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s in Asia

The first meal we ate was boiled cucumber. There was no meat at all. . . .

After the marriage I mostly stayed at home, weaving cotton cloth and selling it for more cotton. When necessary I did farm work in the fields, especially at harvest time when I cut crops. Our life gradually got better. We raised a donkey and a pig. Sometimes we even ate meat.

VIETNAM AND THE PATH TO NATIONAL LIBERATION

The Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism was almost a century old at the end of World War II. Incursions by missionaries, gunboats, and diplomats in the course of the nineteenth century had set off repeated bouts of resistance inspired by a loyalty to the Vietnamese monarchy and Confucian values. The turn of the century was a time of transition with the Vietnamese resentful but also filled with self-doubts and with French enterprise and culture making a major imprint on the major cities and in the countryside. Out of this period of change emerged a resistance of a new sort — self-consciously nationalist and increasingly radical. World War II brought a Japanese occupation that not only disrupted French rule but also punctured French prestige. The war thus provided an opening that the resistance seized, preparing the way for a declaration of independence shortly after Japanese surrender and the beginning of an anti-colonial war in 1946 when Paris insisted on restoring full control.

3.4

Ho Chi Minh Discovers Communist Anti-Colonialism

Ho Chi Minh, the founder of Vietnam's Communist Party and its leader through almost four tumultuous decades of nearly incessant struggle for national liberation and unity, never found an Edgar Snow to record his life. From the available fragments we know that he was born in 1890 in the northern and markedly anti-French Nghe An province to a well-to-do, anti-French family. Ho's father, trained in the Confucian classics, refused to work in the French administration, while Ho and his siblings all engaged in anti-colonial activities. Ho himself was schooled in both the classics and the new Western subjects introduced by the French. In 1915 he left Vietnam to explore the sources of the West's power, settling in Paris. There as an activist in the nascent Vietnamese independence movement, he appealed to the victors of World War I to honor the principle of self-determination promoted by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Their indifference led him in turn to involvement in the French Socialist Party and then in the founding of the French Communist Party.

In the process of searching for external support for the Vietnamese cause, Ho chanced upon the writings of Lenin. His description of that moment of illumination in 1920 did not take shape until forty years later when he prepared a piece on the occasion of Lenin's ninetieth birthday that appeared in a Soviet journal. Reading this recollection, a cynic might wonder if Ho did not exaggerate his en-

thusiasm for Lenin to impress his senior and more powerful allies whose support Vietnam still needed. An even more subversive voice says that Ho could not have clearly remembered an event some forty years earlier. Taking his account at face value, what seems to have led Ho to Marxism and the Soviet model? How do his early preoccupations compare to those of the young Mao? What alternative paths had they considered and found wanting?

"The Path Which Led Me to Leninism"

1960

After World War One, I made my living in Paris, at one time as an employee at a photographer's, at another as painter of "Chinese antiques" (turned out by a French shop). I often distributed leaflets denouncing the crimes committed by the French colonialists in Viet Nam.

At that time, I supported the October Revolution¹ only spontaneously. I did not yet grasp all its historic importance. I loved and respected Lenin because he was a great patriot who had liberated his fellow-countrymen; until then, I had read none of his books. . . .

Heated discussions were then taking place in the cells of the Socialist Party, about whether one should remain in the [Socialist] Second International, found a "Second-and-a-half" International or join Lenin's Third [Moscow-based Communist] International[.] I attended the meetings regularly, two or three times a week, and attentively listened to the speakers. . . .

What I wanted most to know — and what was not debated in the meetings — was: which International sided with the peoples of the colonial countries?

I raised this question — the most important for me — at a meeting. Some comrades answered: it was the Third, not the Second International. One gave me to read Lenin's "Theses on the national and colonial questions" [1920]. . . .

In those Theses, there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again finally I was able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment and confidence they communicated to me! I wept for joy. Sitting by myself in my room, I would shout as if I were addressing large crowds: "Dear martyr compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to liberation!" . . .

