

Yevgeny Kobelev

# HỒ CHÍ MINH



THẾ GIỚI PUBLISHERS

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## CONTENTS

"We're from Nghệ An" . . . . .	5
Thoughts of Freedom . . . . .	9
He Called Himself Patriot . . . . .	30
The Magic Sword . . . . .	50
The Communist . . . . .	60
The Country of Trailblazers . . . . .	73
In South China . . . . .	93
Birth of the Party . . . . .	113
Arrested the First Time . . . . .	125
His Second Homeland . . . . .	140
The Forest Dweller . . . . .	154
Prisoner . . . . .	181
Revolution . . . . .	192
The First Steps . . . . .	220
Beleaguered . . . . .	234
The War of Resistance . . . . .	253
Battle Again . . . . .	274
His Name and Deeds Will Live Forever . . . . .	289
Milestones in Hồ Chí Minh's Life . . . . .	296

## "WE'RE FROM NGHỆ AN"

It so happened that I was in Vietnam as TASS correspondent when the country was fending off the U.S. aggression. The deepest impressions are of my short stay in the southern provinces in June 1965.

The war was in its third month. Black smoke hovered on the horizon. It rose from burning houses, fields, and jungle. Banana leaves pinned on netting camouflaged our jeep, for it was a rare minutes that no U.S. bombers roared overhead.

Bomb craters marred the frontline roads. At river crossings we waited for nightfall. At after-dark markets beside the jetties, in the light of frail oil-lamps, old women sold bananas and coconuts, litchis and huge crabs. Travellers like us examined the wares in the light of torches, bargaining in subdued, somewhat guilty, voices. From across the river, a few miles away, came the noise of battle - bombs bursting, guns going off, and a red glow colouring the dark sky. Under attack was the provincial capital of Vinh.

It took us all night to cover the few miles to Vinh. Indeed, an unbearably hot sun was rising when we finally drove into its streets. The almost deserted township met us with wildly shrieking air-raid sirens, which did not stop screaming all day. We had heard in Hanoi about Vinh being a target of fierce raids, but what we saw in those first few hours defied the imagination. Anti-aircraft guns roared continuously. So loudly did they roar that we could not hear ourselves speak. The sky was studded with the whitish bursts of flak shells. The shrill wailing of falling bombs made us want to drop on our bellies. Wave after wave came the U.S. bombers from the directions of Tonkin Bay.

In the deep of night, completely fagged out by the June heat, we made our way by invisible pathways, across rice paddies, to one of the near-by villages. Here we would sleep the rest of the night. Someone in our party asked the guide, a local militiaman, how people could bear



this life. He replied half in jest: "We're from Nghệ An". Later, revisiting the place, I often heard people speak the same phrase. "We're from Nghệ An", they said when telling us about the latest air-raids, about the good harvest of rice they had grown, about a poem some local poet had written, and the songs young girls hereabouts sang so well at their camouflaged flak emplacements.

What made Nghệ An, a province that had since been merged with Hà Tĩnh and given a new name, Nghệ Tĩnh - what made it unusual and what made it an object of pride? It had none of the haunting beauty of Hạ Long, Bay of the Submerged Dragon, that eighth wonder of the world. It had none of the picturesque landscapes of mountainous northern Việt Bắc or of the southern Teinguen plateau with its seething waterfalls and deep caves. Nor had it the fine natural bights and beaches of Cam Ranh and Nha Trang. On the contrary, Nghệ An Province had long since been associated in people's minds with the yellow forests, the impassable marshy jungle in the Trường Sơn foothills teeming with beasts of prey, vipers and poison insects, and the ominous Lao wind, the torrid wind that came in summertime from the mountains of Laos and scorched the earth until it cracked, that burned the grass and the trees, and made all living things gasp for air. Destructive typhoons did not spare this long-suffering land. The tribal legends of the Moi hillsmen mention hurricanes that bear away people and cattle and that even move mountains. On top of that, Nature had denied Central Vietnam fertile land. People hereabouts had always lived in poverty, and never had enough to eat.

The province is known not for its natural wealth, but for its people. None but the strong could survive, and come out winners. Local people had unbending willpower, and many left an indelible mark in the 4,000-year history of Vietnam.

Since time immemorial the land here was peopled by proud, hot-tempered, freedom-loving Vietnamese. In medieval times, they were always the first to respond to the call of legendary generals, the first to take up arms and liberate the country from invaders. Many an emperor and many a peasant chief had picked Nghệ An as their base to block the way south to the invading armies of Chinese feudal lords. Here, too, they recruited armies, which they sent north to free the land from incursions.

Many of the patriotic movements had their start here during the days of French colonial rule. In 1930, the first people's Soviets of workers' and peasants' deputies were formed here, in the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh. That had been the first organised action of the Vietnamese proletariat under the leadership of the Communist Party. It was a dress rehearsal for the August Revolution of 1945 that liberated the Vietnamese from the colonial yoke. On the walls of the Thailao Memorial near Vinh, erected to immortalise the heroes of Vietnam's Soviet movement are inscribed the names of the 217 revolutionaries who fell at the hands of the colonialists.

Nghệ An Province has given the country many eminent personalities. This applies especially to Nam Đàn County North of Vinh. There isn't a village there that hadn't given birth to a national hero - an ancient general, a great poet, or an outstanding revolutionary. That, indeed, was where Hồ Chí Minh, that great Vietnamese, was born on May 19, 1890. There he grew to manhood.

The future leader came into the world in one of the most difficult periods of Vietnam's history. In the mid-19th century, in a bid to outdo his uncle Bonaparte, French Emperor Napoleon III set about colonialising Asia. And one of his first targets was Vietnam.

Until then, its main enemies had been the Chinese feudal dynasties. For nearly ten centuries (from 39 B.C. until 939), they had ruled Vietnam, and later, too, had repeatedly invaded the country, though invariably suffering defeat. In the early 15th century, for example, after a long and fatiguing struggle headed by a fisherman's son, Le Loi, and scholar Nguyễn Trãi, the Ming rulers were chased out of the country. Then after three centuries of independence, a new, no less dangerous enemy made an appearance.

In August 1858, a French squadron, which included a few Spanish warships, attacked the fortress of Đà Nẵng that covered the road to Huế, the imperial capital. A year later, the squadron captured Saigon. Though their military superiority was undisputable, the invaders failed to force Vietnam to its knees. Vietnamese historians compare the French colonialists to silkworms who consumed the mulberry leaf little by little. Not until 1883, all of 25 years later, did the imperial court of Vietnam sign an unequal treaty, acknowledging French supremacy.

The colonialists partitioned the country into the three regions, each with a different status. South Vietnam became a French colony named Cochin China (Nam Bộ in Vietnamese), while North and Central Vietnam were named Tonkin and Annam (Bắc Bộ and Trung Bộ) respectively, and given the status of French protectorates. Formally, they retained a Vietnamese administration, even their emperor. All affairs, however, were run by the French - a governor in Cochin China and the chief residents in Tonkin and Annam.

But the Westerners were not able to take real charge until much later. In the reed-grown valleys of the South, the jungles of the North, and the mountains of the Central plateau, guerillas harassed the invaders. In 1885, twelve-year-old Emperor Hàm Nghi, enthroned the year before, and his regent, fled to the hills. A fortified base had been built there beforehand, from which he called on his countrymen to take up arms. The liberation movement under the feudal gentry got to be known as *Cần Vương*, the Royalist Movement. Not until the late 1890s did the French colonialists finally manage to capture the rebel emperor, and thereafter suppress the main guerilla bases.

The capture of Hàm Nghi and the enthronement of his brother Đồng Khánh, who swore loyalty to the French, did not, however, end the armed resistance. The Vietnamese continued to resist for nearly twenty years more. In Central Vietnam, the fight was carried on by the feudal gentry under the leadership of the "first scholar" of Hà Tĩnh Province, Phan Đình Phùng. In North Vietnam, the colonialists were not given a minute's respite by a guerilla army under a peasant general, Hoàng Hoa Thám, who was assassinated by a traitor in 1913. Still, his main forces continued the resistance until the early 1920s. Poems and songs were composed to extol the bravery of the guerillas and their chiefs.

But those were the last bursts of a dying gale. While singing the praises of the unbending patriots, the songs also bemoaned the loss of freedom and independence. Vietnam arrived at the turn of the 20th century wearing chains of slavery.

Not that it had resigned itself to its fate. It waited for more propitious times, for the birth of new heroes who would raise the banner of national liberation. And though the hour of victory was still far away, its heralds were already beginning to appear in towns and villages.

## THOUGHTS OF FREEDOM

### 1

"Kneeling humbly, I venture to beg the forgiveness of Your Majesty for the mistake His faithful army made of being far away and for failing to protect You from traitors and enemies. For reasons ill-fated, Heaven had willed that Your Majesty's most faithful servants should have been far away..."

Thus wrote Regent Tôn Thất Đạm to the Son of Heaven, Hàm Nghi, on learning that the young emperor had been taken prisoner. There upon Regent Đạm committed suicide. Before he died, he made the mandarins and scholars in his party promise never to serve the invaders.

Meanwhile, the emperor and his retinue were brought to Huế in chains and shipped off to France. The prisoner was seventeen, but his behaviour was dignified and his self-control surprising in one so young. He looked bravely in his enemy's faces, and left his country with proudly raised head.

The man who told this story to his twelve-year-old son, adjusted the ill-smelling oil lamp. The boy had been listening raptly, eyes wide open, tears rolling slowly down his cheeks. He wore a black handwoven jacket. Two funny locks of hair bobbed on his shaven head. For boys to have the locks was the custom of those days.

Why, he asked, had the foreigners won so easily? Not easily, his father replied - it took them nearly thirty years.

"If you want to know," he added, "the Resistance isn't entirely dead today."

The boy liked those evenings at home, and his father's endless stories of near and distant times. It was impenetrably dark outside. In the room, the murky light of the oil lamp cast shadows on the walls. His father, Nguyễn Sinh Sắc, was the most learned man in the village. He had had a Confucian education. He knew the Four Books and the Five Classics of the ancient Confucian doctrine, and had only recently returned triumphant from the capital, where he had passed his civil

service examinations, an exceedingly rigorous selection among aspirants to high honours. By imperial grace, Sinh Sác had been granted the title of *phó bảng*, an academic degree of the second class.

In old Vietnam, people usually had more than one name. The first was given at birth. At school age the child received an official, "scholarly" name. So, the boy's father gave him a name that reflected the elation he felt at having passed his civil service examinations - Nguyễn Tất Thành, meaning Nguyễn the Triumphant.

In feudal Vietnam the title of *phó bảng* gave its holder the right to take some important office in the central administration. But Thành's father declined the post he was offered in the imperial capital. Young men often recalled his explanation: "Officials are slaves among slaves, perhaps even worse."

Not until eight years later, when the family suffered financial difficulties, did he accept the post of county chief in Bình Định Province. But he defied the higher authorities by refusing to punish those who failed to pay their debts, backing peasant protests against excessive taxes, and allowing the unjustly imprisoned to go free. So, within a few months, the governor dismissed him.

Thành's father belonged to the peculiar feudal estate of provincial scholars. Traditionally, they were devoted students of the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius (Meng-tse) that had reached Vietnam from China in the 15th century. But Confucianism, say present-day Vietnamese historians, was not an entirely correct appellation, because on Vietnamese soil the teaching of Confucius came under the influence of local patriotic tradition, and acquired some essentially progressive features.

The Chinese feudal rulers and their Vietnamese collaborationists sought to cultivate the more reactionary Confucian maxims, those of worship of authority, conservatism, dogmatism, and scholastic education, while the patriotic and progressive members of the feudal Vietnamese educated class laid emphasis on Confucianism's rational and positive elements. They went farther still, and adapted the teaching to the needs of the struggle for national liberation, changing it into a

spirited patriotic doctrine that was often even anti-monarchic. That was why in Vietnam Confucian scholars were often revered as national heroes, leaders of liberation wars, chiefs or participants in peasant rebellions.

One of the principal Confucian commandments, *trung*, loyalty, meant unquestioning obedience to the emperor, whereas its Vietnamese variety, *trung*, meant loyalty with reservations - if the emperor was a patriot it was associated with him; if he bowed to the enemy, loyalty to him was not obligatory.

With the coming of the French, the Confucianists, those nobles of the spirit, were the mainstay of the Vietnamese monarchy as long as it headed the Resistance. But most of them turned their backs on the Nguyễn dynasty when it finally went into the conquerors' service after the defeat of the Cần Vương movement. In contrast to Christianity, which the colonialists forcibly cultivated, Confucianism was then considered the symbol of everything truly Vietnamese.

Thành's father was a faithful follower of the patriotic Confucianist party. He wanted to instil the party's patriotic ideals in his children. And it was thanks to his beneficial influence that Thành, who studied the Confucian classics like other boys of his age, absorbed a system of ideological and political views that were a variety of the Confucian teaching steeped in Vietnamese patriotism.

The villagers were fond of Thành's father. They respected him. In 1901, shortly before the examinations, his wife died at the age of thirty-two, followed to the grave by the youngest, fourth, child. The grieving father sent his two sons and a daughter to live with his late wife's parents, and went to Huế. On learning how well he had passed his civil service examinations, the people of his village, Kim Liên agreed at a communal meeting to allot him, their first *phó bảng*, a plot of land and to build him a new house. He and his children soon moved into a fairly roomy straw-roofed bamboo structure between the smithy and the village pond.

The furniture in Thành's room consisted of a hammock and a roughly made wooden table and bench. The family turned the yard,

surrounded by dense thickets of bamboo trees and banana palms, into a garden with areca palms, lemon and pomelo trees, and a lone breadfruit tree which bore them large round rough-skinned fruits as big as pumpkins.

Kim Liên village had several ponds where the greenish duckweed was studded here and there with the white and pale pink lotus, king of all flowers. Indeed, Kim Liên meant Village of the Golden Lotus. Little Thành liked watching the villagers pull out the morning's catch of fish, and would himself angle with other village boys now and then. Water buffaloes escaped from the heat and flies in the ponds, their black heads sticking out of the water, and their sad eyes looking lazily upon the world.

Always, village boys would climb upon their backs, and play on their reed-pipes.

The boys and girls of Golden Lotus village, like those of the surrounding villages, were fond of music from infancy. The people of Nghe An were convinced that Nguyễn Du, the pride of Vietnamese classic literature, grew up to be a great poet because he was born in their province, and had learned the art of improvisation in childhood. People hereabouts were fond of folk songs and old lullabies extolling nature and cultivating love for the native land. Nguyễn Tất Thành knew those songs by heart. In fact, his aunt was renowned up and down the country as a first class singer, and was often invited to neighbouring counties.

2

The people of Golden Lotus village were poor. There was not enough arable to feed all of them. Besides, much of the land was owned by a few rich families. Most of the others were tenants dragging out a miserable existence. For lack of clothes, the men wore cotton trunks the year round, earning their village the nickname *Đội Khố*, the trouserless.

Thành saw poverty and suffering each day. Officials pitilessly exacted taxes, and the village headman, a member of the gentry, rivalled their greed. Whatever was left was requisitioned by the rich landlords.

Take old man *Điền*'s family living in the house next door. Did they ever eat their fill? Just once a year, during the Tet holiday, when the peasants slaughtered the last of their chickens and pigs, and bought rice wine to at least forget their misery for a while.

Seeing how poor people were, and how ruined villagers went to town to earn a livelihood, never to be heard of again, Thành remembered the splendid carriages of the royal dignitaries and the foreign administrators in Huế, where his father once took him to watch the sacrificial rites at the Altar of Heaven and Earth atop the picturesque hill south of the capital.

