

Finally, I wish to record my very sincere thanks to the Information and Research Center, Singapore, for its encouragement, and for its help in the publication of this book.

I fully realize that this study is very imperfect. But, on the other hand, I am convinced that it will help clarify certain aspects of the Vietnamese question, including the Vietnam wars, and the frightful state of poverty, misery, and continued warfare in which the Vietnamese people have found themselves mired since 1975. This is an attempt at getting at the truth about Vietnam. Of course, the truth, the real truth, all of the truth, about Vietnam will not be known for a long time, if it will ever be known. But we must search for it, as objectively and, especially, as honestly as possible, if we want to really know Vietnamese communism, in the Confucian sense of really knowing:

To know that one know what one knows.

To know that one does not know what one does not know.

That is really knowing.

Trois Rivières, Québec, Canada
Summer 1987

Postscript: This book was completed in the summer of 1987. Since then, a number of events have occurred in Southeast Asia, especially in relation to Cambodia. However, these events have not invalidated my interpretations. I have therefore found that modifications to the book are unnecessary.

Trois Rivières
Autumn 1988.

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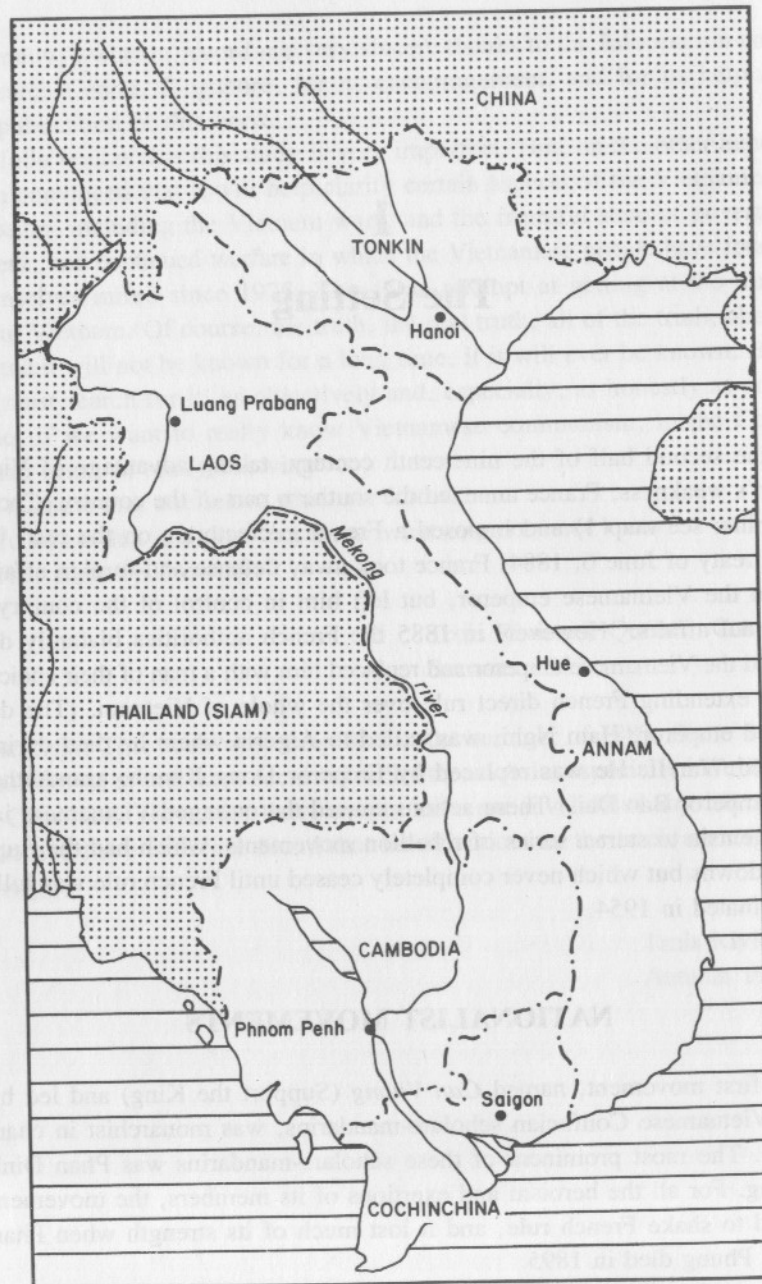
The Setting

In the second half of the nineteenth century, taking advantage of Vietnam's weakness, France annexed the southern part of the country (Cochinchina; see map 1) and imposed a French protectorate on the rest. By the treaty of June 6, 1884, France took away defense and foreign affairs from the Vietnamese emperor, but left him in control of the country's internal affairs.¹ However, in 1885 the French authorities blatantly deposed the Vietnamese emperor and replaced him with a man of their choice, thus extending French direct rule over the whole of Vietnam. (The deposed emperor, Ham Nghi, was exiled to Algeria where he died during World War II. He was replaced by Emperor Dong Khanh, grandfather of Emperor Bao Dai.) These actions caused the outraged Vietnamese intelligentsia to start a series of rebellion movements, which had their ups and downs but which never completely ceased until French rule was fully terminated in 1954.

NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

The first movement, named *Can Vương* (Support the King) and led by the Vietnamese Confucian scholars-mandarins, was monarchist in character. The most prominent of these scholars-mandarins was Phan Dinh Phung. For all the heroism and exertions of its members, the movement failed to shake French rule, and it lost much of its strength when Phan Dinh Phung died in 1895.

The nationalist torch was picked up a few years later by another Confucian scholar, Phan Boi Chau, who wanted to regain independence for a Vietnam under a monarch. But at the same time, he advocated modernization and seeking external aid. He thus launched the *Duy Tân* (Mod-



Map 1. French Indochina in 1939 and French Proposed Indochina Federation in 1946.

ernization) movement; actively recruited young people and sent them secretly to Japan for military training, as part of the *Dong Du* (Go East) movement; and sought Japan's support. He himself also went secretly to Japan in 1904. He first obtained some support there, but in 1908 he was expelled by the Japanese at the request of the French government.

While in Japan, Phan Boi Chau came into contact with Chinese revolutionaries, in particular Liang Ch'i-ch'ao. After leaving Japan, he went to China, where he tried to enlist the support of the leaders of the Chinese revolutionary movement, including Sun Yat-sen. From China, Phan Boi Chau continued his agitation against French rule. He also set up bases in Thailand. But his movement did not make much headway, and it practically came to an end when, betrayed by the Vietnamese Communists (reportedly by Ho Chi Minh; see Chapter 2), he was arrested by French authorities in Shanghai and brought back to Vietnam in 1925. He died in 1941.