. . . [F]rom then on, I . . . plunged into the debates and participated with fervour in the discussions. Though my French was still too weak to express all my thoughts, I hit hard at the allegations attacking Lenin and the Third International. My only argument was: "If you do not condemn colonialism, if you do not side with the colonial peoples, what kind of revolution are you then waging?"

¹The 1917 seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Ho Chi Minh, "The Path Which Led Me to Leninism," April 1960, in Ho, *Selected Writings (1920-1969)* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1973), 250-51.

3.5

Ho Declares Vietnamese Independence

After his Leninist revelation in 1920, Ho went to work for the Communist International in Moscow, laboring as an itinerant political organizer among Vietnamese living overseas, especially in China and Thailand. He paid special attention to recruiting young Vietnamese radicals in the mid-1920s and to bringing together rival communist groups in 1930 into what was called the Indochina Communist Party. The outbreak of war in the Pacific created an opportunity for him as it did for Mao. In 1941 Ho proclaimed the founding of the Viet Minh, a broad-based organization which quickly established itself as the leading anti-Japanese and anti-French resistance force. The sudden surrender of the Japanese in August 1945 gave him the chance to occupy Hanoi and declare Vietnam an independent state. He was aware, however, of French military strength and sought to negotiate a transitional arrangement with the French to avoid conflict, all the while appealing to President Truman to make good on the promise of self-determination that the Americans had once again made central to their publicly stated war aims.

Ho's declaration of independence on September 2 was a dramatic moment attended by an enormous crowd in central Hanoi. On what grounds did Ho base his claim? Who was his audience — perhaps overseas as well as at home — and how did he seek to win support from different groups? How well does this document mesh with the Leninist values that Ho claims to have espoused during his residence in Paris?

Statement Read in Hanoi

September 2, 1945

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." . . .

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

Politically, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty.

They have enforced inhuman laws; they have set up three different political regimes in the North, the Centre and the South of Viet Nam in order to wreck our country's oneness and prevent our people from being united.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly massacred our patriots. They have drowned our uprisings in seas of blood.

They have fettered public opinion and practised obscurantism.

They have weakened our race with opium and alcohol.

In the field of economics, they have sucked us dry, driven our people to destitution, and devastated our land. . . .

We, the Provisional Government of the new Viet Nam, representing the entire Vietnamese people, hereby declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; cancel all treaties signed by France on Viet Nam, and abolish all privileges held by France in our country.

The entire Vietnamese people are of one mind in their determination to oppose all wicked schemes by the French colonialists.

We are convinced that the Allies . . . cannot fail to recognize the right of the Vietnamese people to independence.

A people who have courageously opposed French enslavement for more than eighty years, a people who have resolutely sided with the Allies against the fascists during these last years, such a people must be free, such a people must be independent.

3.6

Vietnamese Peasants Reflect on the Communist Appeal

Like China, Vietnam's population at mid-century was overwhelmingly rural. It was also, like China's, geographically diverse. Peasants in the north had responded earliest to Communist appeals, beginning with a rebellion in 1930–1931 in Ho's home region. While ultimately crushed by the French, it convinced the party of the depth of peasant anger over the injustices and deprivation they faced on a daily basis. The Viet Minh actively recruited peasants during wartime and demonstrated that village support could sustain a guerrilla campaign over a long period of time, a lesson applied in struggles against French and later American forces.

The accounts that follow capture peasant perspectives at different times, one in the south and the other in the north. The first is from Nguyen Thi Dinh, born into a peasant family in Ben Tre province in the Mekong Delta in 1920, telling of her joining the resistance in her teens. Known for its revolutionary tradition, Ben Tre was the site of repeated uprisings from the 1860s onward. Vietnam's Communist Party had a presence there from the 1930s and weathered repeated rounds of French repression. Dinh was eventually imprisoned for her political activity but released in 1943 in time to participate in the Viet Minh seizure of power in Ben Tre and to play a prominent role in the southern anti-French resistance and later in the effort to expel the Americans and unify the southern part of the country with the socialist north.