Why was life so unjust?

Thành was an impressionable child. Other people's pain hurt him as if it were his own. And the most staggering impression, one that left an indelible mark in his heart, was the tragedy that occurred on the *Cửa Rào* Road project.

*Cửa Rào* was a canyon in the upper reaches of the Blue River on the Vietnam-Lao border. The road would run along the canyon, through jungle that few men had ever trodden, to connect Laos and the western part of Nghệ An Province with the shoreline of the Bay of Tonkin. The colonial authorities required all males of 18 to 50 to do forced labour on it. The conditions were unbearable; marshy jungle, wild animals, snakes, poison insects, and miasmic air. The labourers were half-starved.

They slept on the damp soil in the jungle, and, were mercilessly beaten by the overseers. Many died. And those who did return, were haggard and, starved, and suffering from tropical fever or rheumatism. They told their fellow villagers how people died on the *Cửa Rào* Road, and how the dead were wrapped in straw mats and buried on the spot because coffins were in short supply.

In Thành's impressionable mind the days the villagers left for the *Cửa Rào* Road project were associated with funerals. Women wept. The entire village came to see off the departing. Thành stood on the roadside with the other village boys, and watched the bedraggled procession.

And one of the sad songs that people sang, Thành would remember all his life:

*Tall are the Purple Mountains,  
Deep is the Great Sea.  
The King has sold himself  
To the French, dooming his  
People to Grief and Misery.*

One night, a clamour awakened Thành. Tam-tams were beating, women were crying in grief, and the village dogs were barking furiously. Torches slashed the darkness now in one, now in another end of the village. The frightened, sleepy boy asked his father what was up.

"Calm yourself, son. They've probably caught another wretch," his father replied quietly. He stroked his son's head with a shaking hand.

Thành and his elder brother and sister saw a sad group of people in the dim light of the torches: three men with hands tied, and a few soldiers behind them. One of the prisoners was the father of his friend; Thành and he had flown kites together from the top of a near-by hill. No, Thành could not fall asleep that night, sobbing for pity or constructing scenes of revenge.

There had been many more such troubled nights. Fleecing from backbreaking forced labour into the neighboring jungle, the peasants were relentlessly hunted by guards.

The boy's family was relieved of labour duties thanks to Father having the title of *phó búng*. But the scholar was not indifferent to the lot of his fellow villagers, many of whose children he had taught to read and write.

After agonizing speculation on how to help the wretched community, he sold the land the village had given him, and divided the money among families whose breadwinners had been forced into the road gangs.

The Cửa Rào Road tragedy hurt Thành's sensibility. It made him ponder in earnest. The suffering he saw opened his eyes to many of the ills and injustices that reigned in colonial Vietnam. Thoughtful beyond his years, he turned to books for answers to his many questions.

His father spoke with scorn about the outdated classical education. It gave none of the knowledge needed in those days, though it did open the door to an official's career. But precisely an official's career was contrary to the feelings of the boy's scholarly father. He preferred telling the children instructive tales out of the country's past. He taught them the maxims and aphorisms of the old sages.

Patriotic thoughts struck a chord in Thành's heart. He enjoyed the romantic prose of Nguyễn Trãi, thinker, poet, general, and first Vietnamese utopian who dreamed of a prosperous life for all. Thành wept when reading the *Proclamation of Victory Over the Ngô* (ngô being the generic term for invaders):

*The people burnt in flames  
Or buried in tombs of disaster.  
To deceive Heaven and to deceive men,  
The invaders killed and oppressed.  
Humanity and justice were trampled, and  
Taxes squeezed dry the living.*

It seemed to Thành that Nguyễn Trãi had written those lines quite recently, yesterday perhaps, not five centuries ago.

Thành's family liked the poetry of the great Nguyễn Du, who was born in a neighboring village. His splendid novel in verse, *Calling the Wandering Souls*, the harrowing tale of Kiều, a young courtesan, victim of feudal morals, was filled with a haunting beauty, grace and charm. But what impressed itself on the hearts of young people was its rebellious content. Nguyễn Du's novel was a challenge to the medieval feudal morality that still reigned in the country. The loftiest characters in it were those of Kiều, who had sold herself to save her father and eldest brother from the debtors' pit, and Từ Hải, chief of the rebels, or "bandit", as he was named at the imperial court. Từ Hải's monologue is, in fact, an anthem to liberty:

*By sea or stream I sailed where I wished.  
So how can I be out of it now - cringing, not flying?  
Submissive to the emperor's wishes?*



*Is there no other way?  
Am I to be an overfed dignitary?  
Wear rich clothes and bow my head?  
Not me. As long as my men are true  
I'll practise my creed -  
Pay gift for gift,  
Sword thrust for sword thrust,  
Just to be free...*

The image of the unsubmitive Từ Hải, who refused to surrender and died standing, pierced by enemy arrows, was for the patriotic young people an incarnation of mythical heroes.

Lofty feelings, love of country and hatred of its conquerors were inspired by the blind South Vietnamese poet, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. The first bard of armed resistance, he called on his countrymen to fight the French colonialists:

*The living are fighting,  
The dead are fighting,  
The souls of the killed are in battle array.  
No, the people will never surrender!  
The day of reckoning will come.*

Thành grieved for the country's lost freedom and admired those who refused to bow to the invaders. In the village of Kim Liên there were reminders of past battles and glorious men. Near Thành's house was the Cormorant Pond, grown over with lotuses. The old men said a few dozen years before the rebellious soul of their countrymen, Vương Thúc Mậu, found repose in its waters. Responding to the call of the Cần Vương movement, Mậu had formed a large guerilla unit and hit the enemy. The last battle of his life occurred in the streets of the village. When Mậu was seized, he cursed his captors, tore himself free, and dived into the pond. His hands were tied behind his back, and he drowned.

All Kim Liên revered Hoàng Xuân Khanh, a man-legend who was the uncle of Thành's mother. He had fought bravely in Hoàng Hoa Thám's rebel detachment, and was seized when he came home.

Tortured right before Nghệ An's provincial governor, he bit off part of his tongue and did not betray any of his comrades. He was banished to death island Poulo Condore. But he did not die. After serving the term of his exile, mute and sick, he returned to his native and was, to the end of his days, a faithful comrade of all patriotic villagers.

Thành heard from his father of his famous relatives and fellow-villagers, and of other heroes of the glorious past and bitter present of his country. His first school teacher Vương Thúc Quý, the eldest son of a rebel chief, told him tales out of history.

Vương had sworn revenge on his father's grave. He became a highly educated man. He passed his civil service examinations, and started a primary school on returning to his native village. He cultivated in his pupils love of country and knowledge of its heroic history. Hồ Chí Minh remembered Vương all his life with deep warmth. When he was a professional revolutionary, he had, indeed, used the name Vương as one of his many party aliases in remembrance of his first teacher.

Thành and his childhood friends wanted to know the surrounding world. Legendary events had occurred in bygone days on the bank of the Blue River, in whose quick waters the boys found relief from the heat. When they climbed to the top of the hill outside the village, a breathtaking view opened before them.

Northward, they saw a hill where, as legend had it, the chief of one of the biggest uprisings against the rule of the Celestial Empire, Mai Hắc Đế, was born. This uprising in the year 722 culminated in victory, with the Chinese feudal lords being driven out of Vietnam for a time.

On the other bank of the river, almost exactly opposite the hill on which the boys were standing, lay the native village of Phan Đình Phùng, the memory of whose guerilla army had not yet faded into the fog of time. Any grownup could tell the inquisitive boys a lot about him. They learned, for example, how he was hated and feared by the French. After he had died, brought down by sudden illness, the enemy found his grave, dug out his body, and burned it. The French loaded their rifles with his ashes, and fired them so no trace of the hero should remain on the Earth.

Down the river was a string of villages where great poets had lived, one of them being the inimitable Nguyễn Du.

Beyond a twist in the stream, lay the native village of Quang Trung, whose name is known to every Vietnamese. He had been chief of the victorious peasant rebellion known as the Tây Sơn brothers movement. Quang Trung also won fame when, in 1789, he led his peasant detachments against Thăng Long, city of the Flying Dragon (as Hanoi was called in the olden days), and drove out a 200,000-strong army of invaders after a five-day battle. We read in Vietnamese chronicles that the invaders fled.

Thành had never been in Hanoi. But he knew from stories that a temple had been built on one of its hills where the historic battle had taken place in honour of Quang Trung's great victory.

The boys liked climbing the low hills around the village, where, in the thickets, they came upon time-worn rocks, the remnants of old fortresses. The fortresses had been built in the early 15th century by kings Hồ Quý Ly and Hồ Hán Thương, to block the way south for the Ming armies.

Some time later, Lê Lợi, son of a fisherman, came here with his men. From here, after establishing control over the province, he led his men north against Chinese feudal lords who had seized the land. He routed them, and liberated the country.

Learning more about the history of his country, Thành recalled the sad questions he had asked his father. Now he was able to reply to them himself: Vietnam had known time of glory, Vietnam had its great heroes, for nearly a thousand years, at intervals. Vietnam had been ruled by Chinese feudal lords, but never submitted. It squared its powerful shoulders and threw off the chains of slavery. These days, too, the boy knew, there were as many heroes as there had been in the past. Only there was no one to unite them, no one to give them arms.

Old Uncle Điền, the village smith, was a favorite among the children. Thành often visited the smithy to watch Uncle Điền swing his sledgehammer, sometimes helping with the bellows. One summer night,

after the heat had receded, the children gathered round Uncle Dien. He lit his long bamboo pipe, and began telling them one of his tales.

The splendid lake in Hanoi, the northern capital, Uncle Dien said, was called Lake of the Returned Sword. A pagoda rose out of the water at its centre, called Turtle Pagoda.

"The story of the Turtle Pagoda and the Sword will take your breath away," Uncle Điền added. "Long long ago, before the French had come, our land was overrun by a people who called their country the Middle Kingdom. We Vietnamese finally lost patience, and rose up against them. A poor fisherman, Lê Lợi, was the people's leader. Magic powers made him undefeatable. One day, when he was crossing the lake in a boat, the head of a huge turtle appeared out of the water. It held a sword that was radiating light. 'Take this magic sword,' the turtle said, 'it will help you crush all enemies.'

"Lê Lợi took the sword, and thereupon succeeded in beating all foreign invaders, thus liberating our country. Then, Lê Lợi and his comrades went to the lake to thank the turtle. As the boat reached the middle of the lake, his amazed retinue saw the sword leave its scabbard, and the turtle, whose head appeared out of the water, took it back to the bottom of the lake. Ever since then, the lake has been called Lake of the Returned Sword."

Old Uncle Điền said the turtle was still there and still had the magic sword. He also said that if the Vietnamese ever found themselves in trouble, some brave man would come, and the sacred mistress of the Lake would give him the magic sword again.

Thành reflected on Uncle Điền's story. "It's a fairy-tale", he would say to himself, "but there must have been *something* that helped Lê Lợi rally the nation and beat the powerful enemy."

The road to the ruins of the old fortresses, where Thành and his friends liked to roam, passed through the village of Đan Nhiệm. A fine man lived there by the name of Phan Bội Châu: Thành knew him, he was his father's friend and had visited their house several times.

Everybody spoke of Phan's extraordinary life, his extraordinary abilities and gifts. At the national civil service examinations in Huế in 1900, he had won the title of *giải nguyên*, which was the top academic degree bestowed each time on just one examinee - the first among equals. Phan could have had a brilliant court career. But he refused to serve a throne that had betrayed the nation's interests. He devoted himself to revolutionary activity.

He travelled a lot about the country, met patriotic officials, scholars and students, and, taking advantage of his academic title, tried to win over some of the emperor's retinue. Prince Cường Để was one of those whom Phan won over. In May 1904 he formed the secret Renovation Society, with Prince Cường Để at its head. At the constituent conference, it was decided to prepare for an armed rising against the colonial authorities and to restore a true Vietnamese monarchy.

It was also decided to appeal for aid to the Japanese. This idea was prompted by the results of the Russo-Japanese war: a great power, tsarist Russia, had been defeated by a small Asian country that had a short time before been only a little stronger than Vietnam and barely escaped becoming a colony. Asiatic, the Vietnamese nationalists concluded were quite strong enough to drive out Westerners.

Thành respected Phan Bội Châu, a distinguished member of the scholarly estate, and a man of great charm. Whenever Phan came to visit Thành's father, the boy listened respectfully to their learned talk. Phan liked to recite Chu Yuan, an ancient Chinese poet. Thành remembered two lines that struck a special chord in his heart:

*It is hard to breathe, I keep back tears,  
For I grieve over the pain of my people.*

Phan himself was a poet, though, of course, all educated people wrote poetry in those days. Because of the specific qualities of the Vietnamese language - a language of tonalities, with a lot of rhyming words, and hallowed by literary traditions that went back to remote ages. Though Phan's poetry followed the old poetic canons, one clearly felt in it the breath of the new age, a patriotic spirit and combative mood.

The last time Thành saw Phan had been in early 1905. Six months had passed since then. People said Phan had gone abroad, probably to

Japan. Then, one hot July day, lying in his hammock, Thành saw Phan's familiar figure approaching their house.

Phan inquired about Thành's father.

"Father is in town," Thành's elder brother replied.

"Well, it's you who I really wanted to see," Phan said to the boys. He tapped Thành's shoulder, and observed that he had grown. That was true - Thành was fairly tall for a Vietnamese. "I've just returned from Japan," Phan said. "I met people from the Emperor's court there, and got to know some forward-looking Chinese exiles. I hope you've heard of K'ang Yuwei and Liang Ch'ichao? They're fighting for reforms and a constitutional monarchy in imperial China. I had a talk with young Dr. Sun Yatsen, the rising star of the Chinese patriotic movement. Japanese and Chinese friends support our just cause. All Asia is on our side. But to beat the French, we must have educated people. So we've decided to pick a group of fine young men and have them study at Japanese universities. I said to myself you two would be a fine choice. How about it, boys?"

The two brothers listened to the guest in silence. When he finished they glanced at each other surreptitiously and lowered their heads.

"If you could only see that great country, Japan," Phan continued enthusiastically. "Out of all the countries of the yellow race, Japan is the only great power. Japan alone can help us regain our freedom. We'll never succeed without outside help. Today, all true patriots must turn their eyes to the Empire of the Rising Sun."

Thành thanked Phan for his kind offer, but said he and his brother could not leave their father, whose health was failing. "Besides," Thành added, "we cannot venture on so important a thing without his blessing."

Phan said there was still time for them to think over his proposal.

The boys' reference to their father had been an excuse. It was not thoughts of his father that were holding back Thành. Though at fifteen it is very hard to withstand the lure of foreign lands, and though Thành respected Phan Bội Châu, he would not agree with his plan. Uncle Phan meant to liberate the country with the help of influential mandarins and

members of the royal house. Yet all of those people were living a life of plenty under French rule. Nor did Thành trust the Japanese. As people said, it was like driving the tiger out by the front door and letting the panther in through the back door.

Thành was right. Soon, Phan's illusions were shattered. The imperialist powers came to terms when the activity of Vietnamese patriots in Japan grew to dangerous proportions. In 1908, at the request of the French, the Japanese government closed down all the organizations that Phan had formed in Japan. Phan, Prince Cường Để, and other prominent members of patriotic organizations, were ordered out of Japan.

What was to be done? Which was the way to freedom? Perhaps Phan Chu Trinh, another bright star that had risen then in colonial Vietnam, was right? Thành's father said he was a bitter opponent of the royal house and called for republican government. Yet he was not opposed to the colonialists, and only demanded some socio-economic reforms.

