

CUỘC ĐẤU TRANH GIÀNH ĐỘC LẬP DÂN TỘC, 1885-1957

The Struggle for National Independence

Cần Vương and the first Patriotic Movements

For Vietnamese people, *cuộc đấu tranh giành độc lập dân tộc* – “the struggle to win national independence” (or just *đấu tranh* – “struggle” – for short) began in 1885. This was a year after the Treaty of Huế had ended the (fiercely contested) war of conquest by France (1847-84), by which the French had commandeered Indochina as a French Protectorate, dividing it into five ‘countries’ – Cambodia, Laos, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin (ie what is now the country of Vietnam was split into three).

The 12-year-old King, Hàm Nghi, fled to the mountains, where he issued the Proclamation *Cần Vương* (‘help the King’), starting a general uprising; the proclamation changed the nature of resistance from a war of governments into a popular nationalist rebellion. Hàm Nghi was captured and exiled in 1888, but the *Cần Vương* fought a guerrilla war until 1897.

The French set up a puppet administration and exploited the country for its cheap labour, rubber, tea and mineral resources. An elite of wealthy landowners were established, who lived in luxury in French style. The peasantry, by contrast, were subjected to high taxes, extortionate rents and forced labour; French plantations and mines had their own jails, and they arrested, tortured and flogged as they pleased.

Resistance, however, continued. After the defeat of *Cần Vương*, Phan Bội Châu, one of its leaders, set up a succession of revolutionary groups – including the *Duy Tân Hội* (Modernisation Association, 1904) and the *Quảng Phúc* (Restoration Association, 1912). A country-wide tax strike in 1908-09 was brutally suppressed, and there were multiple armed uprisings and mutinies in the years 1909-21. The *Việt Quốc* (Vietnamese National Party), founded in 1927, conducted a campaign of assassinations, culminating in the unsuccessful Yen Bai Mutiny in 1930-31. In this period, thousands of Vietnamese were executed or imprisoned on Con Son island (which consequently became a spawning ground of revolutionary ideas).

In 1921, Phan Bội Châu, meanwhile, had discovered Socialism, and opened talks with leaders of the new Soviet Union. In 1925, he was arrested trying to visit another Vietnamese revolutionary, based in China, going by the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, who had persuaded a revolutionary group called *Tam Tam Xa* to form the basis of a new Communist group called the *Thanh Niên Cách Mạng Đồng Chí Hội* (Young Revolutionaries' Association). This grew, and in Feb 1930 Nguyễn Ái Quốc chaired the Conference (and drafted the Charter) which founded the Communist Party of Vietnam (Feb 1930), which then became the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP, Oct 1930). In this way the independence movement changed its nature a second time, merging Vietnamese nationalism with Marxist ideology, and embracing class struggle, revolutionary violence, mass mobilisation and the violent overthrow of the colonial administration.



Cách mạng Tháng Tám (The August Revolution), 1945

The 1930s Depression hit hard upon a population that was already impoverished. The price of rice dropped by a third, ruining the peasant farmers. There were large-scale lay-offs in the mines and plantations. France, desperate to protect its business interests in the region, made large loans to the companies and landowners ... who then placed the burden upon the peasants to pay the interest. There was a famine in northern Vietnam.

Trade Unions and strikes were illegal, and strikers were shot ... yet still the ICP was able to form underground unions, and by 1931 there were huge nation-wide workers' strikes, along with peasant demonstrations totalling half a million people in Tonkin and Amman – led, again, by the ICP. When the farmers of Vinh held a demonstration for May Day 1930, colonial troops and airplanes fired on them, killing 217; the result was uprisings across the province of Nghe-Tinh. The colonial administrators fled, colonial government collapsed, and the villages set up their own local governments (which the ICP called 'soviets'), self-defence militias and schools. Debts and taxes were declared to be abolished and – where landlords had fled – their land was redistributed.

The Nghe-Tinh uprising and the soviets were brutally put down by the Foreign Legion; the Secretary-General of the ICP was tortured to death. The French promised reforms, set up a 'government' and brought back the 'emperor' Bao Dai from exile in France ... but when the 'government's' Interior Minister, Ngô Đình Diệm (who had led the repression of the soviets), proposed a Vietnamese parliament, his proposal was rejected. He resigned and left for a Catholic monastery in America, from where he set up a secret party: The Association for the Restoration of Vietnam.

In the repression of 1931 the ICP was nearly extinguished by arrests and executions. It survived, however, directed from China by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, partly because the local population hid its members. In 1933 it set up a newspaper, *Trung Lập* ('Neutrality'). It held mass-meetings. It even won a few seats on the Saigon town council in elections.