Until the 1920s, Phan Boi Chau was considered the country's greatest national hero. Another national hero of Vietnam of that period was Phan Chu Trinh, who, unlike Phan Boi Chau, advocated republicanism and the achievement of national independence through cooperation with France and acceptance of French tutelage for a time. His name was associated with the *Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* (Scholars' Modern Schools) whose aim was to give the Vietnamese a modern education. In spite of his advocacy of cooperation with France, Phan Chu Trinh was jailed by the French authorities for his evoking of independence. In 1911 he was released from jail but was exiled to France. In 1925 he returned to his country, a national hero, and died there in 1926.

The two Phans did much to keep the flame of Vietnamese nationalism burning during the first quarter of the twentieth century. They represented the nationalism of the Vietnamese Confucian elite. With the disappearance of these two men from the scene, the Vietnamese nationalist movement came under a different kind of leadership. Instead of looking to the East, the new leaders looked West, as they belonged to the Western-educated and Western-orientated intelligentsia. These new leaders had gone to schools set up by the French authorities in Vietnam to replace the traditional Confucian schools, or had acquired French ideas and values in France in French schools or through contact with the French, especially during and after World War I.

The new nationalists divided into two groups, a division that was to last for the following decades: those who rejected Western colonialism but accepted Western democratic ideas and values, and those who re-

jected both Western colonialism and Western democratic values and adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In Communist terminology: those in favor of bourgeois democracy, and those in favor of Socialist democracy.

The most important of the non-Communist revolutionary organizations was the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), founded in 1927 and patterned closely on the Chinese Kuomintang. The revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party was, of course, the Communist party of Vietnam (changing its name afterward to Communist party of Indochina), founded in 1930 and accepting the leadership of the Third Communist International. Both were secret organizations subject to extremely severe repressions by the French colonial authorities; both were practically wiped out as a result of unsuccessful insurrections in 1930–1931.

The VNQDD insurrection, commonly referred to as the Yen Bay revolt, occurred in February 1930. Its failure led to the arrest of thousands of its members, including almost its entire leadership. After this devastating blow, the VNQDD practically ceased to exist as an effective revolutionary nationalist organization capable of being a serious threat to French rule. Those who escaped arrest fled to China and continued to operate from there under the protection of the Chinese Kuomintang.

The Communist party of Indochina (CPI), for its part, staged a series of “Soviets” in the provinces of Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh in 1930–1931. As a result of their failure and of the savage repression by the French colonial authorities, the CPI also suffered near extinction. But thanks to the help of the Comintern, it was able to reconstitute itself by 1934. Nevertheless, like the VNQDD, it ceased to be a real challenge to French rule until 1945.

In addition to the VNQDD and the CPI, there were other, less important nationalist organizations. However, most of them were reformist and did not favor political separation of Vietnam from France. There was also a Trotskyite group, led by Ta Thu Thau, which competed with the CPI for support among the population.²

Internationally, the period 1885–1939 was one in which France was an acknowledged great European power. Its vast colonial empire was second in importance only to the British empire. On the other hand, as a result of its victory over Germany in 1918, of the U.S. relapse into isolationism, and of Russia being crippled by internal disturbances, France became a leading world power as well. In the colonies, no power was capable of challenging its position, except Great Britain, and for an obvious reason—imperial solidarity—the latter had no real interest in mounting such a challenge.

France's colonial position was made still more secure by the treaties signed in Washington in 1921. Under the Four Power Treaty, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Japan pledged to respect the *status quo* regarding their colonial possessions in the Pacific, whereas under the Five Power Treaty, a ceiling was placed on Japan's naval strength. Thus France's sovereignty over Indochina was fully protected.

Under the circumstances, the Vietnamese revolutionary nationalists, having no strong organization, no armed forces, no powerful and firm allies, could not hope to terminate French rule. For the Vietnamese Communists, in particular, defeating imperialism, even in Vietnam alone, was a remote possibility, a very remote one indeed. The high hopes that Lenin had entertained in 1917 about the coming of the world revolution had been dashed by 1921. That year, Lenin began to speak about the existence of a “state of equilibrium” and about the “zigzag line of history.”³ In 1927 Zinoviev, one of Lenin's trusted lieutenants, talked about the inevitability of the “ebb and flow” of the revolution.⁴ That year, Communist revolutionary hopes in Asia were dashed when Chiang Kai-shek dealt devastating blows against them in China. In 1928 Stalin made “socialism in one country” the official policy of the Soviet Union.

In Europe the following twelve years witnessed the spectacular rise of fascism and the evaporation of Communist hopes of seizing power in a number of countries, in particular in Germany. Hitler's rise to power there in 1933 and his ruthless suppression of communism, together with his avowed intention of seeking “living space” in the East, posed a serious threat to Soviet Russia, the fortress of the world revolution. This danger was compounded by the linking up of Germany, Italy, and Japan by the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936. The growing danger posed by the Fascist powers led Stalin to impose the united front tactics on the Comintern, to seek a rapprochement with the Western powers, and to give firmer support to China, especially after Japan's invasion of that country in 1937.

The international situation in 1928–1939 thus did not favor the Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries. Yet, the upshot of the revolutionary activities between 1885 and 1930, and of the abortive revolts of 1930–1931, followed by the trials and executions of nationalist leaders, national heroes, was that a climate of widespread unrest and a strong spirit of rebellion persisted throughout those years. This situation was to greatly benefit all nationalist revolutionaries from 1939 onward, when the world underwent a complete change as a result of the outbreak of World War II.

WORLD WAR II

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, World War II was to produce great upheavals in Vietnam. In particular, it gave a strong boost to Vietnamese nationalism. France had its hands tied up in Europe and could not maintain a strong position in Indochina. On the other hand, deprived of support from France, Indochina found itself in a precarious position vis-à-vis Japan, whose ambitions regarding Southeast Asia were well known.