Thành looked for the answers in books. One day, he came upon Jean Jacques Rousseau's works. He picked up one of the volumes. It was difficult reading. Thành did not understand most of it. But he discovered simple verities on almost every page. Like precious pearls on the bottom of the ocean, arousing the imagination: man is born free, yet is kept in chains everywhere; to renounce liberty means to renounce human dignity and human rights; the strongest is never strong enough to always rule; if a nation can throw off the yoke and does so, it does right. Out of these dissociated thoughts a real programme of action appeared. A programme of struggle for freedom. Thành was impressed by the spirit of freedom, free thought, contempt for traditional canons and dogmas, and the militant atheism, that imbued the book. He was excited by its calls for liberty, equality, and fraternity. He kept asking himself: how could Rousseau's countrymen oppress his people so cruelly? He also wondered if the present order of things would ever change.

Where to find the magic sword, the all-powerful truth that would show the way to the liberation of the Vietnamese nation, the offspring of mythical parents, the Dragon and the Fairy, a nation with heroic traditions and worthy of a far better fate?

At the end of 1904, Thành's father received strict orders from the royal court to take an official post in Huế. He took his two sons along, and left the daughter at home. For more than a century, Huế, a modest-sized city in the centre of Vietnam, had been the residence of Vietnamese emperors. Royal palaces and ancient pagodas were scattered on the hilly green banks of the River of Fragrance, one of the most beautiful of Vietnam's rivers, so called because it had its source in the pinewoods of Trường Sơn range where fragrant medicinal herbs grew in abundance, lending their sweet aroma to the waters of the stream.

In Huế, Thành and his elder brother were enrolled at a newly opened school, Đông Ba, where they were taught French and literature. On finishing it, the brothers were admitted to Quốc Học National College.

The college was quartered in a former royal marines barracks. On top of the massive gate was an observation tower and a bell, like those in pagodas, with porcelain dragons standing guard on both sides of the entrance.

National College was then considered the finest educational establishment in Vietnam. The word "national" meant that the doors of the college were open to those who wanted a Vietnamese as well as a Western education. The college courses were in *quốc ngữ*, based on the Latin alphabet that had at the turn of the century replaced the old characters. There was also a special class where young people were taught in the ancient classical tradition.

In its early years, a certain Nordemand, a businessman by profession, was director of the college. Married to a Vietnamese, he knew the language and was called Ngô Đế Mân in the Vietnamese vernacular. Later, the office went to a Monsieur Lojoux, a Foreign Legion officer. He was the butt of jokes among Vietnamese patriots. For he had fought against Hoàng Hoa Thám's guerillas had been captured, and spent several months in a guerilla jungle camp. There he went about barefooted like the guerillas, carried water, and milled rice. The stories of how Thám had made the "master race" labour in the sweat of its brow was widely circulated and gave much pleasure to young Vietnamese.

Thành soon saw the college was meant to bring up loyal servants for the colonialists, and was depressed over the ways that reigned there.

The time of Thành's education coincided with that period in world history which Lenin described as "the beginning of the awakening of Asia." When the nations of the Orient came into motion under the impact of the Russian 1905 revolution. In Vietnam, too, the national liberation movement gathered momentum.

Stormy events were unfolding outside the college gates, evoking a lively response in Thành and other students. In the spring of 1908, Thành received his first lesson in political struggle. A campaign for the "renovation of the life and morals of the nation" was started in the country by the followers of Phan Bội Châu. Men who wore the long Manchu pigtails had their hair cut. People were urged to wear modern clothes, give up old customs, establish purely Vietnamese schools and trading firms, and to buy nothing but Vietnamese wares. Members of the Renovation Movement distributed proclamations exposing corrupt taxation practices and urging people to refuse to pay taxes.

Disturbances spread throughout Central Vietnam. Peasants in their thousands streamed into Huế from neighbouring countries. The Renovators established special posts along the roads leading into the city, where hair was cut forcibly and long clothes were shortened. The peasants, many of whom had come with their families, carrying straw mats to sleep on, a supply of rice, and cooking utensils, set up camp on the bridge across Fragrance River, round the French governor's residence, the court house, and on the sidewalks downtown. For three days and nights they waited for their demands for lower taxes and abolition of forced labour to be granted.

Some college students joined the demonstrators. Thành was at their head. He said to his mates: "Our countrymen are asking the French to repeal taxes. It's our duty to help them, because we know French."

Thành and his friends went from group to group, reciting patriotic poetry and urging the peasants to stand their ground. Townsmen gave the peasants tea and water. People relished the atmosphere of national

solidarity. They called each other by a new, recently coined word, *đồng bào*, countryman, which had the sound of music for the ears of patriots.

The French authorities, troubled by the unrest, tried to manipulate eight-year-old Emperor Duy Tân into prevailing on the demonstrators to go home. A four-horse carriage drove out of the grounds of the imperial palace with a mounted guard on both sides. But no one would listen to the boy emperor. True, his carriage was allowed to proceed, but the aroused peasants made the guard and the other carriages that followed the emperor's turn back. The French stayed in their homes. They were afraid to venture into the streets. The demonstrators became actual masters of the capital. But on the third day, troops summoned by the governor arrived, and the slaughter began. French soldiers opened fire pointblank on unarmed crowds. A hand-to-hand skirmish broke out on the bridge. Bodies of the killed were thrown into the river. The peasants, in despair, threw themselves upon the French soldiers and pulled them along into the water underneath.

Many college students, too, and especially their leader, came to grips with the soldiers. But Thành managed to avoid arrest, and found refuge in the house of a friend of the family. The next morning he attended classes as usual.

But soon a French officer with a few soldiers appeared. Accompanied by the college director, they came to Thành's class.

"We want a student of this class - a tallish boy and dark," the officer declared. (Thành was, indeed fairly tall, and, being a villager, strongly tanned.)

The officer added: "I have been ordered to demand that he be expelled at once."

The several days of the popular demonstration had been equivalent in impact to years of quiet living in Thành's Golden Lotus village. Previously, the suffering and mood of the people had been for him an abstract thing. Now life was delivering severe, grim, useful lessons each day. He thought bitterly of the many patriotic movements that had led to nothing: the royalist Cần Vương Movement, the Go East Movement, and the Renovation Society. All of them had been suppressed by force



of arms. And after each such defeat, the colonial authorities only tightened their grip.

For young men entering life, encounters with evil and violence are always a crossroads. Some are gripped by fear: their spirit weakens; they withdraw into themselves, they stop resisting evil. Those whose spirit is stronger, become seasoned fighters. They turn into revolutionaries and will not spare themselves in the fight for the people's freedom.

Eighteen-year-old Thành knew the road he would follow. His previous life had prepared him. His childhood was over. Independent adult life awaited. From now on, he would live the life of the people and champion the people's interests. It was time to go to the plain people, to work, to gather experience. Thành set out on a wandering tour around the country. He wanted to see things for himself.

From Huế he headed south along the shore of the South China Sea.

In those days there were no trains, and only few roads. People travelled mainly on foot, or in boats along the shore. Thành followed the footpaths, stopping over from time to time for a month or two in seaside towns or villages. In Qui Nhơn he passed a village teacher's examination. But when the list reached the French resident for endorsement, the latter struck out Thành's name for he was under police surveillance.

Having travelled some 500 kilometres by the end of 1910, Thành arrived in the city of Phan Thiết. Here he stayed with a friend of his father's an old patriot and teacher, who helped the young man find a teaching job in a recently opened private school. The school, established by local scholars, was known as the most progressive in Central Vietnam.

Thành had the second and third forms. He wore the traditional white gown and an orange belt, and wooden sandals on his feet as he entered the classroom. Each morning, he called on two boys and two girls to recite sad quatrains from the popular anthology of the Tonkin Public School, an educational society founded by patriots in Hanoi in 1907.

*Oh, Heaven! Can't you see our suffering?  
The nation is in chains, languishing in grief.  
Foreigners have doomed it to hunger,  
They've robbed it of everything it had.*

The young teacher taught his pupils more than just reading and writing. He wanted them to be fond of their country. He wanted them to rebel against its sad fate. He cultivated them patiently and fondly - like a gardener tending young saplings. Thành hoped the knowledge he was giving them would in due course grow into a mighty oak stretching its branches to the sun of freedom.

The young teacher was one of the first to teach the Latin alphabet. He explained things several times over at classes, never raising his voice, never punishing his pupils. He took the class out into the open at five in the morning to do physical exercises, and had a special sports lesson once a week. In those days this was an unheard-of innovation.

On holidays, Thành and his pupils went on long hikes. He told his young friends episodes from the history of Vietnam, about the two Trưng sisters who had ridden elephants in the van of the troops, inspiring soldiers to fight harder, and about the general Ngô Quyền, Trần Hưng Đạo and Quang Trung, who defeated the armies of the Chinese feudal lords.

Thành advised his pupils to read Vietnamese classics and thus learn the history and culture of their land. He drew attention to books that cultivated the sense of patriotic duty. Speaking of the famous rhymed novel, *Lục Vân Tiên*, by the blind poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Thành asked the children: "There's the following line." 'Loyalty and devotion are the two main virtues'. What can you say to that?

One of the boys replied: "Loyalty to the king, and devotion to Father and Mother."

Thành shook his head:

"All of us have distant ancestors. The history of our country is nearly 4,000 years old. That means forty centuries, and in every century our ancestors rose up against foreign invaders, fighting for freedom and

independence. That is why the main virtue of every young man is loyalty to the people, to his country. Now the second virtue: every one of you has parents, brothers and sisters. You must love and revere your parents, for they gave you life. The two virtues - loyalty and devotion - are forever linked. Love and revere your parents, be loyal to your people and country."

In his free time, preparing himself for a life of privations, Thành often went to the fishing villages. He helped fishermen repair their nets, asked them about their trade, and learned many new and useful things: how to determine the right tack in the open sea, how to fight seasickness, how to know a storm was about to break. Time and again, he went to sea with the fishermen, and returned with new impressions.

He did not stay long at the school. His lust for knowledge urged him on. At the end of 1910 he moved to Saigon. There, springing a surprise on his kin, he joined a newly-opened school training merchant seamen.

The choice of the educated young man many seem strange. But it was logical for a patriot who had set out to find his "magic sword."

While the other youths recruited by Phan Bội Châu, went east to Japan, which they thought the prototype of the future independent Vietnam, Thành was attracted by other things. Perhaps due to his knowledge of French history, of the great French educators, but more likely the inborn intuition of an outstanding mind. He gradually became convinced that Europe and only Europe - where so many revolutions had already occurred, including the French Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune, where the exciting words liberty, equality and fraternity had first resounded, where science and technology were developing so rapidly - that Europe alone was where he could pick up the requisite knowledge and learn the ways leading to his country's liberation.

Evidently, Thành came to this conclusion when reading Jean Jacques Rousseau. He learned from Rousseau's *Confessions* that before becoming the great educator that he was, Rousseau had crisscrossed Europe for nearly ten years. That was when he learned the most important and difficult lessons of his life. The world that surrounded

him was one of inequality, privation, and real calamities. His experiences enabled Rousseau to become herald liberty, equality, and fraternity, herald of the great French Revolution.

In an interview to the Soviet journal *Ogonyok* in 1923, Hồ Chí Minh explained his thirst for travel: "I first heard the French words *liberté, égalité, fraternité* as a boy of thirteen. And at once I wanted to see the French civilisation and put my finger on whatever was behind those three words."

Seen from Saigon, Europe did not look too far away. Advertisements of the Chargeurs Réunis shipping firm were pasted all over the port city. The ships pictured on them were heading for Singapore, Colombo, Djibouti, Port Said, Marseilles, Bordeaux and Havre. Hands for passenger boats were usually recruited in Vietnam ports.

One day, Thành revealed his plan to a friend he had acquired in the three months attending the sailor's school:

"I've decided to see how people live in France and other countries, then come back and help my countrymen."

"Where will you get all that money?"

Thành raised both his hands, and exclaimed: "Here's my money - I'll work my way there and back."

At noon on June 2, 1911, Thành came to the Saigon jetty romantically named Home of the Dragon. There he saw passengers boarding the *Admiral Latouche Tréville*. He went up the gangway and asked if there was a job for him. Those who heard him, laughed: the frail boy with a scholarly appearance was an unlikely ship's hand. But he would not go away, and finally a Vietnamese seaman took him to see the captain. The skipper examined Thành skeptically, and perhaps the boy's resolute glance and persistence prompted him to suggest that he could be a cook's assistant. He asked for his name.

"Văn Ba," Thành replied after a moment's hesitation. The name meant Văn the Third. Thành had not transgressed against the truth: he re-ally was the third child in the family.

## HE CALLED HIMSELF PATRIOT

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The Vietnamese garçons' -day on the ship began early - at four in the morning. Thành washed the table tops, and the walls and floor of the ship's kitchen. He stoked the ovens, brought a supply of coal, and lugged heavy baskets of vegetables, fish, beef and ice from the holds. One day, in a storm, lugging a heavy basket along the deck, a wave seized him and nearly washed him overboard. At the last instant he managed to take hold of a rope.

The kitchen catered to 800 persons - the passengers and the crew. So the young man hadn't an idle moment until late at night, climbing up and down steep and slippery ladders, barely catching his breath, sweating terribly. During the day, a coat of coal dust gathered on his body, and fatigue lay heavily upon him. Still, when the welcome time of rest arrived and his mates went to bed or played cards. Thành sought a quiet corner and read books until late at night.

One day, he made his first important discovery. Among the passengers were two French soldiers, of about his own age, returning home. Sometimes they helped him with his work. After nightfall they taught him the finer points of French, and gave him books to read. Thành, for his part, taught them Vietnamese, and supplied them with cups of coffee on the quiet. All the Frenchmen he had met so far had been arrogant officials or policemen. They behaved as though they owned the land and treated the Vietnamese as subhuman. But now, a little surprised, Thành was happy to see there could be good Frenchmen too.

His second discovery was made in Marseilles, the first French city he set foot in. The wretched dwellings of the poor in the narrow alleyways on the edge of the city were an eye-opener. He also saw many poorly clothed Frenchmen, and was stunned to see young girls selling themselves outside the waterfront tarvens. Late at night, when the ship lifted anchor and set its course to Havre, Thành said to his neighbour, a ship's garçon like himself: "There are poor people in France, too, as

in our country. Why don't the French worry about them rather than 'teach' us?"

On one of the crossings, Thành learned that Charlie Chaplin was on board. He had seen a few Chaplin films, and had quickly become a Chaplin fan. He sent a note, Geraldine Chaplin recalled years later, asking for permission to take a photograph with her father. Father wasted no time. He went down to the ship's kitchen and found the Vietnamese youth who called himself Ba. They ate a meal together, and then had a photograph taken... Later, after Hồ Chí Minh became a renowned political leader, they met several times. Chaplin often spoke of their meetings, and always remembered Hồ Chí Minh with affection and sincere joy.

Within a few months, Thành made two nearly round-the-world voyages. He crossed the Atlantic and Indian oceans, the Arabian and Red seas, the Mediterranean, and saw two more continents - first Africa, then America. In New York, he left the ship. For a few months he had a job in Brooklyn. Among the many impressions he gained, the strongest was made by the Declaration of Independence. He savoured the words that all men were created equal, that they were endowed with inalienable rights, among which were life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He remembered those words many many years later when, in secret hideout in Hanoi he laboured sleepless nights on the draft of Vietnam's own declaration of independence.

Soon, the picture that he saw around him in America dispelled all illusions. Behind the fine words about equality and liberty he saw the rampant injustices and the poverty of millions of people. Thành was stunned by what he saw in Harlem, the black ghetto that he often visited. The racial oppression and discrimination, signs of which were plentiful all round, revolted him.