Faced by the rise of fascism in Europe, in 1936-39 France elected a 'Popular Front' government – an alliance of socialist, left-wing and moderate parties. The French government stopped persecuting the ICP which, following suit, resolved in 1936 to tone down its demands from: "overthrow French imperialism" and "confiscate the landlords lands and distribute them to the peasants", to a more moderate policy seeking democratic liberties, labour legislation, reduction of rents and limited land reform. It succeeded in winning an 8-hour working day, paid holidays, 8-weeks maternity leave, and the release of many political prisoners. In 1938 it set up a Unified Democratic Front to rally the left against fascism. In this way the ICP became the standard-bearer for Vietnamese nationalism and democracy.

The outbreak of war in 1939 saw a Japanese invasion, followed by a dirty deal by which the French were allowed to administer Indochina on behalf of the Japanese. Under the French Governor General Admiral Decoux, a double burden was placed on the Vietnamese population. In addition to their colonial obligations, Vietnam now supplied millions of tonnes of rice to the Japanese army; to pay for this, the Japanese simply printed hundreds of millions of piastres, which thereby became worthless. When US bombers cut off the supply of coal, the administration used rice and maize to fuel the power stations. Starting in 1943, a famine killed 2 million people.

In 1941, Nguyễn Ái Quốc returned to Vietnam. Changing his name to Hồ Chí Minh, he created the Việt Minh (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội* – League for the Independence of Vietnam) and led a resistance movement. It had massive support, especially since it raided government depots and redistributed the rice to the population. 'Liberation Committees' were set up at village, district and province level. By 1944 the revolutionary 'Army for Propaganda and Liberation' was in control of central and, by 1945, northern Vietnam.

On 13 August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Americans. Just three days later, the Viet Minh National Congress resolved "to wrest power from the hands of the Japanese and the puppet government before the arrival of allied troops in Indochina".

"The decisive hour for the destiny of our nation has struck", declared Hồ Chí Minh. "Under the banner of the Viet Minh, March courageously forward!" Emperor Bao Dai abdicated on 25 August and, on 2 September, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Hanoi.

Kháng chiến chống Pháp (Resistance War against France), 1946–54

Proclaiming independence is one thing; achieving it is another.

The famine of 1943-44 was compounded in 1945 by flooding, followed by a drought ... except in 1945-46, it was met with the enthusiasm of independence. There was a nationwide campaign to plant every available space with short-term crops which more than trebled food production. People responded to an appeal to share food, so no one starved. 11 million work-days were found to repair the dykes for rice-growing. 2 million people were taught to read and write. A new currency, the dong, was introduced to replace the worthless piastres. In 1946, when President Hồ Chí Minh called for whole-nation elections, 90% of the electorate went to the polls – even in the South, which was by that time occupied by the French.

The new state was assailed from the start. Northern Vietnam was occupied by a Chinese army of 200,000, which (successfully) demanded a place in the government for pro-Chinese organisations. Worse, in the South, helped by 4,000 British troops, the French began a war of reconquest. In February, they made an agreement with the Chinese and took control of northern Vietnam also. At this point, in March 1946, Hồ Chí Minh agreed a truce: he would accept a French army of occupation, in return for a ceasefire and the recognition of the Republic of Vietnam ... to which the French agreed.

The French, however, made no attempt to keep their promises. They declared Cochinchina a colony, reorganised South Vietnam as an autonomous republic and military zone, and introduced the franc as currency. On 20 November 1946, the French Navy shelled the port of Haiphong, and the French army marched inland. In Hanoi, in December, French troops occupied the Ministries of Finance and Communications and, when the people erected barricades to stop them, demanded military control of the city.

Therefore, on 19 December 1946, Hồ Chí Minh, who only in August had been in France making concessions to the French, now called to the nation for a war:

“As we desired peace, we made concessions. But the more concessions we made, the further the French colonialists went, because they are resolved to invade our country once again...

We would rather sacrifice all than lose our country and be enslaved. All the Vietnamese must stand up to fight the French colonialists to save the fatherland. The hour for national salvation has struck.

Even if we have to endure the hardest privations and greatest sufferings we are ready to make every sacrifice. Victory will surely be ours.”

The French were expecting a quick victory; it was, as the Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp said: “grasshopper fights elephant”. But it took the French two months to expel the Hanoi Regiment – a makeshift force of 2,000 young men, armed with 1,500 ancient rifles, against 6,500 professional soldiers – from Hanoi.