Japan moved swiftly in June 1940, when the French armies were crushed by Hitler's forces. Paris fell on June 14; the French government asked for an armistice on June 16. Three days later, Japan struck in Indochina. Tokyo demanded the right to set up a Japanese mission in Hanoi to ensure the effective control of traffic on the Haiphong-Kunming railway to prevent war supplies from reaching the Chinese forces. This move followed an earlier demand that the railway be closed to the transport of war material to China. General Georges Catroux, then governor general of Indochina, yielded to Japanese demands.⁵

To the Vietnamese nationalists, the French decision conveyed a clear message: the French were weak and no longer in full control in Indochina. The weakness became still clearer in September when the Japanese demanded the right to use airports and to move troops into northern Indochina, starting from the 22nd of that month. Again, the French authorities in Indochina, now headed by Admiral Jean Decoux, who had chosen to place the colony under the authority of Marshall Petain instead of General de Gaulle, capitulated on orders from Vichy. But, whether as a result of a misunderstanding or as a deliberate warning to the French authorities, the Japanese forces in southern China attacked the border town of Lang Son and inflicted heavy casualties on the French garrison there.

Following the attack, the Communists launched a series of uprisings against the French. These actions were serious mistakes. The uprisings were premature and, naturally, they were ruthlessly put down by the French authorities. France was down but not yet out. In an agreement with Japan on August 17, 1940, France had conceded the right to use military facilities and to station troops in Indochina; but, in return, it had secured Japan's formal recognition of French sovereignty over Indochina, thus giving the French authorities there a free hand to deal with the Vietnamese nationalist revolutionary movements as they saw fit.

However, the Japanese authorities gave protection to the Vietnamese friendly to Japan whose security was seriously threatened by the French police, and fostered the growth of pro-Japanese parties, in particular, of

the Dai Viet. On the other hand, the Japanese humiliating behavior toward the French—unrestrained, insolent, brutal, and especially public—whether accidental or deliberate, convinced more and more Vietnamese that France had become impotent, and its days in Indochina were numbered.

French impotence became more and more obvious. This was further demonstrated by the conclusion of a series of agreements under which France made more and more concessions to Japan, with far-reaching implications, economically and especially militarily. These culminated in the Joint Defense Agreement of July 29, 1941. In the eyes of the Allies, this formally placed Indochina squarely in the enemy camp. For the Vietnamese, it meant the formal end of French sovereignty. The combined effect of these two reactions was to make a smooth and full return of France to Indochina impossible in 1945.

The logical consequence of the Franco-Japanese agreement of July 29 was the Japanese demand, in the form of an ultimatum on March 8, 1945, that the French forces be placed under effective Japanese command. When the ultimatum expired, the Japanese struck: the French forces were disarmed, and the French administration was eliminated on March 9. On March 11, Emperor Bao Dai declared the Treaty of 1884 terminated, and with it, the French protectorate. Thus the Japanese accomplished with great ease, in just one day, what the Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries, Communists included, had been trying very hard, but in vain, to do for almost a century: the ending of French rule in fact as well as in law.

Logically also, the Japanese had acted primarily not in the interests of the Vietnamese but in those of Japan, more particularly, for the implementation of their grand imperial design of "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."⁶ It is thus not surprising that, for Vietnam, independence could be only nominal. Japan retained control not only of foreign affairs, and especially of defense, but also of administration. It refused to turn over immediately to the Bao Dai government control of Cochinchina. Worse still, unlike the policy it pursued toward the Philippines, Burma, or Indonesia, it did not allow this government to have an army or even a ministry of defense. These restrictions were to prove fatal to the Bao Dai government when Japan suddenly surrendered to the Allies on August 15, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The use of the atomic bomb against Japan by the United States on August 6 and 9, and the removal of the French administration in Indochina by Japan on March 9, 1945 are two of the four most decisive external factors in the shaping

of events in Vietnam in the next four decades. (The other two are France's defeat in 1940, and the U.S. presidential order to American military authorities in China to block all attempts by the French to reenter Indochina in August 1945.)

THE POSTWAR STRUGGLE

On August 15, 1945, an extraordinary situation emerged in Vietnam. Japan's sudden surrender had caught everyone by surprise. The Bao Dai government found itself unprepared and impotent: it had had not enough time to establish itself firmly, and worse still, it had no armed forces at its disposal. The French troops were still interned by the Japanese, and the French officials, including the supreme head of the French administration in Indochina, Governor General Admiral Decoux, were still under detention by the Japanese; General de Gaulle was absorbed by pressing French and European affairs, and the French Expeditionary Corps was still being formed 13,000 miles away. The Japanese were no longer interested in exercising effective authority in Indochina, and the Allied forces were still weeks away. A total military, political, and administrative vacuum prevailed in Vietnam.

The vacuum could be filled by any group that was on the spot and had the organization, preparation, and leadership to take full advantage of the situation. The CPV was that group, Ho Chi Minh was that leader. A good student of Lenin, Ho Chi Minh had watched the international situation closely, and he fully realized that the United States played a key role at this time in the determination of the fate of Vietnam. For the achievement of his purpose, it was therefore vital for him to have the Americans on his side. For this he must manipulate them with skill. He did so with great success. As a result, only a few days after Japan's surrender, he was able to seize effective power, hang on to it, and consolidate it in the crucial following months.

Ho had a lead, even a long one, on the French. But the latter were bound to catch up and pose a major problem for him and his party. President Franklin Roosevelt, who had planned to place Indochina under international trusteeship, died in April 1945, and the trusteeship idea died with him. There was no mention of it at the San Francisco conference on the United Nations in June. In August General de Gaulle obtained President Harry Truman's acceptance of the idea of Indochina's return to