Six months passed, and Thành was travelling again. His destination was England. He arrived there when World War I was at its height. The reception was not a kind one. He found a job clearing London streets of sleet and snow, then he was a stoker in rich houses - and for a pittance, though he managed to pay tuition at English language courses.

A few months later he had a stroke of luck: he found a job at the Carlton Hotel on Haymarket Street. The *chef* there, the famous Escoffier, known in those days as king of the French cuisine, took him on as a kitchen boy.

The work was hard. A weaker man would have gone down. But Thành was firm of character. Those who knew him then say he never used foul language, never drank, never gambled. All his free time, no matter how tired he was, was spent reading and learning.

But Thành's active mind could not suffer the monotonous life in London for long, far away from anything that might have linked him with his country. Across the English Channel, in France, he knew from the newspapers, were many of his countrymen, among whom he would be less lonesome. Besides, in French he would know more about the political affairs in Indochina, where portentous events were in the making.

An abortive anti-French armed rising had occurred in May 1916 in Huế. The colonial authorities suppressed it, and banished the rebellious Emperor Duy Tân to Réunion Island. And in August of the following year, in town of Thái Nguyên, the French suppressed an armed rising of Red Belts.

Thành wrote a letter to Phan Chu Trinh, whose Paris address he had come upon by accident. Trinh, arrested in 1908 for anti-French activities, had been sentenced to death by a colonial tribunal. But he was known in French democratic circles, and the Human Rights League and Jean Jaures, leader of the French Socialists, intervened in his behalf. The death sentence was commuted to exile on prison island Pulo Condore. Three years later, he was allowed to settle in France, where he lived under police surveillance.

Trinh did his best for Thành, promising help in finding a job and lodgings for him in Paris. At the end of 1917, finally, Thành crossed the English Channel to embattled France.

A lawyer by name of Phan Văn Trường let him a little room in quiet Rue Gobelins. Phan Chu Trinh had his photo studio in the same house, and employed Thành as retoucher. In his childhood, Thành had learned penmanship as part of his classical education, and handled the brush

with great skill. So, retouching came easy. His new friend, the lawyer, was glad to show Thành around the city. For Thành, he was an entirely new type of Vietnamese intellectual. Trường knew many French progressives - writers, artists, and politicians. He was interested in politics, especially in socialist theory, and Thành saw Marxist authors among his books. Besides, the house on Rue Gobelins was a place where Vietnamese emigrés congregated.

Thành loved wandering about Paris, that open-air museum of history. Even in the harsh conditions of wartime, the city had lost none of its beauty, glamour and charm. Every street, every house, almost every paving stone carried traces of a revolutionary past. For nearly a hundred years - from the end of the 18th century right up to the 1870s - Paris had been leader in revolutionary matters, the revolutionary beacon for all other European capitals.

Knights of revolution came to Paris from all over the world to hear the living voices of history, to glimpse through the prism of the past the outlines of the impending battles in their own countries. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels had lived in Paris. So had Lenin for three of his most fruitful years. Embedded in the memory of Paris were hundreds of names of revolutionaries from different countries. Years would pass and one more name would be added to the list, that of the as yet unknown Vietnamese patriot who walked the pavements of Paris with humility, gazing with wide-open eyes at majestic pictures of a glorious past.

Longing to see more of his countrymen, Thành became a frequent visitor to the Latin Quarter. Most Vietnamese who had settled in Paris, lived there. He went into the little restaurants kept by his countrymen, where the heady aromas of the thick, pitch-black Vietnamese coffee and the *nước mắm* fish sauce hung in the air. Those who live abroad for a long time, says a Vietnamese saying, see and smell *nước mắm* in their dreams.

In those days, the Vietnamese in France had no organisation of their own. Many of them, though missing their country, were rather pleased with their life, which was easier than in colonial Vietnam. Most young people were students getting a government stipend, or sons of

prosperous Vietnam mandarins. Patriotic feelings, and pain for their oppressed country, were foreign to many of them. Thành tried to arouse them, telling them about the suffering and heroic past of their country.

His prestige rose quickly. He was the moving spirit of the as yet rare gatherings of Vietnamese. Soon, he became an initiator, and most active participant, of the first Vietnamese organisation in France - the Association of Vietnamese Patriots.

In the evenings and on days off he spent hours in the Sainte-Geneviève Library on Rue Pantheon. That was where he first read Shakespeare, Dickens, Lu Hsun, Victor Hugo, and Emil Zola.

The genius of Leo Tolstoy staggered his imagination. He read French translations of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection* over and over. The philosophical depth of those outstanding novels delighted him. He was caught up by Tolstoy's hatred of war, of feudal authoritarianism, and injustice, for all these things doomed people to misery and rightlessness. Thành was captivated by Tolstoy's plain and clear language. After reading the description of a hunt in *War and Peace*, he wrote in his diary: "One must write only of what one saw and felt."

One day, Thành picked up a paper running installments of a novel, *Under Fire* (Le feu), by Henri Barbusse, then a young novelist. These dramatic lines excited Thành: "For countless workmen of the battles, you who have made with your hands all of the Great War, you whose omnipotence is not yet being used for doing good, you are the human host whose every face is a world of sorrow..."

In his mind's eye, Thành again saw the war-ravaged towns and villages in the north of France, hospital trains bringing wounded to Paris from the frontlines, the thousands of his emaciated and wretched countrymen who had been sent against their will to die for the alien interests of "mother" France and were hypocritically called champions of justice and freedom.

Thành could not have known what Maxim Gorky said of Barbusse:

"He looked into the essence of war more deeply than any other writer before him, and showed people the abyss of their delusion." But this was exactly how he felt after reading Barbusse's book. Again and again, he repeated the concluding lines of the novel: "These men of the people who had dimly seen the outlines of an unknown Revolution, a revolution that sprang from themselves and was already rising, repeated 'equality!'"

During the first weeks of his stay in France, Thành had learned of the astounding events in Petrograd at the end of October 1917: "a new revolution had broken out in Russia. The Paris papers called it a Bolshevik coup, and it was difficult for Thành and for many of his French friends to at once grasp its history-making significance. But his intuition helped him arrive at the main conclusion. So did his reading of socialist newspapers: for the first time in world history, working people had come to power.

From the bottom of his heart, the heart of an ardent patriot, he welcomed the working people's victory. Some forty years later, as Chairman of the Communist Party of Vietnam and President of free Vietnam, he would say that for him, for all Vietnamese revolutionaries, the influence of the Great October Socialist Revolution had been "like the water and rice that a thirsty and hungry traveller receives after a long journey."

The experiences of his long life abroad, coupled with the benign influence of the Great October Revolution - all this was an important turning point in Thành's ideological and political outlook. No, he had not yet found his "magic sword". But his vision of the world had changed. Such abstract things as "imperialism", "capitalism", and "colonialism" had acquired tangible features. Not in Vietnam alone. All over the world, the toiling masses, whole nations, were being subjected to oppression and exploitation. Meeting people of different colour and social background, Thành saw that in Europe, too, there were poverty-stricken people who had nothing in common with the colonialists oppressing his country. He saw that Africans were just as handicapped and humiliated as Asians. He concluded bitterly that for



colonialists the life of an oppressed, whether black or yellow, was not worth more than a sou.

Thành realised that the Vietnamese proverb, "a crow is black wherever it is" was entirely true. The United States, Britain, Germany, and Japan were, like France, imperialist powers with colonial possessions. Oppressed peoples could not expect help from any of them.

But his hatred of colonialists contained no racial overtones. This helped him gradually acquire a consistent internationalist outlook. He saw that all working people oppressed by the ruling classes, whether in capitalist or colonial countries, had the same interests. His life in Paris convinced him that the enemy of the Vietnamese people was also the enemy of the French working people. This discovery prompted him to join the most revolutionary wing of the French working class.

Thành was a regular reader of *l'Humanité*, the socialist newspaper. He tried not to miss any of the Socialist Party's meetings, conferences and discussions, for it was the only political party in France that sided with the colonial peoples. He listened eagerly to speakers who denounced colonialism. At one of the meetings he was introduced to Paul Vaillant Couturier, a left winger in the Socialist Party and one of the youngest deputies in the French National Assembly. And Couturier introduced Thành to Marcel Cachin and Henri Barbusse. Gradually, he got to know a large number of people in the Socialist Party and the trade-union movement.

At the end of 1918, Thành himself became a member of the Socialist Party of France. No Vietnamese before him had ever been in any French political party. At that time, the Socialists numbered no more than 12,000, though when World War I erupted its membership had approached 100,000. No few Socialists had been among the two million Frenchmen who laid down their lives in battle. And the responsibility for their death lay with the Socialist leaders who had voted for the war. Thành had joined the Socialists along with those who were later called the fiery generation, those who were moved by strong anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment and had none of the illusions of their elder comrades.

For Thành joining the party was the beginning of a professional revolutionary career. He adopted a new name or rather a party name- Nguyễn Ái Quốc, meaning Nguyễn the Patriot. Possibly he had used the name on arriving in France. That would be in keeping with Vietnamese tradition. But its first documentary evidence dates to the beginning of 1919.

Among themselves, Vietnamese use just the name, that is, the last element of their usually three-word appellation. The first element, an archaic reminder of once belonging to a particular clan, is used only to show special respect for the person in question. And that was what he was to his party friends, both Vietnamese and foreign - comrade Nguyễn. Twenty-three years of his revolutionary activity passed under that name.

2

In mid-January 1919, Paris gave a festive reception to a number of highly-placed foreign guests. Representatives of belligerent countries came to the peace conference in the French capital. Rulers of the victor powers were eager to cash in on the results of the war, to enrich themselves at the expense of the losers. The Paris newspapers called for national unity: they wanted a peace treaty that would ensure the revival of a great France. People living in the rich quarters and those who had made their fortunes on military supplies, as well as various shareholders -all of them, gripped by chauvinism, called on the government to make defeated Germany "pay for everything".

News of the peace conference attracted no few representatives of oppressed peoples to Paris. They nursed hopes that the high-ranking conferees would, when making post-war arrangements, hearken to their voices. Many of them were misled by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's demagogic Fourteen Points, which, among other things, referred to the rights of the colonies and of dependent countries. A delegation arrived from China. That country had fought on the side of the victor countries and legitimately expected, at long last, to shake off its semi-colonial status. A Korean delegation came to demand autonomy, and opened an information bureau in Paris. Representatives

of India, Ireland, and various Arab countries appeared in the endless corridors of the magnificent Versailles Palace.

One morning, the doorbell rang at the home of Jules Cambon, former French ambassador to Germany, who was a member of the French delegation. The door was opened by a young woman named Geneviève Tabouis. The future famous woman journalist was her ambassador uncle's secretary. A lean Asian youth with a pleasantly open face confronted her. He spoke with a strong accent:

"I want to hand the ambassador a document."

Geneviève let in the early visitor, seated him at a long richly adorned table that still stands in the drawing room of the Tabouis home and began questioning him.

"Mademoiselle, my name is Nguyễn Ái Quốc. I should like to see Monsieur Cambon."

The young man opened a file, and handed it to Geneviève.

"This is an appeal from the peoples of Indochina. I want to give it to the Ambassador."

The writings, Geneviève saw at once, was clear and orderly. There was also a letter to "Esteemed Mr. Ambassador Cambon, plenipotentiary representative of France at the Paris Conference".

"I write on behalf of the peoples of Indochina." This was inscribed on the top page of the document. "We are an underdeveloped nation. We have learned by experience what the civilisation of your country is."

The document was entitled, "List of Claims of the Annamese People". It read:

"While waiting for the sacred right of nations to self-determination to be recognised, the people of the former kingdom of Annam, now a French possession in Indochina, presents the following demands to the governments of the Allied powers in general, and the French government in particular:

"Complete amnesty of Vietnamese political prisoners.

"A reform of legislation in Indochina, providing Vietnamese with the same juridical guarantees as the Europeans and abolition of the special tribunals, an instrument of terror against the best Vietnamese.

"Freedom of the press and freedom of opinion.

"Freedom of association and freedom of assembly.

"Freedom of emigration and residence abroad.

"Right to education, opening of technical and occupational educational establishments for the population in all provinces.

"Substitution of a system of laws for the system of decrees.

"In the French Parliament there must be a permanent Vietnamese representative elected in his own country, in order to express the will and aspirations of his countrymen."

A few days later, other delegations and many French National Assembly deputies received the same messages. An attached note read: "Esteemed Sir, on the occasion of the victory of the Allies, we should, with your permission, like to address to you a list of the wishes of the people of Vietnam. Convinced in your magnanimity, we hope that you will support these demands during their discussion by the plenipotentiary representatives.

"On behalf of a group of Vietnamese patriots, Nguyễn Ái Quốc."

The resolute Vietnamese youth with a file of papers under his arm was seen in the noisy corridors of Paris newspaper offices and crowded halls rented for meetings and conferences by trade unions and the Socialist Party.

Louis Arnoux, chief of the Indochina section of the French political police who would one day become chief of the security service in Indochina, shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment when the actions of a certain Nguyễn Ái Quốc and the contents of an "anti-French" document he was disseminating, were brought to his notice. He had thought he knew all the politically unreliable Annamese in Paris, and was informed of every step they made. One of them, Phan Chu Trinh, owner

of a photo studio, had practically given up political activity, and, besides, could not have written the document in question for he respected France.

The lawyer Phan Văn Trường, also a resident of Paris thought to be a Marxist, was chiefly engaged in translating political books into Vietnamese and was not known to engage in any subversive activity. The only one out of Arnoux's old acquaintances who could have ventured on such a course of action was the embattled Phan Bội Châu - but Arnoux knew that Chau was in South China and, besides, had only recently published an article which, quite unexpectedly, favoured Franco-Annamese cooperation.

Neither the "all-seeing" Arnoux nor the young patriot's closest friends knew, nor could have known, that the author of the "list of Claims", one Nguyễn Ái Quốc, was the ship's kitchen boy Văn Ba, or the inquisitive youngster named Thành, son of the only scholar in the Golden Lotus Village.

On June 29, 1919, Nguyễn Ái Quốc was among the first readers of the morning papers. The headlines in the bourgeois press were triumphant. The Paris conference had culminated in the signing of a peace treaty that signified a complete victory for France. The country had received practically everything it wanted: Alsace and Lorraine, large reparations, and some of the German colonies in Africa. The newspapers reflected on the postwar arrangements in capitalist Europe, where France would play a dominant role. But nothing was said of the fate of the colonial peoples. The participants in the Paris conference had secured a redivision of the world in favour of the victors, and were deaf to the demands of colonial and dependent countries. A conspiracy of silence surrounded the "List of Claims of the Annamese People."

To be sure, Ái Quốc had enough experience by that time to know that a petition could not have a decisive effect. He considered his initiative little more than convenient occasion to expose colonialism and attract the attention of French democrats to the situation in Vietnam, and, last but not least, to rouse the Vietnamese themselves from their lethargic sleep.

Still, he was assailed by bitterness. Freedom, equality, and fraternity had turned out to be words and nothing more, a smokescreen of the bourgeoisie to conceal its crimes. The eight points in his "List of Claims" did not go beyond demanding autonomy within the French Union, and the fundamental freedoms of bourgeois democracy. But this had the effect of a red rag. The imperialists' honeyed wartime promises were nothing short of deceit. The way out? Struggle unto death. To win independence, the colonial peoples had to throw out their oppressors, like the working people in Russia. Revolution was the only way to break down the colonial stronghold. The "List of Claims" was a political manifesto heralding a new stage in the national liberation movement of the Vietnamese.