Following the Dinh account are a pair of interviews from the Red River Delta in the north. Two political activists in Hung Yen province near Hanoi recall difficult rural conditions and the appearance of anti-French resistance forces at the end of World War II. The setting for their stories is a long and densely settled landscape in which Vietnamese culture had originated and resistance to invaders had flourished for a thousand years. In contrast to the south, villages in the north were compact, with homes closely built together and carefully shielded from the outside world.

The fundamental question here is similar to the China case: What led people in the countryside to embrace the Communist cause? How important was nationalism? Once more, some skepticism is needed in arriving at an answer. Dinh's recollections were recorded in November 1965 and published in Hanoi in 1968 — in other words, at a time when the Vietnamese Communist Party was fighting a

desperate war with the United States and was seeking to do everything possible to rally support. How might Dinh have altered her account to fit events or how might events have reconfigured her memory? Is there reason to give this recollection any credibility? The two oral histories from Hung Yen are equally problematic. They too were gathered in the midst of the American war (in October–November 1967). The interviews were conducted by Gérard Chaliand, a French academic sympathetic to the Vietnamese cause, carrying out his investigations under the watchful eyes of Vietnamese officials among peasants known for their suspicion of outsiders and especially foreigners. Do these accounts ring true? Where might bias have intruded? Finally, does a comparison of the personal stories from the two parts of Vietnam reveal any commonalities or differences? If we step back and look at the Chinese and Vietnamese peasant perspectives together, what common themes emerge?

Nguyen Thi Dinh
*1965 Memoir Recalling Her Road to
 Revolutionary Politics in the 1930s*

By the time I was 10 years old, my father no longer had to work day and night rowing a sampan for hire, and my family was no longer in a situation in which my mother would have to force herself, a few days after giving birth, to sit up and sew [to earn a little extra income]. We now had enough to eat and were not as hard-pressed economically as before, because we children — “the flock of ten blackbirds” — had grown strong enough to work in the ricefields, tend the vegetable garden and catch fish. I was the youngest in the family and could not as yet perform heavy manual labor, so I usually rowed the sampan and went to sell fish with my sister-in-law. We got up at 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. every day, rowed all night and arrived at the My Long market in the morning. After selling the fish, we hurriedly turned around and went home. . . .

. . . My parents wanted to send me to school, but the school was located in My Long market, more than 10 kilometers [6 miles] away. It would be too far for me to go there and come back every day, and if I boarded there it would be too expensive. I had to study at home, and Ba Chan, my older brother, taught me. . . . Whenever we had nothing to do at night, we would gather around the oil lamp — my mother lying in the hammock, cradling her grandchild, my father sitting silent in front of a small teapot, my sisters sitting around mending clothes. We all kept quiet and listened to my brother read [*Luc Van Tien*]. . . . Sometimes . . . I wept and the neighbors also wept. Once in a while my father nodded his head in approval and commented:

¹This classic novel in verse tells of the triumph of a young couple over wicked people and in the process affirms both Confucian ideas of virtue and the Buddhist faith in the ultimate victory of good over evil. The author was Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a prominent nineteenth-century southern scholar and foe of the French.

Nguyen Thi Dinh, *No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh*, trans. Mai V. Elliott (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program and Department of Asian Studies, 1976), 24–33.

"This story teaches people all the virtues they must have in life: humanity, kindness, filial piety, courage, determination and loyalty."

... I hated those in the old days who abused their power, position and wealth to harm honest people. ... But I did not know enough as yet to understand that I should also hate the wicked people who were bringing miseries and poverty to my family and other families at the time. On one occasion, the landlord in the village came to my house and demanded paddy [unmilled rice] in a threatening manner. My parents had to hastily prepare food and wine to regale him. We were out of chickens then, so they had to catch the hen about to lay eggs which I had been raising, and slaughter it for him to eat. When he finally left, his face crimson with all the drinking, I broke down and cried in anger, and demanded that my mother compensate me for the hen. In that period (1930) I noticed that my brother Ba Chan came and went at odd hours. Sometimes men came to the house, sat and whispered for a while and then disappeared. One day, I heard whispers in the room, I looked in and saw my brother hand to my father a piece of red cloth embroidered with something yellow inside. Seeing me, he ran out and pulled me inside, signaled to me to keep quiet and said:

"Don't breathe a word or our heads will be loped off."