The Vietnamese retreated into the hills. In 1947 the French organised a massive campaign with 20,000 troops; it was repulsed with heavy losses. The next year, therefore, they concentrated on ‘pacification and cleaning-up’ in the South, razing entire villages; the Vietnamese set up ‘resistance villages’ and countered with guerrilla attacks, and the French were losing 1,000 men a month. By the end of the war there were 250,000 French troops in Vietnam, in addition to which the French raised a puppet army of 150,000 in southern Vietnam.

In 1949, the fortunes of the War turned with the successful Communist revolution in China. Both China and the USSR recognised the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and supplied food, weapons and military ‘advisers’. China also offered a safe place where Vietnamese soldiers could hide and train.

The Vietnamese founded the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), and went on the offensive. By 1950 there were whole areas of the country under their control. A renewed French Offensive in 1951 was stopped at the battle of Hòa Bình, and their ambitious plan to conquer the north (with massive American aid) in 1953-54 was destroyed at the decisive Battle of Điện Biên Phủ .

At Điện Biên Phủ every bit of the French imperialists’ will for reconquest was smashed forever. In July 1954 the Geneva Agreements recognised the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam. A dividing line at the 17th parallel divided a completely-liberated the northern zone from the South, where the struggle for national and communist revolution continued against US imperialism and its puppets.

Building the First Bases of Socialism and renewed revolutionary war, 1950-63

Even as it resolved on 16 August 1945 to become “masters of the country”, the National Congress adopted a 10-point programme which included: human and civil rights (including the vote, racial & gender equality); “to distribute communal land equitably, reduce rents”; labour legislation & social security; and to build up the economy and a national education system. The government immediately: redistributed to the peasants all the communal lands and the lands confiscated from colonialists and traitors; reduced rents by 25%; introduced an 8-hour day; allowed unions and the right to strike; nationalised key industries; and abolished the poll-tax, forced buying of opium & alcohol, and the salt monopoly.

It was impossible for the new government to do everything at once, and social reform had to progress at a slower pace than the safeguarding of national independence. The Second National Congress of the ICP (February 1951) – renaming itself *Đảng Lao Động* (the Vietnam Workers Party: VWP) – adopted two key principles for the Resistance:

1. “a firm rear” – securing North Vietnam as a strong base for the liberation of the South.
2. “Everything for the Front, everything for victory.” – ie integrating diplomatic, ideological, social, economic and military measures into a single, coordinated struggle.

This meant, not a reduced, but an increased effort on the social and economic fronts. A Three-Year Plan (1958-60) saw huge increases in the production of rice, electricity and coal. Work was started repairing the roads, railway lines and irrigation schemes damaged by the war with France. Modern factories were built, and an ‘emulation’ propaganda and rewards programme encouraged people to work harder. A new National Bank was established in 1951, and trade links were developed with China. Meanwhile, the prices of rice, cloth and salt were reduced and taxes were lowered ... yet the growth in the economy meant that tax receipts increased and, in 1951, for the first time, exceeded government spending.

A programme of Land Reform was conducted in 1953-56 which confiscated land from landlords and the rich and “roused great enthusiasm in the peasant masses, in the army and in the entire people”. Agricultural cooperatives were introduced, followed by full collectivization by 1960. Schools were built, a campaign to achieve universal primary education was launched, and adult education encouraged; schools taught Marxist ideology and nationalism, as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. The brightest students were sent to Chinese and Soviet universities to train as technicians. There were the beginnings of better health care and sanitation; what was available was free.

Politically, the government included some non-Communists in the cabinet and the National Assembly ... though the *Lao Động* party was in the majority and the Politburo controlled policy. Propaganda was regarded as a key tool to educate the masses in the benefits of communism, but traitors and reactionaries were sent for re-education, and the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen paramilitary organisations were proscribed.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile, Diệm – brought back from the US by the Americans, and with their financial and military aid – refused to hold the elections promised by the Geneva Accords, and instead began a blood-thirsty repression. Vietnamese historian Nguyen Khac Vien recorded how “Diệm and his brothers and sister-in-law lorded it over the country and held power of life and death over the people”, with “mass slaughters, tortures, deportations, mass detentions, mopping-up of vast areas” and whole villages deported to build ‘agrovilles’ in rural and mountain regions. In 1959, ‘Law 10-59’ “empowered special military tribunals to try and execute, on the spot and without delay, anyone arrested by the police or captured during a mop-up operation”. An uprising in the Mekong delta, and an attempted military coup in 1960, were signs of “a regime deeply undermined”.