Bùi Lâm, a veteran of the Communist Party of Vietnam, recalled the tremendous impression that Nguyễn Ái Quốc's action made on Indochinese emigrés and those serving in the French army or navy. "The French called it a bomb," he recalled. "We called it thunder - a spring thunder that dispersed the fog and the clouds. It gave life to the sprouts of freedom that slumbered deep within us. Going abroad in search of a livelihood, we all remained true to our country and dreamed of seeing it free. So, we could not but revere the man who claimed rights for his people. The Vietnamese in France began speaking of independence, self-determination, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc. That name itself held a magic attraction for us."

The new name in the anti-colonial movement and the dissemination of "seditious literature" created a commotion among the French authorities in Indochina. On July 25, 1919, the Ministry for Colonial Affairs received a secret dispatch from the Governor of Cochin China.

"Newspapers in the colony have received an inflammatory leaflet from Paris, entitled 'List of Claims of the Annamese People,' it said, "It is signed by a Nguyễn Ái Quốc on behalf of a group of Annamites. I should be grateful for any information you have about the author. In his letters he says the leaflet was also sent to people in high places in Paris. According to the secret police in Cochin China, the man is known to the Ministry for Colonial Affairs."

A cable to the same effect also arrived from the Governor-General of Indochina. Saying that the "List of Claims" had been found on the person of an arrested Tonkinese, the Governor-General requested all the available information about its author, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, who was said to have distributed the leaflet among departing natives in the port of Marseilles.

The Vietnamese colonial press reacted in its own way. The newspaper *Tonkin's Future* wrote: "Again Nguyễn Ái Quốc! Recently we quoted the text of a petition he had filed in Paris. Now the latest ship has brought us the 'List of Claims of the Annamese People.' The text has also reached a number of journalists, and officers of various institutions..."

The reaction of the Ministry for Colonial Affairs was anything but unexpected: although the war was over, it prolonged the postal censorship in Vietnam and for Vietnamese living in France. In France and Indochina police files were started on Nguyễn Ái Quốc. Two secret agents were assigned to shadow him. At the end of 1919, photographs of him were filed by the Paris police. In a report of the Interior Ministry, investigators noted that the heart and soul of the Annamese movement in Paris was a certain Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Secretary-General of the Association of Annamites Patriots.

That was when Louis Arnoux, who saw Nguyễn's photograph for the first time, noted his burning eyes and the resolution written on his face, and said to officials of the Colonial Ministry that the young man, seemingly frail and fragile, was a man of vigour and action, and would one day put an end to French dominance in Indochina.

Nguyễn had long wanted to tell common Frenchmen of the bitter plight of his countrymen. And his acquaintanceship with Gaston Monmousseau, a progressive journalist, editor of *La Vie Ouvrière*, and Jean Longuet, grandson of Karl Marx, editor of the socialist *Populaire*, helped him do so. It was difficult writing in a foreign tongue, but gradually he learned, helped by his new friends, who touched up his contributions.

He lamented that the French had so quickly forgotten the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who had fought under the tricolour in the war,

laying down their lives in the fields of France and Germany, and in the Balkans. He wrote of the appalling living conditions of the Vietnamese "volunteers" building roads and digging foundation ditches in the northern suburbs of Paris. He wrote, too, that the end of the war had brought no relief to the Vietnamese despite France winning. On the contrary, the number of Vietnamese sentenced to a slow death on Pulo Condore was rising, as was the number of prisoners in the remote Tonkin province of Sơn La, and in France Guinea and New Caledonia.

Through his contacts in the papers, Nguyễn picked up that meagre and conflicting news came from Soviet Russia. He questioned his Socialist friends about the Russian Revolution, and about Lenin and the Bolsheviks. He wanted to understand them. That was not easy in those days. The bourgeois press had mounted a slander campaign, distorting the course of events in Russia. Posters put all over Paris depicted a Bolshevik with a blood-stained knife between his teeth, grasping a woman by her hair, with peasant huts burning in the background. On other posters a hungry Russia grovelled in agony. In the bourgeois newspapers, Nguyen read monstrous inventions about the country—that the Bolsheviks had loosened a bloodbath, that the Soviets had nationalised women, and that citizens had to file a request before being allowed to marry.

At the end of 1918, the French government went over from hostile propaganda to armed intervention against the young Soviet Republic. An Anglo-French squadron dropped anchor in Sevastopol and Odessa. Landing parties seized Kherson and Nikolayev, and thrust farther north.

Workers in France responded with mass actions in defence of the Soviet Republic. Nguyen attended meetings held for several consecutive days by the 2,000 workers of a mechanical works in the vicinity of his house. He joined the Socialists distributing leaflets that called on people to come out against the intervention in Russia.

Marcel Cachin made emotional exposures of those "who slandered the Russian revolution without even trying to understand its nature".

Speaking in the National Assembly, he warned: "Regardless of your attitude towards the Russian Revolution, get your troops out of there at once. If you don't, French soldiers will soon absorb the ideas of Bolshevism and Revolution. They will then come home and do what the German soldiers did who had been in Russia."

That, Cachin pointed out, was the unavoidable result of any resort to force. The peoples would soon realise that they must secure the solidarity of those who suffer want and oppression.

Cachin's words were prophetic. In April 1919, French units quartered in Odessa, and seamen stationed in Sevastopol, showed their revolutionary mood by singing the *Internationale* and fraternising with Russian workers. "Down with the War in Russia! Under this slogan seamen formed revolutionary committees.

Nguyễn stumbled upon a sensational item in the papers. A colonial regiment of Algerians, Moroccans and Vietnamese quartered in Odessa had refused to fight for the interests of the French bourgeoisie. It went over to the side of the Red Army.

Nguyễn did not know then that the man who raised the red flag on the cruiser *Waldeck-Rousseau*, then at anchor in the Odessa harbour, was a Vietnamese named Tôn Đức Thắng - a Saigon schoolmate of his who would subsequently become a close comrade in the fight for a new Vietnam.

"I am sure," Tôn Đức Thắng would say later, "that any Vietnamese patriot, especially a worker, who found himself in Russia at that historical moment, would have done exactly what I did, for to love one's country and to hate the imperialists means loving the October Revolution and hating those who are against it."

The French authorities dealt most severely with the rebellious seamen. André Marty, a mechanic aboard a destroyer, and dozens of his mates were sentenced to hard labour. But this did not halt the actions in defence of Soviet Russia. Young Socialists in Paris went about singing a march written by Pau Vaillant Couturier. Meetings of Nguyễn's party section frequently ended with the singing of these lines from Couturier's march:

*Tyrants stained with blood  
Who started the four-year war  
Have not overcome the proud, free Soviet  
Land- land of the workers' hope.*

Gradually, Nguyễn settled down. His party comrades got him a *permit de sejours* and a work permit. With official papers in pocket, he had no trouble finding a job at a reputable photographer's. Finding lodgings was more difficult. Few landladies wanted a Vietnamese lodger. Yet through Vaillant Couturier's good offices, he finally moved into an unprepossessing little room in the 17th arrondissement. To glimpse a slice of blue sky he had to stick his head far out of the little window facing the blank wall of an adjoining house. There was no heating, and Nguyễn suffered from the cold. His ingenuity found a part solution: before leaving for work in the morning he would put a brick in the landlady's fire, and at night take it up to his room wrapped in a newspaper and exuding warmth.

The quarter he lived in was a poor, working-class neighbourhood. Nguyễn saw the wretched life of its denizens. Once more, with his own eyes, he saw the irreconcilable pattern of class antagonisms that racked capitalist society. He put down his observations in a contribution to *L'Humanité*, entitled "Paris" and presented in the form of a letter to his cousin in Vietnam.

"There's a district in Paris that can by itself illustrate all sides of life, the psychology of Paris, of all France, of the universe. Anyone who wants to study the state of contemporary society will do well to visit three places - l'Etoile, Batignole and Epinette. You have always had a fertile imagination and I am sure that upon reading these three names you will have guessed the rung each occupies on the social ladder. I can even hear you whisper, 'Epinette, Epinette!' Life there is indeed very thorny.<sup>(1)</sup> And l'Etoile is for the lucky, the privileged, a real Garden of Eden.

1. A play on words, for Epinette sounds as a diminutive of l'épine, the French for black thorn. - Auth.



"L'Etoile is a place of cosmopolitan luxury, abundance, and refined indolence. It is a paradise for the idle of all colours and lands. Splendour rules the day - even the animals here are magnificent. The money spent on various birds and pedigree horses would be enough to feed the population of one of our provinces. The meanest cur in this part of Paris is better off than a working man."

"The Epinette is at the bottom of the ladder: here live paupers, unwanted people, the rejects of other two places. It is as though they belong to some other breed of humans - timid, modest, shy, crushed by the burden of their poverty. Watch Uncle press the sugar juice out of sugar cane, and you will get the picture. The sweet juice runs down one side, and the squeezed out remains are on the other. That is what you have here: wealth and indolence on one side, want and hard work on the other."

Contributing to left papers, Nguyễn learned how little, if anything, the French knew of his country.

On January 4, 1920, Jean, a secret agent who tailed Nguyễn, reported to the Minister for Colonial Affairs: "Monsieur Nguyễn Ái Quốc complained that other countries know nothing about Indochina. He had spoken to foreigners, and none of them knew a place like that existed. They had never heard of it, and assumed that it was a border zone between India and China. Nguyễn Ái Quốc said he wanted to speak and write as much as possible about Indochina. He wanted members of the Socialist Party to mount a campaign, so that everybody should know what is really going on in Indochina."

Nguyễn's wish to let ordinary Frenchmen know the truth about the colonialists' abuses in Indochina led to the thought of writing and publishing a book. In his very next report, secret agent Jean cites a dialogue between Nguyễn and Lâm, a friend of his:

"When do you expect to finish your book? Lâm asked.

"Hard to say. I need a lot of fresh material. I wouldn't want to invent anything. I'll quote extracts from various books on French colonialism. The book will consist of four chapters - the first about Indochina prior to its seizure by the French, the second about what the colonialists

brought to Indochina, the third about the present situation in Indochina, and the fourth about Indochina's future.

Nguyễn entitled his book, which was ready in March 1920, *The Oppressed*.

"Monsieur Nguyễn Ái Quốc, wrote agent Jean, "intends to publish the book on his own money. He told Lâm he had saved up 300 francs... It is most unlikely that some secret organisation should have supplied him with any money, because he is a finicky sort of person. He wants the book to be published on his own savings."

But the manuscript never reached the printer's. On coming home one night, Nguyễn found it missing, Jean, a man who knew of Nguyễn's every step, had evidently stolen it. But what Nguyễn had accomplished was not wasted. He used a few of the chapters he had intended for *"The Oppressed"* in a book that appeared in 1925, *French Colonisation on Trial*.

His moving to new lodgings, even though they amounted to an unheated, small half-dark room, meant that now Nguyễn was financially independent of Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Văn Trường. Their relationship had indeed gradually grown cooler.

Phan Chu Trinh, evidently affected by his arrest and prison term, had in effect abandoned all political activities, and preferred spending his free time in billiard halls. As for Phan Văn Trường, he was by nature more attracted to desk work. He had neither skill nor the liking to work among people. And Nguyễn was angry at both for their indifference.

They, on the other hand, thought his conduct and ties with the Association of Vietnamese Patriots a worthless and childish venture. Fierce arguments would break out between them. The secret agents who kept an eye on their house reported the noisy quarrels that occurred each night, noting that by all evidence the views of Phan Chu Trinh and Nguyễn Ái Quốc diverged.

A Ministry for Colonial Affairs file contained the following note: "Nguyễn Ái Quốc is gradually becoming an authoritative leader of the Annamites resident in France, while the part played by Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Văn Trường is diminishing."

Nguyễn was perturbed by the ideological break with his friends. He was fond of both of them, and grateful for all the good things they had done for him. So their final encounter left a most bitter aftertaste. One evening, as usual, they gathered in Trường's study. Stroking his moustache nervously, Trinh glanced vexatiously at Nguyễn.

"I was told you're distributing leaflets," he said.

"Yes, claims of the Annamites. Trường helped me with my French, and the Association helped disseminate them in France and Indochina. What's wrong, Uncle Phan?"

Trường explained hastily, "I did help, but I told him he was playing a dangerous game."

"An adventurer, that's what you are," Trường exclaimed. I've told you before, and I'll say it again: France is a civilised country. It is bringing us enlightenment and knowledge. What we need are a few reforms. Our troubles come from our weak-minded emperor, greedy mandarins, feudal lords, and the gentry. What we need is a republic and the paternal hands of France."

Trinh was reared on strick Confucian traditions, and in political debates preferred the lapidary style of the old Chinese writings, where characters usually stood for just the subject, object, and predicate, while many grammatical aspects, such as tense, mood, and so on, were merely implied.

"What civilisation are you talking about, Uncle Phan? Nguyễn asked acidly. "Haven't you heard of the colonialists' cruelty? More prisons than schools, and all of them crowded. Vietnamese have been stripped of elementary rights. We are oppressed, by what is worse is that the colonialists ply us with opium and drink - in order to make idiots out of us. You call that civilisation?"

He cited a newspaper report of a French mechanic in Hải Phòng shooting a man who was pursuing a young woman. The killed man turned out to be European. The killer said to justify the murder that he had thought his victim was a native.

"And what about the rising in Thái Nguyên?" Nguyễn added heatedly. "Blood was shed, and innocent people were executed. It was

provoked by M. Darles, the French resident. To squeeze money out of people, he put them in jail, where they were beaten. He buried people up to their necks in the ground and did not release them until they were half dead. Do you think M. Darles was punished for it? Not on your life!"

Trường smiled sadly.

"Did you think your petition would help?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," Nguyễn replied. "But we mustn't sit on our hands. Unite, organise, gather strength. Colonialists do not change their spots. To plead with them is like playing the lute to a buffalo. Force and nothing but force will win us freedom. Remember Lê Lợi, Trần Hưng Đạo, and Quang Trung. In Russia, the people have taken power into their own hands. Our neighbour, China, has risen, too."

"No, no, and no. No force. Force would be the end," Trinh objected. He added, as though arguing against his old ideological adversary, Phan Bội Châu, "Mustn't count on foreign countries either. That's stupid."

Trường filled the pause by saying:

"Our task is to enlighten our people. We must bring them knowledge. Political knowledge. Cautiously, and slowly. The way you behave, your scandalous speeches at the club, your leaflets - it's childish. There's no other word for it. But it's also dangerous. The police'll be after you."

The argument between the three lasted deep into the night. At that time, Nguyễn did not know Marx's pertinent thought that action is more important than talk. The sixth sense of a real revolutionary filled Nguyễn with a yearning for action - to help those who were fighting and rouse those who had resigned themselves to being colonial slaves.

Nguyễn did not lose contact with his elder friends after he had moved to the new place. He could not accept their views, but had deep respect for both of them for what they had done. Phan Chu Trinh had been the idol of the patriotic Vietnamese youth for years. And when he died suddenly in 1925, after having just returned to his homeland, all dedicated Vietnamese took his death as a great national loss. As many

as 140,000 people walked behind his coffin through the streets of Saigon. There were also public demonstrations in Hanoi, Hải Phòng, and Nam Định.

Phan Văn Trường, the timid intellectual, had done a lot by then to disseminate Marxist knowledge in Vietnam. He had been the first to translate the *Communist Manifesto* into Vietnamese, and had himself written dozens of articles on Marxist theory. On returning home, he started a newspaper, *Annam*, which ranked as one of the most progressive publications in Cochin China in the 1920s.

But a break with his old friends, though painful, was becoming inevitable. Ideologically, Nguyễn was already far ahead of them. He was foreign to any and all conservatism, and rejected the social utopias and political delusions of the Vietnamese national leaders of the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. A man of action, he had a revolutionary psychology, and happily escaped the effects of any dangerous reformist viruses. Unlike his old friends, he was about to merge national patriotic ideals with the Marxist doctrine.