My father quietly went into the garden, climbed to the top of the coconut tree and hid the package there. Threatened by my brother, I hastily nodded my head in assent, but felt very annoyed and wondered what the fuss was all about. A few days later, as I was walking toward the market carrying the fish basket on my head, I suddenly heard many people whisper to each other:

"There's a hammer and sickle flag at the three-way confluence of the Huong Diem river."

"The Communists in Ben Tre Province will soon rise up like those in Phu Rieng."

All at once many things rose in my mind: hammer and sickle flag, Communism, Phu Rieng. On the way back from the market, I went all the way to the three-way confluence of the Huong Diem river to take a look. I had the vague feeling that the flag was exactly the red piece of cloth that I had seen in my house a few days before. The yellow lines I could not make out now appeared clearly as the crossed hammer and sickle. I did not understand anything, but felt very happy about what my brother had done.

A few days later, my older brother Ba Chan was suddenly arrested by the puppet village officials who took him and jailed him. ... My mother and whole family worried and cried a lot. This happened at the end of 1930. I often went to visit him in jail because I was small and would not arouse the suspicion of the enemy. Every day I had to row a sampan for more than 4 kilometers to bring him food. It was there in the prison that I witnessed for the first time scenes of brutal torture. It was Muon, the same Canton Chief — the tyrannical landlord who had come to my house to collect rent, drink and swallow my hen which was about to lay eggs — who now angrily hit the prisoners with a walking stick while drinking and shouting. ...

... My brother was not the only one who was tortured, many other old and young people were also tortured. Many men were beaten until they passed

out, blood trickling from their mouths, heads and feet, and dyeing the cement floor a greyish and purplish color. I loved my brother and I hated the soldiers so intensely that I wanted to run out to hold them back and defend my brother, but I was too frightened so I just stood there, frozen, and wept in anger. . . .

. . . My brother was not released until half a year later. We wept with joy. He loved me even more than before because I was the only one in the family who had taken care of him during his imprisonment. I asked him:

"You didn't do anything to them, then why did they beat you up so brutally?"

He smiled and said:

"Of course I did something, why not?"

"You mean you were a subversive?"

"Don't be silly! I make revolution to overthrow the landlords who are oppressing and exploiting us, like Canton Chief Muon, and also to overthrow the French who have stolen our country from us."

He explained to me at great length, but I did not understand anything more than that the Communists loved the poor and opposed the officials in the village. My love for my brother and the men who had been jailed blossomed and deepened with such new and significant events. When I remembered the villagers' comment that the Communists would soon rise up in Ben Tre province, I immediately thought that the time was coming when Canton Chief Muon . . . would perish. I was very happy and eagerly looked forward for that day to arrive. . . .

In 1936, I was 16 years old. . . . I grew very tall, much taller than before, and I was less skinny, though I had not put on much weight. . . . Suddenly my hair became curly and wavy near the temples. My girl friends used to tease me:

"Dinh, did you wave your hair because you're about to get married?"

I only smiled because in my head I was entertaining ideas very different from those of my friends. At that time the movement was on the rise. People from many areas frequently came to hold meetings in my house. My brother Ba Chan persuaded me to help and cook for them. I agreed at once. They all treated me with affection like my brother Ba. They were all good people and my parents were very fond of them. . . .

. . . [B]esides cooking when they came to hold meetings I was given the job of delivering letters, propagandizing people in the hamlets and village to join mutual aid associations and rice transplanting and hoeing teams, encouraging people to buy the "Dan Chung" (People) newspaper, and mobilizing women. . . . Whatever task I was given I performed with a lot of zeal.