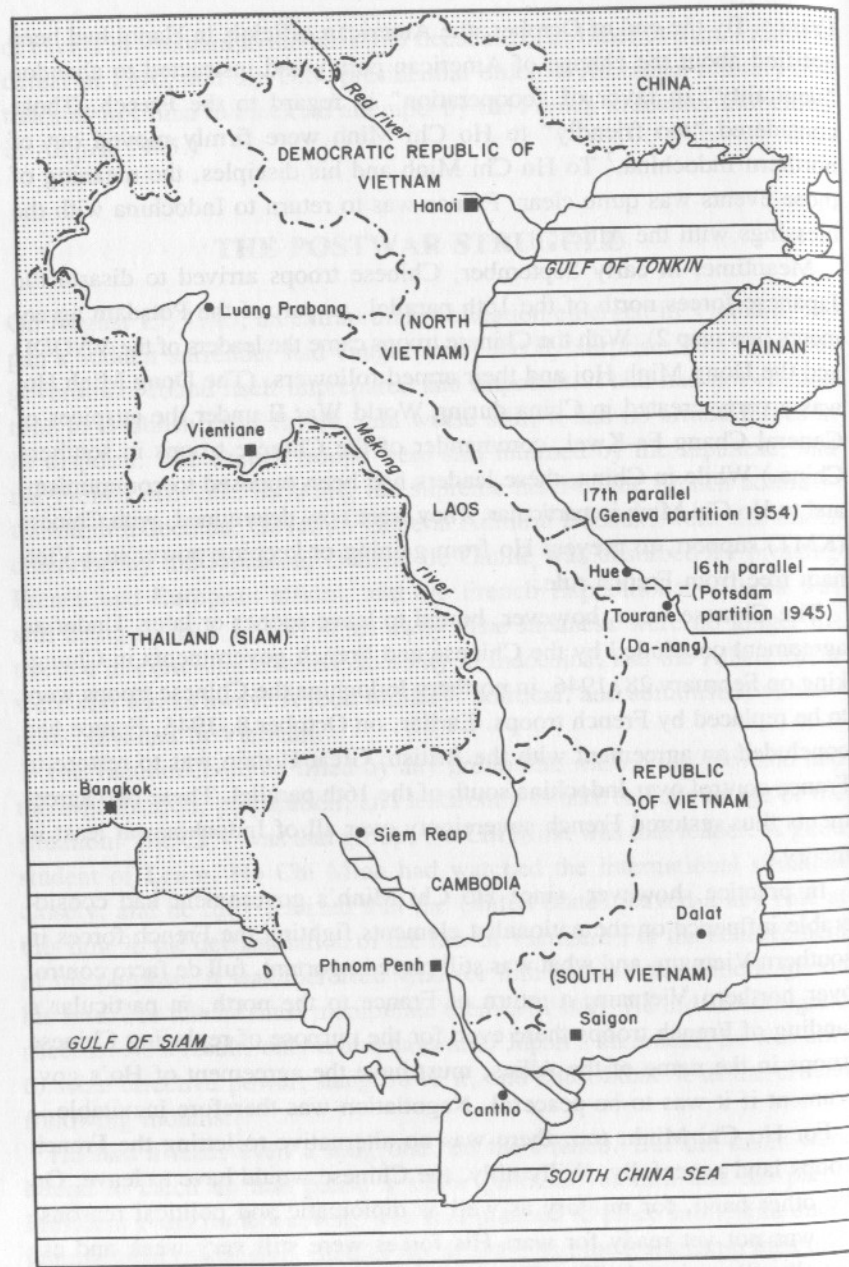
France. By the end of October, the American officials in Hanoi had been notified about the change of American policy and instructed to abandon "neutrality" in favor of "cooperation" in regard to the French. Those considered "too friendly" to Ho Chi Minh were firmly moved out of northern Indochina.⁷ To Ho Chi Minh and his disciples, the meaning of those events was quite clear. France was to return to Indochina with the blessings with the Allies.

Meantime, in early September, Chinese troops arrived to disarm the Japanese forces north of the 16th parallel, as part of the Potsdam agreements (see map 2). With the Chinese troops came the leaders of the VNQDD and the Dong Minh Hoi and their armed followers. (The Dong Minh Hoi was a party created in China during World War II under the auspices of General Chang Fa-Kwei, commander of the Chinese troops in southern China.) While in China, these leaders had been opposed to communism, and to Ho Chi Minh in particular. They were now determined, with Chinese (KMT) support, to prevent Ho from gaining or keeping power in a Vietnam free from French rule.

The Chinese were, however, bound to leave sooner or later. Under an agreement concluded by the Chinese and French governments in Chungking on February 28, 1946, in northern Indochina the Chinese troops were to be replaced by French troops. Earlier, on October 8, 1945, France had concluded an agreement with the British; Great Britain was to restore to France control over Indochina south of the 16th parallel. These two agreements thus restored French sovereignty over all of Indochina, at least in theory.

In practice, however, since Ho Chi Minh's government had considerable influence on the nationalist elements fighting the French forces in southern Vietnam, and what was still more important, full de facto control over northern Vietnam, a return of France to the north, in particular a landing of French troops there even for the purpose of replacing Chinese troops in the name of the Allies, must have the agreement of Ho's government if it was to be peaceful. Negotiation was therefore inevitable.

For Ho Chi Minh, too, there was no alternative to letting the French troops land peacefully. Willy nilly, the Chinese would have to leave. On the other hand, for military as well as diplomatic and political reasons, Ho was not yet ready for war. His forces were still very weak and especially ill-equipped. The Chinese Red Army was thousands of miles away, and in his rear Ho still had to face the Kuomintang forces. His government had no international status. And what is more important than



Map 2. Indochina in 1945/1946 (16th Parallel) and in 1954/1975 (17th Parallel).

everything else, he had not yet fully secured his government's acceptance as a nationalist government representing all the Vietnamese people. For this, he needed time for more maneuvering.

Ho's needs coincided with those of General Philippe Leclerc, commander of the French forces. Leclerc wanted French presence restored in northern Vietnam. To him, entering Hanoi was to be "the last stage of the liberation."⁸ But he wanted to do so without having to fight, at least not before French troops had entered Hanoi.

The consequence of the convergence of Ho's and Leclerc's desires was the conclusion of the Franco-Vietnamese agreement of March 6, 1946. As subsequent events were to prove clearly, these agreements, one political and one military, were only tactical moves, with mental reservations on both sides.

The political agreement, which recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as a free state within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union, did not solve the real issue.⁹ What Ho wanted was a fully independent and unified Vietnam, naturally under Communist control and free to choose its own international alignment, the natural choice being alignment with Moscow. France, on the other hand, wanted to retain sovereignty and exercise substantial powers in Vietnam through control of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union (see map 1). In any case, it wanted in Vietnam, if not a submissive, then, at least, a friendly and reliable government, and it firmly refused to entertain the idea of a Communist Vietnam in a French Union headed by a France allied to the Western powers.¹⁰ Thus nothing was really settled. Further negotiations were necessary.

The continued negotiations were held, first at Dalat in April, then at Fontainebleau near Paris in July–September. Naturally enough, they produced no result. The two sides, for obvious reasons, talked past each other. A last-minute attempt by Ho Chi Minh and Marius Moutet, the French minister for Overseas France, to save the situation by the signing of a modus vivendi on September 14 did not lead to any improvement, and the real talk was left to the canons.¹¹ This began on the night of December 19, 1946.

