on Cổ Ngư Avenue beside Lake Hồ Tây (West Lake) for the last time. That avenue was filled with romantic couples strolling along every summer and autumn afternoon. While we were eating, a few boys, ages ten and younger, approached and asked us for money. I gave them some and told them that they should have done something more decent to earn money instead of begging. To my surprise, the youngest looked straight at me and said, "The Việt Minh will

come here before long. We poor people will be given property, you dirty rich people will be felled, and you'll beg us for money."

His saucy manner drove us to red-hot anger, and one of my friends was about to give him a good slapping when I pulled the kid to my side to protect him. I softly told him that I also came from a poor family and that he had learned the wrong lessons about the communists. He talked back, saying that he knew only the Việt Minh. Apparently he didn't know what a "communist" was. "Poor little brother," I said. "You're too young to tell right from wrong. But if you are brilliant enough, you'll see for yourself what the Việt Minh really are after a few years living under them. When you've grown much older, remember what I'm telling you today."

When I let him go, he walked about ten yards, then stopped to look at me, a look so deep and dark that I would never forget and that would help me recognize him fourteen years later in Sài Gòn.

* * *

That night, I stayed up until 1 AM, writing twenty-two pages to the girl I loved who was still in Nam Định. This was the first love letter in my life and the longest one I have ever written. I asked one of my cousins who was going back to Nam Định the next morning to hand my letter to the girl personally. In the letter I promised that I would never forget her and that I would come back someday in triumph. In fact, her image was so strong in me that I didn't fall in love with any other girl for years.

In 1992, two years after I had resettled in America, with help from an old classmate, I located the girl and we exchanged letters occasionally. She was now a widow and had many children and grandchildren. One day in 2001, I talked to her for the first time by telephone about my last days in Hà Nội. I couldn't help asking if she had received my long good-bye letter. She was silent for about five seconds and then said that she had not. My cousin had never handed my letter to her. After our long conversation, she sent me an email in which she admitted, "If I had received your letter, I would have joined you in the South, and our lives would have been greatly different." I replied that it was because of the war. She flashed back, "That's our destiny, you and I."

FAREWELL, HÀ NỘI, HELLO, SÀI GÒN!

At 6 AM, August 12, I said good-bye to my family and reported to the Gia Lâm Airport near Hà Nội for a flight to Sài Gòn. While I was waiting to board a military plane, a young French first lieutenant came to talk to our group of twenty Social Services cadres. We told him our objectives and our future plans in the

South. When we were about to leave, he shook hands with all of us and said: "I know France has made many mistakes that caused endless tragedies to you Vietnamese. Your trip today is a consequence of those mistakes. I can say only that I regret it. I wish you good luck and great success in your struggle for a better Việt Nam." Although I was nursing dislike for the French, his words, delivered with obvious emotion, moved me very much.

So at 8 AM, we boarded a French C-47 for Sài Gòn. I've never forgotten the last sight of Hà Nội when the plane circled over the ancient city before heading south. A gray shroud of clouds hung low over the city we loved so much. From about 3,000 feet, I saw the best part of Hà Nội through an opening in the clouds: the Hoàn Kiếm Lake (Lake of the Sword), the Red River, and the Long Biên Bridge. My friends and I had tears in our eyes. A man sitting next to me said the image made him think of a gray mourning scarf around the face of a young woman. We all nodded without saying a word.

We arrived in Sài Gòn three hours later. I could see canals and rivers with coconut trees along their banks bordering green fields and gardens. The landscape, slightly different from that of my home province, made me feel both homesick and excited.

After reporting to the Ministry of Social Services, we were assigned jobs receiving North Vietnamese who began arriving in the Sài Gòn area, about 100 persons a day at first, then more than 1,000 a day at Tân Sơn Nhứt Airport. Airplanes of all kinds, military and civilian, were landing every ten or fifteen minutes from 11 AM until 9 PM. Meanwhile, ships from many nations, including the U.S., British, and French navies, brought in thousands of refugees.