One day my brother Chan called me into the room — the same room where he had whispered to my father and handed him a package of documents years ago. He took down a large package from the ceiling and asked me:

"Would you dare to disseminate these leaflets?"

I was both happy and worried, and said:

"Alright, but unless you tell me how to do it, I won't know what to do."

He smiled and gave me detailed instructions. Finally, he reminded me:

"If the enemy catch you red-handed, just tell them over and over again that these papers were given to you by a man who said that they were publicity pamphlets for drugs. You are illiterate so you don't know what the papers say. The man told you to disseminate the papers, gave you some money, and then disappeared you don't know where."

After accepting this honorable task which was assigned to me for the first time, I felt agitated and restless. In the afternoon, I crawled inside the mosquito net and pulled out one leaflet to read in secret. Not knowing how to read very well, I had to spell each word slowly, and it took me a long time to read the leaflet. It was an appeal to the peasants to oppose the cruel rich people and village officials. That night, I could not sleep in peace and got up at midnight. At 3:00 A.M. I pretended to leave to sell fish as I had been doing every day. I gradually let the leaflets, which I had tucked under my pants at the waistline, fall down to the ground at my feet. When it was almost daylight and I was at the market I had gotten rid of all the leaflets. The sky began to brighten. At around 8:00 A.M., the people started whispering to each other, and rumor was thick that the Communists had spread a lot of leaflets. Policemen hurriedly grabbed their weapons and ran off in a panic. . . .

. . . After succeeding in a few tasks, I became very eager to operate and wanted to leave because if I stayed home a lot of chores, such as cooking, working in the ricefields and tending the vegetable garden, would get in the way of my work. I began to move around more [going on mission]. Some nights I stayed out and came home very late. My parents were afraid I would become "bad" and said, "State affairs are not for girls to take care of. And even if women can do it, they must be very capable. What can our daughter Dinh do? If she's caught, she'll confess everything and harm others." At that time, I had reached the puberty period and caught the attention of many youths in the village. Several sent matchmakers to my house to ask for my hand. My parents wanted to accept and give me away in marriage to put an end to their worries, but I absolutely refused to go along. I often confided to my brother Ba:

"I only want to work for the revolution, I don't want to get married yet. . . ."

. . . [M]y brother Chan . . . told me in private that Bich [a well-known intellectual from the provincial capital who had attended political meetings in Dinh's home] wanted to marry me, and asked me what I thought of it. When I heard the news, I was both happy and embarrassed, and my face burned as though I had had a sunstroke. But I still had my doubts and wondered whether Bich really loved me.

My parents who had always been fond of Bich agreed immediately. From then on, Bich frequently came to the house. He loved to stay in the garden, so we often went and sat for hours under the tangerine trees to confide in each other. We got married at the end of 1938. . . .

After spending a few days together, Bich again left to travel and operate. As for me, I continued working in the mutual aid associations and the rice trans-

planting teams of the women. Once in a while, the brothers brought back "Dan Chung" newspapers and gave them to us to sell within the organization. It was much later that I discovered that Bich was a member of the Ben Tre Province Party Committee and belonged to the group that operated openly under legal cover. . . . At that time Bich was busy with many things, so he only came home once every month or two, and then left immediately. The third time we saw each other he knew I was expecting. He was overjoyed. The next day, he made me go and see a doctor, and then bought all sorts of supplies for the baby — clothes and diapers — before leaving. He wanted to have a child very much, and especially a son. . . .

. . . In 1939 when my confinement period drew near, Bich came home and stayed a week with me. That was the longest time we spent together since our wedding. He took great care of me. . . .

Our life was so happy and lovely when suddenly security police agents came to the house, surrounded it and arrested Bich. The baby had been born only three days before. . . .

After they took Bich away, it seemed as though the earth and sky had suddenly turned black. I looked around the room, and looked at my baby and felt I was dying a thousand deaths. I was overcome with worry and grief, and had the feeling I would be separated from Bich forever. We had been married for one year, but had spent less than two months together. We had not even had time to choose a name for our baby when he was arrested. I remembered the time when my brother Ba Chan was beaten in jail, and felt full of pity and worry for my husband. . . .