For a time, Ho Chi Minh's government suffered a number of disadvantages. It was isolated diplomatically, weak militarily, and in a precarious position politically. One of Ho's major concerns before he entered Hanoi in August 1945, or even while he was still in China or in the jungles of the Sino-Vietnamese border, was to secure international recognition, not only as a de facto and exclusive authority in Vietnam, but

as the official and legal government of all Vietnam, Cochinchina included. Although the position of his government had been strengthened by Bao Dai's abdication and transfer of power on August 25, 1945, its international position remained uncertain. The March 6 agreement was only preliminary. For foreign countries, especially for the United States and China, France still exercised sovereignty over Indochina. The Soviet Union was far away, and Stalin was more concerned about extending Soviet power and influence in Europe than about improving the fortunes of a small Communist party in Asia.

Militarily, although Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the armed forces of the DRV, had been able to build up an army of 60,000 men by December 1946, it was still in its formative stage, lacking arms and especially ammunitions. It was in no position to defeat, or even seriously challenge, the French Expeditionary Corps. The Chinese Communists was still three years away, and in December 1946, there was no clear indication as yet that they could defeat the Kuomintang forces and extend their control to all of China, down to the border of Vietnam. The DRV had no safe rear base, an essential condition for waging a guerilla war successfully.

Politically, although Bao Dai had transferred the "mandate of Heaven" to the DRV, and although the CPV, through the Viet-Minh (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh—Vietnam Independence League—front for the CPV, set up by Ho Chi Minh in 1940) had a large following thanks to its heavy play on the Vietnamese people's burning desire for immediate and total independence, and to its skillful exploitation of its American connections, it had not been able to secure unanimous support among the population. Furthermore, if Ho Chi Minh had obtained French recognition for his government, as far as the French were concerned, it applied only to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (i.e., Vietnam north of the 16th parallel).

Finally, Bao Dai had by this time clearly put distance between himself and Ho Chi Minh's government by staying in Hongkong, and moves were being made by other political groups to put up an anti-Communist government headed by him to challenge the legitimacy of the government led by Ho Chi Minh. If Bao Dai could wrest from the French what Ho had been unable to do—national unification of the country and full independence, or even a substantial measure of real independence—the Viet-Minh might collapse as a nationalist front, appear more obviously Communist, and consequently isolated and vulnerable.

Ho Chi Minh had therefore to hang on in the hope that the Left in

France would emerge victorious in the French coming elections and form a government that would be favorable to the RDV and make it more natural for Vietnam to stay in the French Union; or until the Chinese Communists could gain control of all China; or for a change in official Soviet policy; or for the French government to make disastrous mistakes.

The first eventuality did not materialize, and in the spring of 1947, the Communists were out of the French government. But the three other possibilities did, and this opened up tremendous avenues for the CPV.

The total victory of the Chinese Communist party (CPC) and the arrival of Chinese Communist troops on the Vietnamese borders in late 1949 provided the DRV with a colossal ally and a safe rear base. The Soviet switch of policy, from accommodation to confrontation with the West, was signalled by Zhdanov's famous speech at the founding of the Cominform in Poland, in September 1947.

Moscow's new policy put the CPV's intransigent policy in line with that of Moscow. Likewise, the elimination of the Communists from the French government made the adoption of a tough policy by the CPV look good in the eyes of the French Communist party (CPF). Finally, the French government ruined Bao Dai's and the Vietnamese anti-Communists' chances in the spring of 1947 by refusing them the political weapons they needed—immediate and total reunification and independence—in their competition with Ho's government for popular support both at home and abroad.

The combined effects of those four factors was that, now, not only the DRV was linked geographically with a vast Communist camp stretching all the way from the frontiers of Vietnam to the borders of West Germany, but also the CPV could be certain that its policy was in harmony with that of the entire Communist camp. Internally, through the Viet-Minh, which it controlled, it now fully gained the psychologically very attractive and politically very rewarding image of a nationalist party leading a people in a fierce fight for national independence. Defeat was no longer to be feared, and victory now became virtually a certainty.

The certainty became clearer after the French suffered a series of resounding reverses along the Sino-Vietnamese borders in the autumn of 1950.¹² Psychologically, for Ho's government the war was practically won because to the majority of the Vietnamese, especially the peasants who had remained skeptical or uncertain, it had now been proved that the French were beatable and that in supporting the Viet-Minh, they were sure of supporting the winner, always an extremely important consideration for the naturally cautious Vietnamese.

France could now hope to defeat the DRV only if it had strong national

will, and especially the necessary means, in particular manpower, and it had neither of these.¹³ The obvious solution to the problem of manpower shortage would be bringing the anti-Communist or non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists into the fight, by offering them immediate real independence. This the French government would not, or could not, do. Instead, after lengthy negotiations with Bao Dai, which started in the summer of 1948, France concluded an agreement on March 8, 1949, which imposed many restrictions on Vietnam's sovereignty.¹⁴ Even so, this agreement, often referred to as "the Elysee agreement," was not ratified by the French National Assembly until January 29, 1950.

The Elysee agreement convinced many Vietnamese that they had only the choice between fighting against France, which meant joining Ho Chi Minh's forces, or abstaining. Many abstained; those already in the fight fought harder. Thus, militarily and politically, the DRV's position now became more secure. Diplomatically also its position became stronger, after its recognition by Communist China and the Soviet Union in the latter half of January.

Ho Chi Minh's recognition by the Soviet Union and Communist China did not change the basic situation of Vietnam internally, but it introduced a new element internationally for, following the Soviet and Chinese move, the United States and other Western nations extended diplomatic recognition to the Bao Dai government in early February. The struggle in Vietnam now became international, a contest between two camps, East and West, which had emerged since 1947 as contestants in a "cold war."

The contest was intensified by the outbreak of the Korean War in June, when the United States became involved in Indochina as a result of President Truman's decision to accelerate the delivery of American military assistance to France and the Associated States of Indochina. The U.S. administration now accepted the French view that, in Korea and in Indochina, the United States and France were fighting the same war against the same enemy in two different theaters.¹⁵

For Ho Chi Minh and the CPV, America's involvement meant that, to win the war, not only would they have to fight harder and longer, but they also must have the firm and total support of the Communist states. It was clear that they would be able to continue their fight only so long as this support remained firm and total. As they were to find out, such was not always the case. Soviet and Chinese support was not, and could not be, absolute. China's and the Soviet Union's interests were not always the same as those of the DRV. They had their own, and larger, interests

to protect, and they made this plain in 1953–1954 by seeking a compromise peace with the West in both Korea and Indochina.