In 1959, therefore, the *Lao Động* party secretly passed ‘Resolution 15’, agreeing to renew the ‘people’s war’ in the South, and in 1960 nationalist opposition groups in South Vietnam merged into the National Front for Liberation (NFL). NFL resistance groups killed Diệm’s officials; sabotaged bridges, railways, roads & canals; destroyed public facilities such as medical aid stations & schools; and hijacked shipments of food, hospital supplies & equipment. Shortly after, the ‘559 Group’ was created to open the Trường Sơn supply route – the massive, long-term trail through Laos and Cambodia that became the backbone of the Vietnamese war.

By 1963, the NFL’s ‘Liberation Army of South Vietnam’ (called the ‘Viecong’ by the Diệm regime) had grown into a significant force, and in January 1963 it was able to defeat the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) at Ap Bac, less than 40 miles from Saigon. By 1963, the NFL controlled nearly four-fifths of the country with two-thirds of the population, the Diệm regime was deeply hated and the ARVN was demoralised.

Cuộc Kháng Chiến chống Mỹ (Resistance War against America), 1963-75

Some modern historians interpret the post-1954 Vietnamese conflict as the clash of two rival patriotisms – Diệm’s versus Hồ Chí Minh’s. The North Vietnamese of the time, however, were convinced that what they were witnessing – even in the 1950s – was American imperialism, using the South Vietnamese as a puppet regime.

In North Vietnam, therefore, attitudes were caught between two conflicting considerations. The first was the determination to unite Vietnam by liberating the South. The second was the fear of provoking an American invasion which would lose them the North. This dichotomy was mirrored by a division in the Politburo, between the ‘South-firsters’ who wanted to intervene, and the ‘North-firsters’ (including Hồ Chí Minh and Giáp) who urged caution and a ‘protracted’ war accompanied by diplomacy. Up until 1962, the North-firsters held the upper hand; in July *Lao Động* General Secretary Lê Duẩn wrote to the insurgents in the South, explaining the importance of political as well as military struggle. Besides which, he commented, since the NFL was winning battle after battle, there was hope that the USA would ‘throw in the towel’.

This all changed in November 1963 when the CIA, seeing Diệm’s regime disintegrating and uncompliant, organised his assassination and replacement by a military junta. Shrouded in secrecy (we still do not know what really happened – there was clearly a vigorous debate), the 9th Plenum of the *Lao Động* party met almost immediately. Lê Duẩn and other powerful Politburo members argued that Diệm’s assassination was a prelude to American intervention, and that they should try to win the war before the USA could send their troops. The South-firsters won the debate, and PAVN troops moved south to support the Liberation Army. In the event, the South-firsters were correct – in 1964 the US used the Gulf of Tonkin incident to fabricate a pretext to intervene.

Supported by the PAVN, the NFL forces abandoned guerrilla tactics, and scored significant victories in conventional battles against the ARVN at Bình Giã (December 1964) and Đồng Xoài (June 1965). But there were 200,000 US troops in Vietnam by December 1965 and, when the PAVN took on US forces at Ia Drang (November 1965), they suffered heavy casualties. Meanwhile, the US launched massive bombing raids on the North, promising to bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age.

The North had been planning for this, and it was ready. For the moment it had to pause hopes of a quick conventional military victory. But anti-aircraft weaponry had been supplied by China; the Trường Sơn supply route ensured the flow of supplies to the guerrilla fighters in the South; Operation Sơ Tấn (Evacuation) moved factories, schools, laboratories, hospitals, technicians, civil servants and employees into the mountains; and each province had plans in place to become self-sufficient in food and everyday goods – if necessary, on a handicraft basis. The USA’s huge ‘search-and-destroy’ operations were continuously harassed and attacked, and achieved nothing; as soon as they cleared an area and moved on, the NFL forces moved back in. By 1967, both sides judged that the war had reached a stalemate.

In Hanoi, the Politburo was again riven by disagreements between the North-firsters and the South-firsters. In the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair, hundreds of North-firsters were arrested, accused of sabotage and treason, and imprisoned. Lê Duẩn and the South-firsters were then able to pass Resolution 14, declaring *Tổng Công Kích/Tổng Khởi Nghĩa* (General Offensive/General Uprising – TCK/TKN) for a “decisive victory”.

In January, therefore, the PAVN and NFL forces launched the Tet Offensive.

Although it was not admitted at the time, recent historical research has found that it was all a bit of a muddle. The General who devised the attack, Nguyễn Chí Thanh, died of a heart attack the evening after securing its approval. It was meant to be a surprise attack, yet the Americans knew about it, yet it still took them by surprise. It was never really made clear whether the campaign was to be a series of short-sharp attacks over an extended period, or an all-out attempt for a decisive victory; the need for secrecy seems to have kept many officers and units in the dark. It was meant to begin on 30 January, but the attack on the important military base at Khe Sanh was launched on 21 January (no one really knows why).