On 18 July, I took my baby with me and went to see my husband. At the prison, it took me a long time to obtain all the necessary papers, and in the end I was only allowed to see him for fifteen minutes. But at that point, to be able to see him for even one minute, for us to be able to look at each other's face and for him to see the baby was good enough. . . . [W]hen I saw him standing behind the iron bars, looking out and smiling at me, my eyes suddenly became blurred, I felt dizzy and swayed on my feet. I noticed that he was emaciated, had lost a lot of weight, and looked haggard. I thought of scenes of enemy torture and felt full of pity for him. He stretched out his arms, took the baby, and kissed him for a long time. As we were passing the baby back and forth, I asked him about my leaving the baby behind and going off to operate. . . . He loved his son very much, so he thought about it for a long time and then encouraged me:

"It's right for you to do that, I approve of it wholeheartedly."

I asked him:

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

He looked at me with affection:

"I've been sentenced to five years of imprisonment and five years of deportation. I'm resigned to my arrest, but I feel very sorry for you and the baby. It's because of me that you two are suffering. Try to bring up the baby, go with the brothers to operate, and wait for my return. I'm very confident that you will overcome all challenges, as you told me before we got married."

Before I had time to add anything further, the guard came in to announce the end of the visit and to throw me out. I suddenly remembered and asked Bich hurriedly:

"What name shall we give to the baby?"

"[Let's call him] On."

"On" was our first born. The guard shoved me outside. I did not leave at once, and kept walking back and forth in front of the prison gate with the baby in my arms, so my husband could see us a while longer.²

On 19 July 1940, I returned home with the baby in my arms. Before the 21st arrived, the day on which [a prominent party leader] was coming to fetch me as had been pre-arranged, I was arrested by the security police. They took me to the prison in Ben Tre [province town] and kept me there for three weeks. They interrogated me about Bich's activities and then about my own. . . . When I thought of our situation — my husband in jail in one place, me in exile in another, and the baby separated from both his parents — my heart broke to pieces. The day I handed the baby to my mother to take home, seeing his innocent face and his steady breathing as he lay sleeping, I bent down to kiss him but tears filled my eyes. The moment my mother turned around to leave, I broke out sobbing. My mother also wept pitifully. . . .

. . . [W]e learned that they had deported us to Ba Ra. This was one of the highest mountain peaks in South Vietnam, near the border with Cambodia. This region was infamous because of its insalubrious environment, and people used to say that those who went there never came back alive. . . .

²This was the last Dinh saw of her husband. He would die in prison.

Tuan Doanh¹ 1967 Interview

The province was so poor that it used to be known as Beggars' Province. . . .

Historically, our province has been a battlefield ever since . . . the second and third centuries. The marshes and reeds provided an excellent terrain for guerrilla warfare in the lowlands, and the dense vegetation stopped the enemy from advancing. There were also major battles against the Mongols in the thirteenth century. It is fair to say that the peasants of Hung Yen have had

¹Tuan Doanh was a member of the Communist Party Provincial Committee for Hung Yen. Gérard Chaliand, *The Peasants of North Vietnam*, trans. Peter Wiles (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 71-75.

to withstand continual attempts at invasion throughout their history, in addition to long periods of drought and flooding. They've had the French to contend with, too! It was the Scholars who organized a resistance movement in the villages. There is not a single village in these parts which did not play a part in the resistance. That was in my grandfather's day, and he did his share. It was a peasant uprising on a really large scale, and even the women fought.

... All in all, the resistance against the French was kept up for over twenty years . . .

The first [Communist] Party cell in the province was set up in 1930. . . . Between 1933 and 1940 they established contact with the general population and began to build up a mass following. . . . By 1940, repression or no repression, we were able to get on with our propaganda work and agitation. Each militant was required to establish contact with several villages . . . and do his best to establish nests of sympathizers. This went on from 1940 until 1944. There were very few professional revolutionaries in the area — no more than four or five in the entire province; the rest did ordinary jobs as well as working for the Party. And then, round about 1943 or 44, we started making military preparations. On a very small scale, mind: we had no arms and ammunition as yet. . . .