NORTH AND SOUTH VIETNAM

The Korean War was brought to an end by the signing of an armistice at Pan Mun Jom in July 1953. In the case of Vietnam, peace was restored at the Geneva Conference in July 1954. At this conference, Ho Chi Minh and the RDV had to settle for half a victory, although they had won a resounding military victory at Dien Bien Phu in May, and their position seemed quite strong. The DRV was given control of half of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel. Control was total, but it extended to less territory than before the start of the war in December 1949, when Ho Chi Minh's government had effective control of a territory extending at least to the 16th parallel (see map 2). Furthermore, Viet-Minh troops had to evacuate Cambodia as well as Laos.

If to Ho Chi Minh and the CPV total control of Vietnam and Indochina was highly desirable, to their senior partners, the Soviets and the Chinese, avoiding a wider war—in which they would be involved—was a more imperative consideration. An extension of Communist control to all of Vietnam through a continuation of the war could be achieved only at the risk of a war in which the United States would be directly involved, and in which China itself could become a victim, at a time when, after an exhaustive war in Korea, it wanted a respite to devote all its time and energy to internal development.

The Soviet Union, too, had more urgent domestic problems to resolve in the wake of Stalin's death. Moreover, it was tied to China by a defense treaty. Above all, it wanted to prevent the conclusion of a European defense treaty, which was being pressed on France by the United States. This treaty would formalize the rearmament of Germany. To Stalin's successor, preventing German rearmament—viewed as a threat to the Soviet Union in Europe—continued to be more important than total victory for a small Communist party in Asia, especially as achievement of this victory carried with it the risk of involving the Soviet Union in a war.

On the Western side, France was too tired, and especially after the recognition of full independence to Vietnam by a Franco-Vietnamese treaty signed on June 4, French public opinion saw no sense in continuing to make sacrifices in Indochina to defend a French Union that had ceased

to exist as a result of the recognition of Vietnam's full independence. As regards the United States, an effective denial of victory, or even of half a victory, to the Communists would clearly require American direct military intervention in Indochina. This intervention would be impossible without formal French invitation and full British cooperation, and neither of these was forthcoming.¹⁶

The negotiations held at Geneva ended on July 20. They resulted in the conclusion of what has commonly been referred to as "the Geneva Agreements": three separate cease-fire agreements for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and a Final Declaration, which bore no one's signature. In strict international law, such a declaration is binding for no one, a fact that was to have very important consequences.

According to the Final Declaration, the two Vietnamese parties, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam), were to hold talks from July 1955 onward to determine the modalities of the elections that were to take place in July 1956 and lead to a peaceful reunification of the country. These talks did not occur because the government of South Vietnam, headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, refused them, as his government had not signed and was therefore not a party to, and thus not bound by, the Geneva Agreements, a perfectly valid point in international law.

Since there were no talks, there were no elections, therefore no Communist victory—a victory that practically everyone had expected—and no reunification. And since the Soviet Union did not want to press the case, and no major power, China included, wanted to have war at that time, Ho Chi Minh and the CPV would have to wait and find other ways or, in Communist parlance, other forms of conquering the rest of Vietnam. This is what they were going to do in the next two decades, with great success but at horrendous costs to the country and its people.

In those two decades, Ho Chi Minh and, after his death in 1969, his disciples had to maneuver within a new and very complex international context.¹⁷ There were many major obstacles in their path; one was the presence of John Foster Dulles at the head of U.S. diplomacy. Dulles had favored strong measures including military, "massive retaliation" among them, to stop Communist expansion. He had seriously warned China against intervention in Indochina and pushed hard for the establishment of a military alliance, the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

Another major obstacle was Soviet policy. In the wake of Stalin's death (March 1953), a power struggle took place in the Soviet Union. It led to the emergence of Nikita Khrushchev, who advocated de-Stalinization at

home and peaceful existence abroad. This meant seeking detente with the United States and avoidance of armed conflicts, which could generate tensions or escalate and lead to direct confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Since any armed action in South Vietnam would require approval and backing by Moscow, the CPV would have to find a way of winning Soviet approval of an interpretation of the peaceful coexistence policy that would permit the CPV to pursue revolutionary, including armed, action in South Vietnam without thwarting Khrushchev's desire for detente with the United States. In this it had the support of China, whose leaders did not share the views on peaceful coexistence put forward by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist party of the USSR in 1956, and at the meetings of the Communist parties in 1957 and 1960.¹⁸

The conflict between the USSR and China and the necessity for Moscow to compete with Peking in maintaining its image as the leader of the world revolution gave the CPV room to maneuver. Since Moscow did not want an open break, and since Peking objected to an interpretation of peaceful coexistence as the freezing of all revolutionary activities, especially in the Third World, the CPV was able to use an interpretation of peaceful coexistence that would combine the maintenance of peace between the Soviet Union and the United States with the continuation of revolutionary struggle where conditions were favorable.

The way was open to the CPV to pursue a forward policy in South Vietnam by means and at a level that, in its view, would not provoke direct U.S. intervention in South Vietnam. From 1957 onward, the CPV accordingly added military action to political agitation, but on a limited scale, while waiting for an opportunity to escalate its military operations.

The opportunity was provided in 1960 by events in Laos, where the breakdown of a precarious peace led to a resumption of the civil war. Although Khrushchev did not want to get involved there, he had to reckon with China's militancy. China used the occasion to prove that, unlike the Soviet Union, it would not hesitate to support revolutionary movements. The CPV asserted the right of Communist parties to pursue a forward policy where a revolutionary was considered to exist. In the view of the CPV, such a situation existed in 1959, and still more so in 1960.

The resumption of the civil war in Laos led to the convening of an international conference at Geneva in May 1961. This resulted in the conclusion of an international agreement in July 1962, which forbade SEATO intervention in Laos. North Vietnam could now open a corridor along the border of Laos and Vietnam through the territory controlled by the Pathet

Lao, which was under the control of Hanoi. Through this corridor, North Vietnam could freely send troops and supplies in increasing quantities to South Vietnam to intensify its operations against the government there. Furthermore, with Peking's help, it was able to obtain from Prince Sihanouk permission to use Cambodian territory to set up passageways and bases from which to mount attacks against the South Vietnamese forces, and sanctuaries to which its troops could retreat for refuge and recuperation.

U.S. INVOLVEMENT

Hanoi's decision to embark on a forward policy in South Vietnam was based on its assessment that the situation there was "ripe" for revolution, but also, and much more, on its conviction that the United States would not intervene directly and would accept for South Vietnam the same solution as for Laos.