## THE MAGIC SWORD

*There is a legend in our country... about the magic Brocade Bag. When facing great difficulties, one opens it and finds a way out... Leninism is not only a miraculous Brocade Bag, a compass, but also a radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory, to socialism and communism.*

Hồ Chí Minh

1

Following the foundation of the Third (Communist) International on Lenin's initiative, the truly revolutionary forces in the working-class movement in capitalist countries mounted a struggle against reformist

leaders and for the founding of communist parties, that is, parties of a new type called upon to lead the revolutionary movement and rally the mass of the working people.

In France, the fight for a new type of party, and its affiliation with the Comintern, was headed by the revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party. By the end of 1919, within just a year of the conclusion of World War I, the Party's membership had risen to nearly 100,000. Most of the new members were young workers strongly influenced by the 1917 Socialist Revolution in Russia. This was the time the Party was joined by Maurice Thorez and Jacques Duclos, later the foremost leaders of the French working-class movement. The younger members in the Party were ever more visibly opposed to reformist policies. They demanded that the Socialist Party should quit the Second International and join Lenin's Third.

The French section of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), consisting, among others, of Inesse Armand, Jeanne Labourbe and Jacques Sadoul, contributed greatly to the spread of the ideas of the Third International among the working people of France. At the height of the May strikes of 1919 a new body sprang up in Paris which called itself the Committee for Affiliation with the Third International. Members of the socialist revolutionary wing saw their task in propagating communist ideas.

Meetings of the Party's district section, which Nguyễn did his best to attend regularly, were increasingly reminiscent of a droning swarm of wasps. Successive speakers argued about the two Internationals - which of them was better suited to further the interests of the French workers. The arguments were made all the more vehement by the impetuous French temperament. Nguyễn listened attentively, though not everything the speakers said was clear. Some juggled with "clever" words - "utopian socialism", "anarchism", "reformism", and "syndicalism", and with the names of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Blanqui. But gradually he began to grasp the overall picture.

The meetings, like the Party, comprised three fairly distinctive camps. The left Socialists were for joining the Comintern, which they saw as the harbinger of truly revolutionary struggle for the liberation

of the working class from capitalist oppression. The right wing demanded the revival of the Second International, which, they maintained, was closer to the democratic traditions of the French Republic. The middle-of-the-roads, meanwhile, known in the Party as the Longuetists (their leader was Jean Longuet), were for refurbishing the Second International by clearing it of all "non-socialist" elements.

Nguyễn was distressed that the speakers discoursed exclusively about the future of the French working-class movement, and made no reference whatever to the fate of the colonial peoples. At one meeting, he asked for the floor:

"Dear friends", he said, "all of you are Socialists. That is splendid. All of you want to liberate the working class. If so, what difference is there between the Second, Third, and Second-and-a-Half Internationals? Whatever International you join, you will have to act together, because you have the same goal. Why argue so much? While you argue, my compatriots in Indochina are languishing under the colonial yoke..."

After the meeting, a girl named Rose, whom he knew before, told him he did not see the difference between the Internationals because he was still green.

"You'll soon see what our arguments are all about," she said. "The issue has a strong bearing on the future of our working class."

In his heart, Nguyễn was always with the left Socialists, those who spoke out for the colonial peoples. It was among them that he found friends. Yet his conscious option in favour of Leninism came in 1920. On July 16 and 17, *L'Humanité* published tentative guidelines on the national and colonial questions formulated by Lenin for the 2nd Congress of the Communist International. That was the first time Nguyễn read anything written by Lenin. He was stunned by the simple wisdom, of Lenin's ideas. He was overjoyed to read that the "Communist International's entire policy on the national and the colonial questions should rest primarily on a closer union of the proletarians and the working masses of all nations and countries for a joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landowners and the

bourgeoisie. This union alone will guarantee victory over capitalism, without which the abolition of national oppression and inequality is impossible".<sup>(1)</sup>

For the first time in his life, Nguyễn read in so many words, with staggering impact, that the efforts of the revolutionary movement in the metropolitan countries and those in the colonial countries should merge. He read about the distinctions and specificity of the liberation movement in colonial and dependent countries. Lenin stressed:

"With regard to the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate, it is particularly important to bear in mind:

"... that all Communist parties must assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in these countries, and that the duty of rendering the most active assistance rests primarily with the workers of the country the backward nation is colonially or financially dependent on."<sup>(2)</sup>

Nguyễn kept reading some of the passages over and over; he wanted to reach down to the bottom of the Lenin's ideas. Tears of delight dimmed his eyes. He felt as though he had long and stubbornly climbed uphill, clinging to barely visible projections, his fingers bleeding, until now, at last, he saw the boundless spaces in all their beauty. For nine years had he looked for the Magic Sword, the great truth that would bring freedom to his people. And he had found it at last - the truly revolutionary, endlessly diverse, universal Leninist doctrine, whose main principles were equally applicable to the advanced capitalist countries and to the backward peasant countries of the East.

Thus passed the night. This time the dawn was not only the forerunner of a new day, but also the beginning of a fundamentally new stage in Nguyễn's life. Lenin's ideas captured him. He was conquered for good. Years later, as President of Free Vietnam, he recollected:

"In those Theses there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again I was finally able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment and

<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*. Vol.31, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 146.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

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: "My dear long-suffering compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to liberation!"

"Since then, I had complete confidence in Lenin, in the Third International."

Nguyễn sent a letter to the Committee for Affiliation with the Third International, asking to be admitted as its member. And he was accepted. Now, he was one of the most active speakers at meetings of his section. He attacked Lenin's enemies, the enemies of the Third International. "If you do not condemn colonialism, if you do not side with the colonial peoples," he said, "what kind of revolution are you then making?" Cheered by young workers, he flung these words at the opportunists. On becoming a member of the Committee, he eagerly attended meetings of other sections, where he articulately defended his ideas.

In Moscow on August 6, 1920, the 2nd Congress of the Comintern endorsed the 21 conditions for admission to the Comintern. *L'Humanité* published the full text of that important document. Nguyễn's attention was attracted to clause 8: "The parties of countries where the bourgeoisie possesses colonies and oppresses other nations must have an especially clear line in the matter of colonies and oppressed nationalities. Every party that wants to belong to the Third International is obliged to expose the offences of 'its own' imperialists in the colonies without mercy; it is obliged to support any liberation movement in the colonies by deed rather than word, and demand the expulsion of its own, home-bred imperialists from these colonies, cultivate among the working people of its own country a truly fraternal attitude towards the working population of the colonies and towards oppressed nationalities, and to conduct systematic agitation among their own troops against any and all oppression of the colonial peoples."

The Committee for Affiliation to the Third International had no residence of its own. It leased various available premises, and kept moving from address to address. One day, at a meeting in the Latin Quarter, Nguyễn got to know a young Frenchman who had just been demobilised from the army. His name was Jacques Duclos. Though he

was seven years Nguyễn's junior, they looked the same age, for like all Vietnamese, Nguyễn was slim and straight, and had shining black hair, which made him look much younger than his age. They met regularly at meetings of the Committee, and gradually became friends.

Duclos recalled later: "We spoke a lot about Soviet Russia when collecting money in the streets to help the Russian Revolution cope with the hunger and the aftermaths of the blockade organised by France and other Entente countries."

One day, Nguyễn said the Russian revolution was in danger: "Yet," he added, "it will defeat all its enemies, though many hardships lie ahead."

Duclos was only just starting on his activity in the party. He eagerly questioned Nguyễn about things he had not yet himself understood. One late night, the two friends were travelling in a nearly empty car of the Paris subway. The usual smell of machine oil and burnt rubber hung heavily in the air. Jacques told Nguyễn that he had seen Vietnamese in his native village in the foothills of the Pyrenees. They were employed in a military workshop, and lived in barracks behind barbed wire.

Jacques asked Nguyễn why the wretches had left their homes. In reply he heard the sad story of how his countrymen abused the Vietnamese, how they were stripped of elementary human rights, how they were mercilessly exploited and forcibly turned into alcoholics and drug addicts.

"That was a revelation," Duclos recollected. "For in France we were told colonial policy was a kind of export of civilisation. Thanks to Nguyễn I learned the truth about French colonialism."

But the main subject they discussed was the Comintern. In those days the young Socialists who favoured affiliation with the Comintern were eagerly awaiting the return from Moscow of Marcel Cachin and the General Secretary of the Socialist Party, Louis Frossard, who had gone to meet Lenin and make contact with the governing bodies of the Comintern. Would these two men cope with their job? Time and again, Nguyễn and Jacques raised and discussed this question. Both agreed that Frossard could not be trusted as a political figure. And soon, Frossard bore them out by leaving the French Communist Party which

he had himself help to found. As for Cachin, here they differed. Duclos had never met Cachin, but had heard he was a centrist, Nguyễn, who knew Cachin well, who had explained the Indochina situation to him, was captivated by the fact that even when Cachin backed the idea of "war to the finish", he was still actively opposed to colonialism.

"Nguyễn thought better of Marcel Cachin's probable performance in Moscow than I," Duclos recollected. "And he proved right... Lenin, too, had different opinions of Cachin and Frossard, though both believed in 'war to the finish'. Lenin saw that the Russian Revolution had made a strong impression on Cachin, and had trust in him. He ignored the hints that Cachin was a centrist. And I found that Nguyễn Ái Quốc's opinion of Cachin was practically the same as Lenin's."

The Socialist Party of France joined the Comintern. The time was ripe for a radical restructuring. Nguyễn used to say angrily that party meetings had become a talking-shop, with no one bothering to carry out adopted decisions.

"A revolutionary party," he used to say to Duclos, "must have tight discipline. Once a decision is taken, it has to be followed. It is high time for us to form a new party where the parliamentary style of work will be ruled out."

Cachin and Frossard came back from Russia. On August 13, the Socialist Party held a meeting on the premises of the Paris circus. People shoved and pushed to get closer to the orators, for there were no loudspeakers in those days. Thousands of workers had come, occupying all the seats, spilling over on the arena. Yet the tram and subway brought new masses of people, and the 30,000 who found no place inside the circus, milled in the adjoining streets. Nguyễn had been among the first to come, and found a comfortable seat.

When Cachin appeared, everybody sang the *Internationale* and chanted, "Long live Cachin! Long live Lenin! Long live the Soviets!" "What a joy for an old Socialist who has dreamed of it for thirty years to see a society in which labour alone has all the power," Cachin said. He said the Russian Revolution, which had created such a society, paid a heavy price for it."

"We, too," he said, "are making it suffer, since the soldiers of the Socialist Republic of Russia are being killed by French shells fabricated by French workers and transported by French railwaymen and sailors.

"Gather strength, people of France! See what imperialist France is up to, and think of your duty."

Cachin said the French Socialists ought to study the experience of the Russian Revolution. He said the Third International, unlike its predecessors, had gone over to direct action against world imperialism. It was uniting all nations, and giving them moral and material aid. He said the Russian Revolution and the Comintern were arousing the enslaved. Ideas of liberation were spreading in the East, too, and the better minds and over the world were hoping for national independence and freedom.

After his visit to Russia, Cachin became one of the most dedicated members of the movement for affiliation with the Third International. He travelled all over France, took part in dozens of meetings, explaining the substance of communism and expressing confidence in the victory of the Russian Bolsheviks. Cachin's drive swung the scales. At the end of 1920 most French Socialists voted for affiliation with the Comintern.

2

At the height of the Christmas holidays, on December 25, 1920, the Socialist Party held its national congress in the little town of Tours. Among its 285 delegates, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, elected by his section for his part in the Committee for Affiliation, was the only representative of the French colonies.

The congress was held in the riding school next door to St. Julian's Cathedral facing the Loire. (During World War II the building was bombed and burned down.)

The riding school was hastily adapted for the congress by members of the local party branch. The presiding platform consisted of unpainted planks laid out on trestles; collapsible chairs and tables were hired from a soft drinks tradesman; a few garlands of flowers adorned the ceiling; portraits of Jaurès were hung on the walls, and behind the speakers'

platform two large posters: "Liberation of the working people is the cause of the working people!" and "Workers of All Countries, Unite".

Faithful to the tradition that dated to the romantic times of the French Revolution, congress delegates seated themselves in separate groups depending on their views. On the left were those who wanted affiliation with the Comintern, the Longuetists were in the centre (they were the "reconstructors", those who wanted to merely improve the Second International), and on the right were the social-chauvinists, fierce enemies of Bolshevism and Soviet Russia.

The debate went on for four days. Though the majority had from the start favoured the party's affiliation with the Comintern, the controversy was exceedingly sharp. The social-chauvinists and "reconstructors" seized on every opportunity to distort the terms of admission to the Comintern, to slander those who favoured affiliation, and to influence the final decision of those who were not entirely clear about the goals and tasks of Communists. And the latter were fairly numerous.

At the height of the meeting the floor was given to Nguyễn Ái Quốc. A murmur of approval resounded when the slim young man with a high forehead and prominent cheek-bones, dressed in a fairly elegant suit of clothes specially borrowed for the occasion, rose to speak. There was no microphone, and Nguyễn spoke standing beside his seat.

"I should be speaking of the world revolution," he said. "But as a Socialist I have come here with pain in my heart to protest against the monstrous imperialist crimes in my country."

"Bravo," someone shouted.

After describing the fierce colonial exploitation, oppression, discrimination, and abuse loosened on the Vietnamese, Nguyễn exclaimed:

"Twenty million Vietnamese or half as many as the population of France, live a life of misery. Yet they are said to be under the protection of France! The Socialist Party must take effective measures on behalf of the oppressed colonial peoples."

Amidst shouts of approval, Jean Longuet cried:

"But I've spoken in defence of the natives."

"Haven't I imposed a dictatorship of silence when I began to speak? Nguyễn parried, causing merriment in the hall. "The Party should conduct socialist propaganda in all the colonies. I should think that affiliation with the Third International with amount to the party promising to recognise the importance of the colonial question."

A decisive moment came in the deliberations at nightfall on December 29. Resolutions were put to the vote. One was for affiliation with the Third International, another rejected some of the 21 conditions of the Comintern and suggested establishing contact with all socialist organisations that had quit the Second International. The first was submitted by Cachin, the second by Longuet. Cachin's resolution won 70 per cent of the votes, including that of Nguyễn Ái Quốc.

Delegates sang the *Internationale*. "Long live Jaurès," shouted the right wingers. "Long live Jaurès and Lenin," shouted those on the left. The right-wingers and the "reconstructors" refused to submit to the majority and walked out of the congress hall. Those who stayed founded the Communist Party of France, which became the French section of the Comintern.

It was half past two in the morning on December 30, 1920, when the Communist Party opened its 1st Congress. Those minutes were historic not only for the French working-class movement, but also because they marked the initiation of the first Vietnamese Communist who raised the Leninist banner in the national liberation movement of Vietnam.

After a spell of revolutionary activity under the national-democratic banner, fighting against colonialism and imperialism, Nguyễn Ái Quốc opted for Marxism-Leninism. Many years later he would say:

"At first it was patriotism, not yet communism which led me to have confidence in Lenin and the Third International. Step by step, in the course of the struggle, studying Marxism-Leninism and engaging in practical activities, I finally understood that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people



throughout the world from slavery. I understood then how indissolubly patriotism and proletarian internationalism were tied together."

Those who really love their country, Nguyễn used to say, those who consider themselves a particle of the people and devote themselves to the fight for national and social liberation, are bound to espouse Marxism-Leninism. The Communists, he added, as history shows every day, are the most consistent and the stoutest champions of national interests, of the will of their peoples. They are truly selfless fighters for independence, freedom, and the prosperity of their countries.