On 9 March 1945 came the Japanese coup toppling the colonial administration. . . . The French were in such disarray that they could do nothing to stop us. Side by side with the armed conflict, the masses were incited to lay hands on the stocks of rice held by the Japanese. . . . The communal rice-stocks in the possession of the village elders . . . were shared out, together with the supplies appropriated by the Japanese. In addition, all taxes were withheld. As a result of these steps, starvation was averted in the province. . . . This seizure of rice for public use finally removed the peasants' uncertainties about the revolution. . . .

In August 1945, we took over every district in the land. . . . Suddenly we found ourselves enjoying independence and freedom. The mood of the country was unbelievable: people were burning with enthusiasm. I shall never forget those times.

And then, in December, the French invaded us again. . . .

After 1949 the people living in the delta became [the target of French forces]. . . . [O]ur army and cadres could not be dislodged; the peasants continued to hide them. A complete network of underground shelters and communication trenches was established, stretching for tens of miles, with exits in or on the outskirts of villages. As the war dragged on, it became possible to conceal and accommodate whole regiments and, eventually, whole divisions.

The French set up puppet municipal councils, staffed with collaborators. It was our task to smash these councils. So we turned the villages into military strongholds, barricading them and digging underground passages. Sometimes a guerrilla platoon was able to withstand a siege by an enemy regiment. After dark, parties of our men would go and harass enemy posts defended by entire battalions. . . .

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Pham Van Ha¹
1967 Interview

My own family were landless peasants: all they had was a house and a small yard. They were hired labourers, working for landowners. . . .

I was eleven when my father died, after an illness, at the age of fifty-four. My mother died of starvation during the great famine of 1945. I was fourteen at the time. We were a family of six. . . . My little sister and I took jobs, looking after landowners' children. . . . At that time, I ate one meal a day: rice with fig-leaves, and usually a soup made from rice and bran. There were no vegetables: all we had was rice and salt. One of my sisters died of starvation in 1945; another was killed during a bombardment in 1948. And one of my brothers was killed in the army in 1953. That leaves the three of us. . . .

. . . The landowners used to hold huge feasts and make the villagers contribute. Some of them had three wives. They ate meat or chicken every day. When you were working for them, you got a few sweet potatoes in the morning and some rice at midday. That was for heavy labour. . . . If they wanted to grab a peasant's land, they would plant some liquor in his home (the colonial administration had exclusive rights to liquor) and tip off the authorities. The peasant was duly prosecuted and had to sell his plot. That is how my uncle was dispossessed. And another thing: peasants would run into debt whenever the taxes fell due. The interest rate was 50 per cent for a period of six months. They would just manage to pay off the interest. The debt itself was never disposed of. . . . The poorer a family was, the greater the attempts to make it sell its land, fall into debt and move to another part of the country. . . . In 1943 the village notables decided to put pressure on my family. At their bidding a man came to my uncle's house, feigned insanity and set fire to the place. . . . [M]y two uncles were arrested for laying hands on the notables. There was pandemonium at the district court. In the end, my uncles had to sell all they owned to pay for the trial and were sentenced to three months' imprisonment. We had already lost three *saos* [a third of an acre] as a result of the liquor incident, and now the last four *saos* had to be sold. We had nothing left. In 1945, the young uncle to whom all this had happened was the first person in Quoc Tri to join the self-defence forces; afterwards, the whole family served in the Resistance.

INDIA ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

By 1945 Indians had done the hard work of convincing the British to abandon their colonial position in South Asia, the centerpiece of one of the world's major empires. At the head of the independence movement was the Indian

¹Pham Van Ha was a local Party secretary in Hung Yen.
Chaliand, *Peasants of North Vietnam*, 93-95.