Hanoi's belief was based on two decisions by President John Kennedy. On the one hand, Kennedy refused to intervene directly in Laos and accepted a coalition government there as part of an international agreement reached at the Geneva Conference on Laos in July 1962. On the other hand, and this is more important still, during the conference, Kennedy authorized Averell Harriman, chief of the American delegation, to meet secretly with the North Vietnamese delegation and discover whether they were prepared to accept for South Vietnam the same solution as for Laos, i.e. a coalition government.¹⁹

To the leaders of the CPV, Harriman's approach was a clear indication that the United States was seeking for a way to disengage from Vietnam, as it had done in Laos. It followed logically that if they pressed on, they would have a very good chance of conquering South Vietnam without running too much risk. Their guesses were correct, as, according to people close to Kennedy and to the White House, the U.S. president planned to disengage from Vietnam in 1965, after his reelection.²⁰

The CPV's chances for a quick victory in South Vietnam were tremendously improved by the elimination of President Ngo Dinh Diem by the United States in November 1963. Diem had been the major obstacle to a Communist takeover. With his removal, the road to Saigon was wide open to the CPV. However, three weeks after Diem was killed, Kennedy himself was assassinated, and his plan of disengagement could not be implemented, for President Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy,

had different ideas. Johnson was determined not to allow a Communist takeover of South Vietnam, through a coalition government or otherwise.²¹

However, the South Vietnamese situation looked good to the CPV leaders in late 1963. Following the removal of Diem, South Vietnam was plunged into a state of chaos and disorganization, which facilitated Communist agitation in the cities and military operations in the countryside. By early 1965, after a series of major military reverses, South Vietnam was on the brink of collapse.

President Johnson was faced with the painful choice between letting South Vietnam fall into Communist hands or intervening more directly. He chose not only to intervene in the South, but also to attack the North. By ignoring Khrushchev's warning, the CPV leaders had brought war to North Vietnam and raised the prospects of widening the Vietnam war, with complications for China and the Soviet Union.

However, like Kennedy before him and Nixon after him, Johnson would not, or could not, do what was needed to win the war in Vietnam. Whereas the CPV fought a *total war for world stakes*, Johnson chose to fight a *limited war for local stakes*. Whereas the CPV fought for the victory of world communism, the United States fought only for the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam. Johnson made it clear, through various channels and in various ways, that he did not want a war with China and a confrontation with the Soviet Union, and especially he did not want the destruction of the Hanoi government.²²

Moscow and Peking were thus free to continue to give backing to their Vietnamese allies. This, obviously, prolonged the war, as so long as Hanoi continued to receive military and other supplies from China and/or the Soviet Union, so long it could continue to wage war. Whereas China, in furtherance of its policy of forcing the United States to seek its cooperation, encouraged Hanoi to pursue the war, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev wanted to see the war ended so that it could improve its U.S. relations. Fortunately for the DRV, Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964, and the new Soviet leadership, under Brezhnev, increased Soviet aid to the DRV to enable it to cope with U.S. intensification of the war. The situation was thus stalemated.

The stalemate lasted until February 1968, when North Vietnam, in flagrant violation of the Lunar New Year's (*Tet*) truce, staged a surprise attack against all the cities of South Vietnam, including Saigon, the capital. The spectacle of the counteroffensive waged by South Vietnamese, and especially by American, troops to eject the Communists from Saigon

and other cities, and of the vast destruction inflicted by the fighting brought directly into the bedrooms of America shook American opinion. But, above all, the audacity of the attack, and the fact of the attack itself, brought about the collapse of American morale, including that of the American Commander-in-Chief, President Johnson. Earlier, the morale of the American secretary of defense, first Robert McNamara, then Clark Clifford, had already collapsed—a remarkable situation indeed!

As a result of the Communist Tet offensive, in March 1968 Johnson decided to stop the bombing of North Vietnam, and to seriously seek peace, an “honorable peace.” This was an admission of defeat, for to seek peace in such circumstances meant to be ready to give in to the enemy’s major demands, with some device for saving appearances.

In May, during the American presidential campaign, Hanoi agreed to meet with U.S. negotiators. Paris was chosen as the site for the talks. In early November, on the eve of the U.S. presidential elections, Hanoi announced its readiness to start negotiations. Due to Saigon’s stalling, these negotiations began only after the inauguration of the new American president, Richard Nixon.

Nixon took over in 1969 and pursued the peace negotiations, but at the same time he applied a policy of withdrawal of American troops under the guise of “Vietnamization.” The American armies were leaving the battlefield before an agreement was reached in negotiations. Only defeated troops leave the battlefield before the war is over. No one was blind to that fact, least of all the CPV leaders. They knew they had definitely won the war. Now, it remained only for them to decide how to finish it off, quickly and economically. The Paris negotiations were to serve that purpose. Through these talks, they secured the total withdrawal of American troops on the one hand, and, on the other, the establishment of a coalition government in South Vietnam, and especially their right to retain their own troops there.

COMMUNIST VICTORY

The result of the negotiations was the Paris Peace Agreement of January 23, 1973, which laid the ground for North Vietnam’s final assault on South Vietnam in 1975. But, in the meantime, the CPV leaders had to reckon with a major obstacle: the possibility of a resumption of American bombing. But luck was on their side. On November 7, 1973, the U.S. Congress passed a War Powers Resolution, which seriously limited the

U.S. president’s powers to commit American armed forces to action abroad. In August 1974 a major political scandal (Watergate) forced the resignation of President Nixon, the man who would not hesitate to bomb North Vietnam savagely. Last, sentiment was growing in the U.S. Congress for total disengagement from Vietnam, including financial disengagement. This would mean turning over the South Vietnamese to Communist rule.

The combined effect of these developments, which were carefully watched and analyzed in Hanoi, was to prompt the CPV leadership to launch a massive military offensive in the spring of 1975 for the final kill.²³ It started with a surprise attack on the highland town of Ban Me Thuot on March 10. Strategic and tactical mistakes made by South Vietnam’s president Nguyen Van Thieu and his generals opened the way for a Communist quick drive toward Saigon with a force of five well-equipped divisions sent in from North Vietnam. On April 23, on the eve of the final assault against Saigon, Gerald Ford, the new U.S. president, declared that for the United States the war was finished. This, plus a refusal of the U.S. Congress to extend further financial aid to South Vietnam, was the final massive blow that completely broke the morale of the already badly shaken South Vietnamese armed forces, and it sealed the fate of the country.

The Communist forces captured Saigon on April 30. For the first time, the CPV exercised total control over all of Vietnam. A key country of Southeast Asia fell completely into Communist hands. The CPV achieved an end they had pursued since 1930, and that, as many people were soon to learn to their astonishment or their sorrow, was only part of a larger purpose: world revolution.