Many of our teams had to work late and as much as ten hours a day, including weekends, to welcome the refugees and give them initial assistance. The others had to prepare paperwork for refugees in reception camps, sometimes all night long, so that they could be paid as early as possible after their arrival. Although exhausted, we all felt happy to serve our compatriots.

All schools in Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn areas were used to lodge the newcomers. Each refugee was paid every week or at five-day intervals an allowance of VN$12 per day, half for a child of twelve and younger. In 1954, VN$12 was equal to 30 cents but was enough to buy decent meals for one day. One could even save a little by cooking for oneself. (Minimum wage was about VN$500/month.)

Although distributing the allowance was handled with simple procedures and very little paperwork, which made stealing quite easy, very few of us were dishonest. Most of us were still too idealistic to commit such shameful misdemeanors.

On the first weekend when we could be free from work, my two friends and I went to Tây Ninh province seeking more information about Trình Minh Thế's army. If things appeared to be fine, we would join the force. In the first few hours

of our visit, we learned that Trình Minh Thế and his army would soon join Ngô Đình Diệm's government. The dream we had been nursing since 1953 came to an end.

THE FIRST MONTHS IN SÀI GÒN

On trips to places around Sài Gòn, we felt happy to see people leading an easy life. Unlike the North Vietnamese, who worked so hard to earn a scanty living, people in the South enjoyed life in a carefree manner. I liked their way of living.

However, all of us newly arriving from the North shared the same concern about what the working class in the South had learned about the communists. During the war of Resistance, Việt Minh forces in South Việt Nam were rather weak. Many Việt Minh policies in the North were not applied in areas in the South and only the southern part of Central Việt Nam under its control. Many of the South Vietnamese knew very little about the true Việt Minh. To them, Việt Minh was a patriotic movement and had nothing to do with communism. Some who associated the Việt Minh with communism believed simply that communism would make the poor wealthy. Some were even credulous enough to ask us why we had gone south when the North was "independent." Right in Sài Gòn, there was some overtly produced propaganda. In many villages, pro–Việt Minh activists showed their attitude without fear of being arrested.

South Việt Nam in 1954 was not far different from the time it had been a French colony known as Cochinchina. Administrative papers were in French. Streets were named after celebrated French personages, including notorious colonists and their Vietnamese collaborators. In the North and the Central, all of those remnants of colonialism had disappeared since March 1945.

One of my friends was right when he predicted that the situation would cause much difficulty for the incoming struggle against the communists. He was afraid the South Vietnamese would only learn from the experiences of their brethren in the North when it was too late.

Beginning in late August, the flow of North Vietnamese refugees increased, and more social cadres were recruited to handle the situation. Intellectuals, experts, technicians, skilled workers (especially mechanics), and middle-class people from northern cities and towns left for the South. Some decided to leave forever; some just planned to go south for a few years and return after the elections were held as stipulated in the Geneva Accords. Some of the refugees were poor peasants who came with nothing in their pockets. Many had to walk for hundreds of miles to reach the French-controlled areas. Some even fled the Việt Minh areas on risky boat trips.

The Việt Minh employed every trick to stop people from leaving. On Highway 5 between Hà Nội and the port city of Hải Phòng, they forced hundreds of

peasants, especially women, to act as human obstacles, lying in front of civilian buses and military trucks. Some pulled the refugees from vehicles or away from their walking groups to order them not to go. There were clashes resulting in bloodshed.

Although Catholics formed less than 10 percent of the population, they made up half of the refugees. Most came from the dioceses of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu. And because of the cease-fire agreement, an important number of noncommunists serving the Resistance could flee to the South. They would later play significant roles in the South Việt Nam administration and armed forces.

Almost all North Vietnamese refugees were looking to the United States for material and moral support. The Americans seemed to be better friends, offering us generous aid.

The first time I talked to—or argued with—an American was in late August 1954. He was a captain in charge of the newly built tent city in Phú Thọ area next to the Sài Gòn racetrack. The camp was built with American funding and reserved for refugees coming on two U.S. ships, the *Marine Serpent* and the *Marine Adder,* as I recall.