## THE COMMUNIST

*Hồ Chí Minh's first and greatest service was that he tied in the revolutionary movement in Vietnam with the international working-class movement, and led the people of Vietnam along the path he had travelled himself - from patriotism to Marxism-Leninism.*

Lê Duẩn

1

"Confidential. To the Minister of French Colonies M. Albert Sarraut from the Chief Inspector of Indochinese troops in France. I have the honour to report that last night I had a talk with Phan Chu Trinh. He is in a sad condition - sick and moneyless - and wants to go home. I am sure you know his frame of mind. I should only like to add that he is no troublemaker. Phan Chu Trinh is a nationalist. True, he nurses the hope of seeing his country independent one day. But he believes that our protectorate in Annam should continue.

"Phan Chu Trinh's ideas, filtered by his ten years' stay in France, have no resemblance to those of Nguyễn Ái Quốc. In fact, Trinh disapproves of Nguyễn's ideas and methods. I am convinced that the best thing for us would be to grant Phan Chu Trinh's request. I therefore

beg Your Excellency to permit him to return to his country, and to instruct the Bank of Indochina to pay his fare."

The French guardians of the law in Indochina no longer feared Phan Chu Trinh. His erstwhile patriotism had succumbed to his Francophile views and finally sank to primitive collaborationism. When departing from France on February 3, 1925, he told an audience at the Salle des Sociétés Savantes of his political views:

"To survive and develop, the Asiatic lands need a material force. France and France alone can help us. France, too, if it wants to maintain its power in the Far East, has a stake in cooperating with Vietnam. If the two sides work together they will achieve everything. If they do not, they will achieve nothing."

This speech was Phan Chu Trinh's political swan song. Young people were the first to see that their idol has fallen, and ridiculed his ideas.

And the fewer followers Phan Chu Trinh had, the greater were the fears of the colonial authorities concerning Nguyễn Ái Quốc.

Meanwhile, the young Communist was occupied collecting money, medical supplies and clothing for hunger-stricken Russia. He tried to miss none of the party meetings that called on the French government to lift the economic blockade of Soviet Russia and grant it diplomatic recognition. Often, he was seen among the speakers at discussion clubs. And in his little room he worked late into the night, writing on the colonial issue for party newspapers. On Sundays, Nguyễn began going to the Bibliothèque Nationale on Rue Richelieu. It was through Vaillant Couturier, who took advantage of his National Assembly credentials, that Nguyễn was granted a permanent library pass. He was also a frequent visitor at the Rue Lafayette headquarters of the French Communist Party's Central Committee, and was soon appointed member of its Colonial Affairs Commission, in which he took charge of the Indochina section.

Ever since 1880, it was a tradition among the ordinary people of Paris to lay flowers at the foot of the Wall of the Communards at Père-Lachaise Cemetery at the end of May. Nguyễn, too, observed the

tradition, and listened with rapt attention to speeches extolling the Communards and calling on people to follow their example.

All his free time Nguyễn devoted to party work. Though he was over 30, he had not yet given any girl a piece of red silk as is the Vietnamese custom, so that old man Moon could tie him by a silken thread to his chosen one. Possibly, there was a girl in his native Lotus Village who, according to feudal custom, the families had agreed would be his life. But a lot of water had flowed beneath the bridge. For his fellow villagers he was simply a missing person. Even if his father had at some time underwritten a contract with some family, its validity had lapsed. And it was certainly not easy to find a fitting companion in a foreign land. His frequent moves from country to country, the professional revolutionary's ascetic way of life, and the rules of conspiracy - all this pushed his personal affairs far to the background. Nguyễn Ái Quốc simply remained a bachelor all his life.

At the central Committee, Nguyễn met progressive young people from other French colonies - Algerians, Tunisians, Madagascans, and so on. Gradually, they arrived at the idea of forming a joint organisation, and in July 1921 founded what they called the Intercolonial Union. Nguyễn was elected to its governing committee. The purpose of the Union, its rules said, was to unite colonials resident in France for the common struggle for national liberation. Two hundred people joined at once, including all the members of two organisations - the Association of Vietnamese Patriots and the Madagascan Human Rights League.

One of the Union activists and a close friend of Nguyễn's was the lawyer Bloncourt, a native of the Antilles. Some fifty years later, he recollected:

"Nguyễn attended all meetings regularly. I saw he was dedicated to the struggle for the liberation of all colonial and oppressed people - not only in Vietnam, but all over the Earth. He had indomitable faith in final victory. For him the only way to national liberation was that of revolution. His mind was set on the thought of national liberation, and this shaped all his life accordingly. Once, when he learned of the barbarous French reprisals heaped on people in Dahomey, he was

deeply incensed and suffered as greatly as though all this was happening in Vietnam to his own people. He was a humanist and internationalist in the full sense of the word."

Nguyễn, a prolific contributor to the party press, knew the force packed by the printed word. He suggested the Intercolonial Union should put out its own newspaper. Nguyễn and his friends called it *Le Paria*, for the word indicated the actual situation of the oppressed and humiliated colonial peoples. None of the Union activists save Nguyễn had any journalistic experience, and he was promptly chosen to run the paper.

Nguyễn called on Henri Barbusse and asked him to give a hand. At that time, Barbusse headed Clarté, the international league of progressive writers formed on his initiative. Its members included such distinguished writers as Anatole France, Barnard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Rabindranath Tagore, and so on. Barbusse responded instantly. He even found a room for the newspaper in the Clarté building.

The first issue of *Le Paria* appeared on April 1, 1922. The title of the one-sheet tabloid-size paper was given in three languages - French, Arabic, and Chinese, thus emphasising its international nature. The introductory message to the readership said it was the first newspaper to represent the working people of all the French colonies.

Distribution called for ingenuity. At first, *Le Paria* was mailed to official addresses in Indochina, the African colonies, and the West Indies. But nearly all the mailed copies were seized by the local police. Where upon arrangements were made for seamen to carry the newspaper secretly.

Some copies were sold in Paris among colonials and Vietnamese workers. Though most of the latter could not read, they were told what it was about, and bought the paper all the same, asking their French mates to read it to them. *Le Paria* was also put on sale at Paris newsstalls controlled by the FCP. Nguyễn used to come to workers' meetings with a large number of copies, which he handed out silently. In the end, he climbed the platform and said the newspaper, which exposed the colonialist oppression, was being handed out free.

"But we should be grateful," he would add, "if you volunteered some money, even if it is only a sou."

Many Vietnamese sympathised with Nguyễn's activity, but were afraid of reprisals and sent him money secretly. One day a Vietnamese student slid into the *le Paria* office, looked about anxiously, and put 5 francs on the desk "for the newspaper". And vanished at once. He was the son of a prosperous collaborationist.

Nguyễn was not only editor but also writer of most of the articles. Besides, he produced cartoons and drawings. Responding to all important events in Indochina and other French colonies, he ridiculed the mercenary colonial regime. *Le Paria* was for him also a vehicle for promoting the ideas of the Great October Socialist Revolution. While bourgeois writers flung mud at the Communist International, distorting its policy, *Le Paria* spoke out loud and clear in its favour issue after issue. "The Comintern," the paper wrote, "fights tirelessly against the plunderous essence of the bourgeoisie in all countries of the world. Study Marx. See the brilliant embodiment of his ideas in Soviet Russia. Communism is the only road to our liberation."

In the paper, Nguyễn expounded his political and ideological creed. In the colonies, he pointed out, revolution was the business of the mass of the people. The Communist Party, he amplified, was the only party that could take the national liberation struggle to full and final victory. This was a new word for the Vietnamese. Fired by Lenin's ideas, Nguyễn had arrived at the conclusion that the Vietnamese revolution could not do without Marxism-Leninism and a political working-class party.

In June 1922, a colonial exhibition opened in Marseilles. It was to show that the French were bearers of civilisation in their colonial empire. Indochina, the pearl of the French colonies, was widely on display. Arful models of the Cambodian Angkor temples, of ancient Vietnamese pagodas, and old Hanoi streets aroused everybody's interest. Khmer dancers performed on a platform in the centre of the exhibition grounds. Vietnamese rickshaws ran up and down the grounds with lovers of Oriental exoticness ensconced in them.

But the greatest attraction was the Vietnamese imperial court which the French brought to Marseilles for the opening of the exhibition. It arrived aboard the s.s. *Portos*, which flew a triangular orange flag with the two red strips of the imperial dynasty. Emperor Khải Định whom the French installed on the Annamite throne in 1916 in place of the rebellious Duy Tân, walked slowly down the snow-white gangplank. The most vicious of all puppet emperors appeared before the welcoming crowd clad in the traditional imperial garb - a goldfish turban on his head, and a long silk robe with elaborate dragons embroidered on it draping him from the neck to his feet. Behind him came a ten-year-old boy named Vĩnh Thụy. Three years later he would become the last of the emperors in Vietnamese history under the reign title of Bảo Đại.

Emperor Khải Định and his heir apparent were accompanied by an enormous retinue consisting of dignitaries and officials in resplendent garb.

At the foot of the gangplank, the honoured guests were met by Albert Sarraut, French Minister for Colonial Affairs. Responding to Sarraut's greeting, Khải Định said pompously: "France is our teacher. Out of our fond handshake come good feelings as both our countries march forward together."

Nguyễn wrote an angry exposure of the extravaganza put on in Marseilles. He described an episode that occurred in Vietnam shortly before the opening of the exhibition: a Frenchman had burned a Vietnamese railwayman alive because he thought the man had not been prompt enough in carrying out his orders. "In Marseilles," Nguyễn wrote, "people extol the humane spirit of France, while in Vietnam they kill our compatriots. In Marseilles they hail Indochina's prosperity, while in Vietnam people die of hunger."

Nguyễn decided to try his hand at a satirical interlude on Khải Định, entitled *The Bamboo Dragon*. From time immemorial, Vietnamese craftsmen cut exotic dragons out of warped or twisted pieces of bamboo. Though in Buddhist demonology the dragon symbolised power and glory, the bamboo dragon, however attractive it may have looked, was nothing but a useless toy. Similarly, a traitor, even though crowned, was nothing but a wretched toy in the hands of the colonialists.

Nguyễn's *The Bamboo Dragon* was published in *Le Paria*, and was then performed at one of the *L'Humanité* festivals in a Paris suburb.

The colonial press mounted a mudslinging campaign against *Le Paria*. The *Tín điện thuộc địa*, a Saigon newspaper, published a pamphlet in which Nguyễn Ái Quốc was described as "a man of excessive ambitions". When the paper reached Paris, members of the governing committee of the International Union called an emergency meeting. The next issue of *Le Paria* carried an article by a Vietnamese resident in France, Nguyễn Thế Truyền.

"What are Nguyễn Ái Quốc's excessive ambitions?" he asked. "His greatest ambition is the liberation of his countrymen who are living in slavery and are mercilessly exploited by the greedy colonialists. What more noble ambition could there be?"

"Nguyễn Ái Quốc's chest was not covered with decorations," Truyền went on to say, "and no government remittances were sent to him. Yet he was the personification of Vietnam's hopes and aspirations."

"Last year in Vietnam," Truyền wrote, "I heard many inspiring stories about Nguyễn passed from mouth to mouth. An old lady whose two sons were jailed by the French, asked me if I knew him. And a boy whose father the French thought suspicious and put away in prison-kept asking me, 'Oh, please, tell me what Nguyễn Ái Quốc looks like. Is he really like all of us, a man of flesh and bone?'"

The French secret police kept an eye on all people coming from the colonies. Their interest in Nguyễn Ái Quốc after he joined the CP of France and began putting out *Le Paria*, was especially great. Wherever he went, plainclothesmen were sure to follow. Often, they did not bother to conceal themselves, though when he was at meetings or conferences, they stayed outside for they feared what the workers would do to them. In the end, Nguyễn had to learn things all revolutionaries had to know - the art of security. Gradually, he learned, and those who shadowed him found their job getting harder.

The landlady, too, noticed this side in Nguyễn's life. "Monsieur Hô," she said years later, "led a secluded life. I could never be sure if he was still at home. That was how, one day, he disappeared forever."

The 2nd Congress of the French Communist Party gathered in Marseilles, and once more Nguyễn was elected delegate as member of the Central Committee's Colonial Affairs Commission. On arriving from Paris, he and a few other delegates approached the building where the congress was to take place. Out of nowhere two plainclothesmen jumped on him. But Nguyễn was quicker. He slipped out of their hands, and ran inside the building, where the policemen did not dare follow.

The congress opened, and Nguyễn was elected to its presiding party. He spoke on the colonial question, and proposed a resolution, "Communism and the Colonies", drafted by the Party's Colonial Affairs Commission in keeping with the Comintern line.

When the sitting was over, those among the delegates who were members of the Marseilles municipality and the National Assembly surrounded Nguyễn and led him across the city past police patrols to a safe place. On the following day, *L'ami du peuple* came out with a strong protest against the behaviour of the Marseilles police. "The French working class," it wrote, "will not sit by and watch such disgraceful behaviour. It will protest most vehemently if the police goes against the law and arrests Nguyễn Ái Quốc. The entire Communist Party agrees with Nguyễn Ái Quốc's words of pain and anger in support of native workers victimised by imperialist colonials. If they want us to keep quiet they will have to imprison not only the Annamite delegate but all delegates to the Congress, all members of the Communist Party."

When Nguyễn returned to Paris, his employer informed him vexedly that the police had been to his studio and had turned everything upside down. The police had told him he would have trouble for hiring a "troublemaker". The employer said Nguyễn's *carte d'identité* had been invalidated, and that to keep his job he would have to have it renewed. Meanwhile, he reduced Nguyễn's salary.

It never rains but it pours. After a few hours in a queue at police headquarters, Nguyễn caught pneumonia. And while he was in hospital, his employer hired someone else in his place.

To make ends meet, Nguyễn advertised his services as a retoucher of photographs in *La vie ouvrière*. Also, he called on the coal merchants in his vicinity and offered to make signboards for them. He also had orders

from curio shops to draw Chinese-style pictures on paper fans and vases. Usually such pictures were accompanied with a few characters wishing happiness, luck, prosperity, and the like. Now and then, Nguyễn would write other characters in their stead, meaning "down with imperialism". That was how ostensibly medieval artifacts landed on the shelves of curio shops and finally adorned the rooms of unsuspecting purchasers.

The ideological thrust of *Le Paria*, no matter how modest its influence, troubled the French authorities. The Colonial Affairs Ministry classified the paper as seditious literature and banned its dissemination in the colonies. Issues of the paper found aboard French ships leaving for the colonies were to be destroyed on the spot.

In early 1923, Albert Sarraut informed Maurice Long, Governor-General of Indochina, that the government intended to arrest Nguyễn Ái Quốc and ship him to Vietnam under the surveillance of the local police because his activity in France was becoming politically dangerous. Governor-General Long cabled back categorical objections. It would be the lesser of two evils to keep Nguyễn Ái Quốc out of Vietnam, where he was increasingly popular.

One night, the concierge met Nguyễn with an ingratiating smile.

"Oh, Monsieur Nguyễn, you've come up in this world," she said, handing him an official-looking envelope: Monsieur Albert Sarraut himself was inviting him for a chat.

Nguyễn had no choice but to comply. At the gate of the old ministry building, a National Guardsman examined his papers. A few seconds later, Nguyễn was marching across the cobblestones of the inner yard. A stiff official in a black suit gestured to him silently, and brought him to a large study profusely adorned with Eastern curios and artifacts. A baldish middle-aged man came from behind his desk to meet him, a monocle over his right eye.