After capturing South Vietnam, the CPV lost no time in extending its control over neighboring Laos and Cambodia. With its help, or rather under its direction, the Lao Communists seized total power in that country, abolished the monarchy, and set up a full-fledged Communist state by the end of December. On July 17, 1977, the rulers of this new state signed with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV)—new name for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—a treaty establishing a “special relationship” between the two countries, as well as a boundary treaty whose terms were kept secret. In addition, the SRV maintained some 40,000–60,000 troops in Laos.

Attempts to exercise the same kind of control over Cambodia, however, failed. Moreover, a dispute between Cambodia and the SRV over the demarcation of the borders between the two countries, and suppressive measures taken by the Cambodian leaders against the pro-Vietnam-

ese elements of the Communist party of Kampuchea (CPK), led to armed conflict between the two countries in 1975–1978, and to full-scale war in the late 1979. The SRV invaded Cambodia in force, occupied Phnom Penh, where, on January 8, it set up a puppet government under Heng Samrin, a Communist who had fled earlier to Vietnam to avoid liquidation by Pol Pot, head of the Communist government and party of Cambodia. On February 17 the SRV signed with the new Cambodian government a treaty that established between Vietnam and Cambodia the same kind of “special relationship” as that existing between Laos and Vietnam.

The blatant invasion of Cambodia and its total domination brought the SRV into conflict with China. Sino-Vietnamese relations had deteriorated since Peking reversed its policy of enmity toward the United States and invited President Nixon to China in 1972. They deteriorated still further after the CPV victory in 1975, which was followed by conflict between the two countries over the delimitation of their borders and over Vietnamese policy toward Chinese residents in Vietnam. Moreover, China strongly and clearly objected to Vietnam’s total and exclusive control over Laos and especially Cambodia, whose government had placed itself under Chinese protection. Vietnam’s massive invasion of Cambodia with some 180,000 troops was followed by Chinese massive attack along the northern borders of Vietnam in February–March 1979.

To forestall a Chinese attack, the SRV had earlier secured assurances of Soviet support, first by joining Comecon in June 1978, then by signing a treaty of “friendship” on November 3. The treaty contained clauses of a clearly military character and was obviously directed at China. The SRV had now placed itself squarely on the Soviet side in the Sino-Soviet conflict, and had become an enemy of China.

The SRV invasion of Cambodia and establishment of a puppet government there had another consequence: it brought the SRV into conflict with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in particular with Thailand. To secure full control of Cambodia, the SRV had to send troops to the Thai border. Sooner or later these forces would be involved in armed clashes with Thai forces. In such a situation, Thailand naturally had to seek the support of its ASEAN fellow members, as well as that of China. It obtained both.

Although some ASEAN countries, in particular Malaysia and Indonesia, feared and distrusted China and saw in Vietnam an obstacle to China’s march southward, they could not refuse to support Thailand against Vietnam. This was a matter of principle as well as self-interest. The SRV’s

blatant invasion of Cambodia was an act of aggression, and what the SRV did in Cambodia could well be repeated against other ASEAN members.

The ASEAN governments therefore denounced the SRV’s invasion of Cambodia in increasingly strong terms and demanded the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from that country. On the other hand, to prevent the SRV from consolidating its hold on Cambodia, they extended diplomatic support to the anti-Vietnamese Cambodian government, and political and military aid to the Cambodian forces battling the SRV occupation troops.

In giving full support to Cambodia, the ASEAN countries had become *de facto* allies of China, with which, through Thailand, they coordinated their actions at the United Nations and elsewhere. With such support given the anti-Cambodian forces, the SRV could not hope to establish full control over Cambodia in a short time, if ever. The SRV was therefore getting bogged down in a long war in Cambodia, and likewise in Laos, where anti-Vietnamese forces backed by China and Thailand were also operating.

Involved in another protracted war, just after thirty years of already devastating war against France and the United States, the SRV could not continue for long and without total exhaustion without external help. And the only country from which it could obtain help for war to extend its power in Southeast Asia was the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union would not give something for nothing. In return for its aid, Moscow extracted political and economic, as well as military concessions: full alignment on the Soviet Union’s position in foreign policy, economic integration into the Soviet bloc through Comecon, and in particular, use of air and naval bases in Vietnam by the Soviet Union. The SRV had no choice but to bow to Soviet wishes. This introduced Russian military presence into Southeast Asia for the first time in history. It is clear, however, that even with extensive Soviet help, the SRV could not easily finish off Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the development of the country, which had seriously been neglected during the previous thirty years of war, could not be pursued successfully. After ten years of CPV rule, Vietnam became the poorest country in Southeast Asia, and one of the poorest countries in the world. The prospects of rapid, or even moderate, improvement were extremely poor so long as the CPV leaders persisted in pursuing policies that kept the SRV at war and isolated in the world.

It is against this setting that the foreign politics of the CPV must be considered. Particular actions taken by the CPV leaders at particular times

in regard to particular individuals or groups of people especially must be viewed.

In the next two chapters, we examine the backgrounds and basic views of the men who were responsible for formulating and implementing CPV policy, first Ho Chi Minh, then the other leaders of the party.

2

Founder, Teacher, and Leader— Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh has been acknowledged by his disciples as “the founder, organizer, teacher, educator, and leader” of the Communist party of Vietnam, as “the supreme leader” of the party, “the man who has guided it in its efforts to develop its forces and to forge its victories.”¹ On the day of his funeral, these disciples, through the voice of Le Duan, secretary general of the party, vowed to become “worthy disciples of President Ho Chi Minh.”² Thus even after his death, Ho Chi Minh continued to guide the CPV’s thoughts and actions.

Without a good knowledge of Ho Chi Minh’s life, thoughts, and personality, it is not possible to have a full understanding of Vietnamese communism. It is appropriate, then, to begin a study of the foreign politics of the Communist party of Vietnam with a study of Ho Chi Minh himself. This is not an easy task, for Ho Chi Minh, true to Lenin’s teaching about the necessity of secrecy, always took great care to surround himself with mystery. Those who have devoted much time to the study of Ho’s biography bemoan the fact that there are many obscurities and uncertainties concerning his life.³ Some of these can now be eliminated thanks to recent Vietnamese publications,⁴ but many others are likely to remain for some time.

EARLY YEARS

The uncertainties start with Ho’s birth date. No one can say with absolute certainty when Ho was born. Several dates have been given: 1895, 1894, 1892, 1890.⁵ But in 1983 two Vietnamese scholars, going through the French National Archives, section Outre Mer, stumbled on a letter written