On a rainy evening, a French ship brought in more than 1,000 refugees. Someone in the Ministry of Social Services, our headquarters, told the truck drivers to make for the Phú Tọ tent city. The Americans there refused to let them in, simply because they were not brought to the South by U.S. transportation. When news came, two cadres and I, who seemed to be the only ones capable of speaking "some" English, were sent to Phú Thọ "to do something," as we were told.

We tried our best with our poor vocabulary and accent to talk to the U.S. captain. We showed him the people standing on roofless trucks under the heavy rain. We patched our sentences with anything that came to mind, trying to make him agree to let those poor compatriots of ours into the camp, at least overnight, until we could find some other place in the morning.

The argument went on for about two minutes. After looking up words in a pocket dictionary for almost every sentence, we failed to move the captain's heart. At last we gave up, not because we were exhausted but because we had exhausted our vocabulary and grammar as the dialogue went into more complicated areas. Then came an English teacher who was a Vietnamese working for the U.S. embassy. He handled the affair in about two minutes, and everything went fine: the refugees were welcomed into the tent city at midnight.

My mother, my aunt, and my sisters arrived in Sài Gòn in early September. My mother worked as a corrections officer at the Sài Gòn Central Prison. In December, I came back to live with them and reentered school. Meanwhile, my comrades and I continued doing what our Việt Quốc Party required.

The Ngô Đình Diệm government had to face strong opposition right from the beginning. The nationalist army chief of staff, General Nguyễn Văn Hinh,

son of the former prime minister, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, openly opposed Diệm. Every day since October 1954, the two had waged war not on the streets but on the radio. The war of words frustrated many young men of my age. We longed for stability in the South, a basic requirement for the construction of an effective anticommunist regime.

The crisis came to an end after weeks of a heated war of words. General Lê Văn Tỵ was appointed joint general chief of staff, replacing General Nguyễn Văn Hinh. The remnants of the French supporters lost their foothold in the nationalist army. Meanwhile, I joined the student-led campaign for new street names honoring Vietnamese heroes. The campaign was an instant success. Within a month, most of the street names related to colonialism disappeared after a quick resolution by the Sài Gòn City Council. Names of great patriots, including those who had fought the French colonialists, were now seen on the city street corners.

ELEVEN

The Year of Changes

ADVANCE TO THE NORTH

When the Reverend Hoàng Quỳnh, a Catholic priest and ardent anticommunist activist, founded a new regiment with the name Bắc Tiến (Advance to the North), my group was ordered by the Việt Quốc leaders to join it as a part-time psychological operations team. The regiment included ethnic North Vietnamese soldiers who had deserted from nationalist army units. Most of them were Catholics, rallying under the command of a brilliant officer, Colonel Trần Thiện, who was said to have been trained by the United States somewhere in the Pacific.

The regiment was sponsored by General Lê Văn Viễn, leader of the Bình Xuyên forces, once a powerful gang that had joined the Resistance before returning to Sài Gòn to collaborate with the French. The Bình Xuyên was then given control of the territory of Rừng Sát, south of Sài Gòn, and the right to run two famous gambling dens and a well-managed brothel.

By agreement between Lê Văn Viễn and Reverend Hoàng Quỳnh, the Bắc Tiến became an autonomous part of Bình Xuyên forces. It was supposed to be a spearhead in the future national liberation of North Việt Nam.

The regiment's morale was rather high. Once every week, our cultural group of a dozen students visited the companies, giving them general information briefings and political indoctrination and entertaining them with a show that usually lasted two hours with songs and skits. Many times the troops rose to join us in patriotic songs. The atmosphere was much like that of 1947–48, when the heroic resistance reached a high pitch in my district area, with brave warriors setting out for battle after being entertained in almost the same way.

We served the Bắc Tiến regiment with much enthusiasm but less confidence. We felt that our Việt Quốc leaders were not as clairvoyant as we had