The Tet attack scored some huge successes – the US Embassy in Saigon was captured and held out for 6 hours; the city of Huế was occupied and held out for 25 days; and the US forces abandoned Khe Sanh. The Americans sacked their Chief of Staff (General Westmoreland) and his successor (General Abrams) dialled back operations from ‘search-and-destroy’ in NFL-held areas to ‘clearing-and-holding’ the US-occupied areas around Saigon. President Johnson decided not to stand for re-election and his successor, President Nixon, started to pull out US troops and introduced the policy of ‘Vietnamisation’ (letting the ARVN do the fighting). The Tet offensive is often credited with being the event which made the Americans realise they could not win the war.

At the same time, however, the Tet campaign decimated the North Vietnamese forces. 45,000 PAVN/NFL were killed – almost half the number of the fighters who had participated, including many of their best guerrilla fighters, and most of their officers. It took the PAVN four years to rebuild its fighting capacity. Also, much NFL-controlled territory in South Vietnam had been lost, and PAVN fighters had to be transferred down to plug the gaps in the NFL. The Politburo declared the Offensive to be a huge victory – proof that the PAVN could take on the might of the USA. But in April 1969, it issued Directive 55: ‘Never again are we going to risk our entire military force’, and on 3 April it opened negotiations with the Americans’ new President, Richard Nixon.

Western historians represent Nixon as the President who took the USA out of the Vietnam War by using ‘Vietnamisation’ to ‘bring the boys home’, and mass-bombing to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. The Vietnamese saw him just as yet another President who ‘talked peace and made war’. For them, ‘Vietnamisation’ was just a trick to continue the war whilst reducing American casualties and making the war more palatable to the US public. They regarded his bombing campaign (including the use of Agent Orange and napalm), and his invasion of Cambodia and Laos, as “Nixon's warmongering and adventurist policy” and an escalation of the War “in the hope of imposing his diktat”. It was the Vietnamese, not Nixon, who in July 1971 presented a realistic 7-point plan for the settlement of the war!

Nixon’s ‘Vietnamisation’ failed, its failure made clear in 1972 by the success of the PAVN’s Spring-Summer Campaign (*Chiến dịch Xuân–Hè*) which forced him to ‘re-Americanise’ the war with a mass-bombing campaign to save the ARVN. In September, the North Vietnamese again proposed a realistic solution but, just as negotiations in Paris were about to be concluded, the Americans and South Vietnamese governments demanded 126 changes to the agreement reached. Having failed to force the Vietnamese negotiators to accept his terms, on 18 December Nixon launched another mass-bombing campaign. Huge losses of planes, along with international condemnation, however, forced him to agree the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973.

The Final Collapse of the Neo-Colonial Regime

The Paris Accords:

- Divided North and South Vietnam at the 17th Parallel
- Secured US withdrawal.
- Recognised the NLF’s political status.
- Left hundreds of thousands of northern troops in the South.

The Lao Động Party never intended the Accords to be the solution for Vietnam. Whilst the DRV issued its commanders with the ‘Five Forbids’ – don’t attack, don’t resist enemy attacks, don’t surround enemy positions, don’t shell enemy positions, don’t construct defences – NLF forces seized rural territory, surrounded cities, and disrupted ARVN supply routes, knowing that without US troops and with declining US aid, the Saigon regime was steadily weakening.

Lê Duẩn now secured Resolution 21 (1973) calling for the armed overthrow of the Southern regime by means of coordinated conventional offensives supported by political uprisings.

In March 1975, the final campaign began. What was planned as a multi-phase offensive became a rapid succession of victories, as the ARVN collapsed faster than expected. City after city fell and in early April, the Politburo was able to order the ‘Ho Chi Minh Campaign’ to seize Saigon.

On 30 April 1975, NVA tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace. The South Vietnamese regime surrendered. The war ended in the total victory that Hồ Chí Minh had envisioned in 1941 (though he did not live to see it).

For the *Lao Động*, this was not merely a national triumph. It was the historical vindication of Marxist-Leninist strategy, and of the national determination of the Vietnamese people. They saw the War as a unity stretching from resistance to the French in the 1880s, to the expulsion of the American puppet regime in 1975, the result of decades of sacrifice culminating in the liberation of Vietnam, the defeat of imperialism, and the reunification of the homeland under the red flag.