This was the first time Nguyễn saw one of the powerful men of the world, the Colonial Affairs Minister, at such close range. For him and all other freethinking Vietnamese, the man was the incarnation of the evil colonial policies in Indochina. This was the man who had control over territories totalling 4 million square kilometers with a population

of 60 million speaking twenty different languages. From 1917 to 1919, M. Albert Sarraut had been Governor-General of Indochina, where his cruelty in suppressing the people of Cochin China earned him the title of Saigon butcher. In his book, *Le mise en valeur des colonies françaises*, he stood before his readers as an ardent protector of the interests of French capitalism.

His eye glittering behind the monocle, M. Sarraut examined the frail Vietnamese who seemed to have sunk into the large soft leather armchair. Then, in a schoolteacher's voice, the minister said:

"Troublemakers connected with the Russian Bolsheviks have made an appearance in France. They are in contact with Canton, and through Canton with Annam. They are planning to make trouble in Indochina. France is merciful, but it is not going to suffer this forever. We are strong enough to crush the rebels."

He showed by compressing his fist how easily the rebels would be crushed, and went on to say that he liked people of Nguyễn's mould who had a purpose and will-power.

"Will-power," he said, "is splendid. But one must also have understanding. Let bygones be bygones. If you happen to want anything, I'm always at your service. Now that we know each other, you can apply directly to me..."

Nguyễn stood up. Looking straight into Sarraut's face, barely controlling himself, he said:

"Thank you, Monsieur Sarraut. The main thing in my life, and what I need most of all, is freedom for my compatriots, and independence for my country. May I go now?"

On the way home, Nguyễn reflected on the interview. In that brief duel of wits disguised by polite turns of phrase, he had managed to put in the last word. To Nguyễn, this little triumph seemed a kind of harbinger of his people's coming victory over colonialism.

Thirty years later, when the French expeditionary corps surrendered at Điện Biên Phủ, Albert Sarraut, now Chairman of the Assembly of the French Union, may have recalled that brief encounter with the man who had then, too, expressed assurance that the ideas of liberation would triumph.

"Comrade Nguyễn, it has been decided to send you to Soviet Russia to work for the Comintern. At the request of Comrade Manuilsky of the Comintern Executive."

Nguyễn could not believe his ears. Was his dream to come true at last? Would he see Moscow and Lenin? He remembered how he had met Manuilsky. It was at the 3rd Congress of the FCP in Paris in October 1922. Nguyễn was invited to the presiding party as a representative of the French colonies, and there met the first Soviet person in his life. Though the opportunists headed by Frossard did manage, in effect, to thwart the work of the Congress, Nguyễn had had an opportunity to speak, and had the colonial question put on the agenda as a leading item. Manuilsky had liked his impetuous speech. Listening, he nodded his head in approval and applauded along with the rest when Nguyễn ended his intervention with these words: "It is every Communist's duty to further the liberation of the colonial peoples."

A few months later, when the Executive of the Comintern had instructed him to make the main report on the national and colonial question at its 5th Congress, Dmitry Manuilsky remembered the energetic young Vietnamese he had met in Paris, and advised the French comrades to send him to Moscow.

Travelling from France to Russia was a dangerous undertaking in those days. Nguyễn had himself taken part in meetings of protest against killings of French Communists en route to or returning from Russia by police hirelings. The French authorities persisted in their hostility towards the Soviet state. The one more or less safe route from Paris to Moscow lay through Germany, the only great power that then maintained normal relations with Soviet Russia.

Before his departure Nguyễn had to go through some intricate procedures to mislead the police in preparation for his disappearance from Paris. He wrote several articles and notes for *Le Paria* and the French party papers to be published after his departure, creating the impression that he was somewhere in France. To confuse the agents who shadowed him, he adopted an indolent way of life, suggesting that he had given up politics. He worked in the mornings, spent the

afternoons in the library or a museum, and went to the movies in the evenings. As the days of this unchanging monotonous routine passed, the agents became less watchful.

One dark June evening, Nguyễn bought a ticket to the cinema as usual for the last show. Long before the film ended, however, he slipped out by an auxiliary exit he had noted before. It was a matter of minutes to run down to the subway and head for the railway station, where a French comrade was waiting for him with his small suitcase.

Paris night life was as exuberant as ever. Glittering advertisements lit up the streets, the cabarets in Montmartre and along the main boulevards attracted crowds of customers. Vans laden with oranges, cauliflower, beef, pork, and so on were already heading through the streets for les Halles centrales, the famous Parisian market. In the black sky an airplane was advertising Citroën cars. The lights atop the Eiffel tower shone in all directions.

Nguyễn was leaving the city for long, if not forever. He had decided by then that from Russia he would at last head for home. The six years he had spent in Paris had not been wasted. He had become a Communist, a practitioner of Leninism, the surest of all revolutionary teachings. He had looked for and found the way to his people's liberation - the thought of which had sent him on his travels abroad. He had gone through a severe school, had learned to work, had picked up knowledge, had absorbed the basics of revolutionary struggle, and had become a professional revolutionary.

The only person he had told of his going to Moscow was his close friend Bloncourt. And the letter of goodbye which he had written to his friends in the Intercolonial Union and *Le Paria* (he had said he was going to the countryside to rest up), he also left with Bloncourt.

This letter, which abounded in fervent faith, is worth reproducing, if only in part:

"Dear friends, we have worked together a long time. Though we are people of different races, different countries, different religions, we are attached to each other as brothers of the same family.

"All of us suffer from the atrocities of colonialism and are fighting for a common ideal: the liberation of our people are the independence of our fatherland. We are not alone in our struggle, because we have the support of our entire people, of the French democrats, the true Frenchmen who stand by us."

"Our common work in the Intercolonial Union and *Le Paria* has borne good results. It has shown France the real situation in the French colonies. France is now aware of the fact that the colonialist sharks abuse the name and honour of France to plunder us and multiply their profits. Our work has helped to arouse our countrymen, and has helped them to see the real France, the country that first raised the slogan of liberty, equality, and fraternity. But a lot still has to be accomplished. What precisely?"

"This question must not be answered automatically. Everything depends on the conditions in each country. For me the question is clear: I have got to go back home, to rejoin my people, to rouse it, to organise, to rally, and to prime for the struggle for freedom and independence..."

To escape the agents who were shadowing him, Nguyễn put on an elegant suit and took a first-class ticket on the Paris-Berlin express. As he recollected once, he was smoking an expensive Havana cigar, and posing as a wealthy businessman. In Berlin he was met by a German comrade, who then called at the Soviet mission and asked for entry papers for a member of the French Communist Party, a native of Indochina, who was going to work in the Comintern in Moscow. Soon, Nguyễn was given entry papers in the name of photographer Trần Vang, and a few days later arrived in Petrograd on a Soviet ship, the *Karl Liebknecht*, which he boarded in Hamburg.

Most authors writing about Hồ Chí Minh say, for some reason, that the first time he came to Soviet Russia was in 1924. But the entry papers issued to him in the name of Trần Vang by the Soviet mission in Germany, repudiate this version. The border guards had stamped his papers on June 30, 1923, as he disembarked in Petrograd.

Nguyễn's disappearance created a commotion in the French secret police. The archives of the Colonial Affairs Ministry still have copies

of dispatches which the Sûreté sent Albert Sarraut. A dispatch dated July 30, 1923, for example, said Nguyễn Ái Quốc had told people he was leaving on a ten-day vacation. A month had passed and he was not back.

Then, a dispatch of October 8: "In reply to your inquiry of August 30, in which you informed us that Nguyễn Ái Quốc, an Annamite revolutionary, member of communistic organisations and editor of *Le Paria*, has disappeared, we have the honour to inform you that we are searching for Nguyễn Tất Thành, also known by the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, high and low, but so far we have not found him."

Not until a year later, in October 1924, did the Colonial Affairs Ministry receive a coded message from the French Embassy, just opened in Moscow after the establishment of Franco-Soviet diplomatic relations, that the communist troublemaker, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, was in the Soviet Union.

## THE COUNTRY OF TRAILBLAZERS

### 1

Incredible trials befell the Soviet Republic in its early years - dislocation, hunger, imperialist blockade, foreign armed intervention, and civil war make up a far from complete list. Not this, however, impressed itself upon the memory of people who visited Soviet Russia in those unforgettable times. They told their friends and comrades about the burning crimson of the revolutionary standards adorning the streets and squares of old Moscow, and about the truly indomitable revolutionary enthusiasm of the workers and peasants, and about the all-conquering faith of the Bolsheviks in final victory - a faith that also inspired visiting friends from abroad.

"None of us felt cold in the light overcoats intended for wear in Rome, Genoa or Naples. Our hearts beat faster, our cheeks burned and our eyes were alight," wrote Giovanni Germanetto, a veteran of the

Italian Communist Party and a close friend of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's, about his first visit to Soviet Russia.

The same feelings, only enhanced by his impetuous character and his bent for romanticism, seized Nguyễn, the first Vietnamese Communist when he disembarked in Petrograd. He inhaled the smell of the sea and factory smoke - the life-giving air of the country where proletarian revolution had won.

He had no papers on him except the entrance certificate issued in the name of Trần Vang. His purse was practically empty. All his savings had been swallowed up by the monstrous inflation in Germany, where he had had to pay thousands of marks for a newspaper. All his belongings were packed in a small suitcase.

But these trifles had no meaning for him. He was imbued with a sense of elation and triumph over being the first Vietnamese to set foot in the country where his dreams of freedom and happiness had already come true, and where people who had been oppressed and humiliated for centuries had now become captains of their own fate. He was strong and vigorous, and only 33 years old. From this great country, the cradle of the world revolution, he would blaze the trail to the liberation of his own land. Perhaps, too, his wish would come true and he would meet the great Lenin. It was this cherished wish that he passed on in the first few minutes of his stay on Soviet soil to the border guard examining his papers.

"What is the purpose of your coming to Soviet Russia?" the border guard had asked.

"Well, first of all, I'd like to see Lenin."

"When I first came to the Soviet Union," he recollected later, "I saw the hard conditions under which the Soviet land set out on its exploit.

Words fail me to describe the enormous heroism and dedication of the workers and peasants who had begun to build socialism. Yet the first several achievements of the Soviet people were already visible. And this rapid progress of the Soviet land cheered us revolutionaries and filled us with pride for the cause of the Great October Socialist Revolution."

Many of the things Nguyễn saw in Moscow differed considerably from what he had expected to see. The French bourgeois press had gone out of its way to sling mud at the worker-peasant country. Truthful reports from Soviet Russia, on the other hand, arrived with much delay. The evidence of eyewitnesses, too, failed to keep up with the rapid course of events.

The New Economic Policy launched by the Bolsheviks under Lenin's guidance had begun to yield ever more visible results. The years of hunger and dislocation, the fuel crisis and the transport problem, were receding into the past. The country was entering a period of economic upswing. The countryside reported bumper harvests. The first trainloads of grain for export were converging on the Petrograd port from all parts of the country. The newspapers regularly announced price reductions for manufactured goods. In the main Moscow streets one could find advertisements saying prices for a wide variety of goods had been reduced 40 per cent. "A prize to anyone who finds any item in GUM (State Department Store) dearer than in other shops," said one brightly coloured notice.

Lenin ended his speech at a plenary meeting of the Moscow Soviet-the great leader's last speech - on the following optimistic and prophetic note, "NEP Russia will become socialist Russia." And the first tokens of socialism were, indeed, surfacing, thus bearing out Lenin's brilliant prophecy.

The Soviet Government adopted what was in those days a big and note-worthy decision: to hold an All-Russia Agricultural Exhibition, the first in the history of the young worker-peasant state. It opened in Moscow in August 1923. "One more victory for the revolutionnary proletariat," commented *Pravda*.

On a Sunday, Nguyễn, along with other Comintern comrades, visited the exhibition. He reviewed all the displays in silent wonder. Admiring the smiling sunburned visages of the peasant lads who had come to Moscow from different Russian gubernias and other Soviet republics, he listened raptly to what they said about their work as they showed visitors the fruit of their labours - sheafs of wheat and rye, mountains of snow-white cotton, and beautiful handmade carpets.



Like other Comintern people, Nguyễn was put up at the Lux Hotel.

From there his route lay to Manege Square and Mokhovaya Street. In a building there, facing Troitsky Lane, opposite the Rumyantsev Museum (now the Lenin Library), were the head offices of the Comintern's Executive Committee.

Nguyễn was attached to the Eastern Department of the Comintern Executive. Accustomed to rising early, he would walk out of his hotel with the first rays of the sun and go up Tverskaya (now Gorky Street) to Red Square. Looking up at the crenelated Kremlin wall and the ancient Kremlin towers, he would recall a history lesson at the National College at Hue when the French teacher told them of Emperor Napoleon standing atop the Kremlin wall and gazing with pained eyes at Moscow in flames, a Moscow his troops had entered but would never conquer.

The first thing Nguyễn did when he joined the Eastern Department was to write a letter to the Presidium of the Comintern Executive, setting forth his ideas about the liberation movement in Indochina. He pointed out that proletarians in that French colony were no more than 2 per cent of total population and had to no organisation of their own. The mass of peasants, he added, was the most handicapped part of the population and therefore had a high revolutionary potential. He considered the intelligentsia a nationalist revolutionary force.

One of the prime conditions for the liberation movement to make headway in Indochina, he wrote, was to secure joint action by Communists and revolutionary patriotic elements. Nguyễn recalled Lenin's idea that revolutionaries in the colonies should join forces with the working people of the metropolitan countries and the first socialist land, Russia. He suggested establishing reliable communications between Moscow, Indochina, and Paris. He urged the Comintern leadership to devote more attention to liberation movements in colonial countries and dependencies, including Indochina. "The oppressed peoples of the colonies," he wrote, "have been aroused by the echo of the October Socialist Revolution, and are turning instinctively to our International, the only political party that is showing a fraternal interest in them and on which they pin all their hopes of liberation."

From his first days in Moscow, Nguyễn won a large number of friends and acquaintances, especially among Soviet people and foreigners associated with the Comintern. They spoke of him as of a charming, knowledgeable person who had a knack of winning people's affection. No small part here was played by his being the first Communist to come from remote Vietnam.

In those days, that French "overseas province" was for many a land of mystery at the very end of the world if not on some other planet. True, Russians were already in the know about Vietnam. In the mid-19th century, Russian writer Stanyukovich, who had visited the country repeatedly on his voyages, wrote with compassion and anger about the French conquerors' abuses in Cochin China. And poet Gumilev extolled the exotic splendours of Vietnam in his poetry.

The first contacts between Soviet people and the Vietnamese dated back to 1919. A Vietnamese unit, as I have said earlier, went over to the side of the revolution in the region of Odessa, the port where the French intervention troops were mainly concentrated, and later also in Vladivostok, where France landed an Indochinese rifles battalion to back up U.S. and Japanese troops. Now, finally, Moscow had a professional Vietnamese revolutionary representing the national patriotic forces of French Indochina.

Soon after Nguyễn's arrival in Moscow, his name appeared in the columns of *Pravda*. Peasants from more than twenty European and Asian countries had come to see the big Agricultural Exhibition. They used the opportunity to hold an International Peasant Conference. It opened on October 10 in the Kremlin's famous Andreyevsky Hall. That day *Pravda* carried the following banner headlines: "Greetings to Our New Allies!" and "Workers and Peasants Join Hands Against the Predaceous Alliance of Capitalists and Landowners."

On October 12, in an item on the Agricultural Exhibition, *Pravda* reported that "Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc spoke at the second sitting on behalf of the French colony of Indochina. He said Indochina peasants bore a double burden of oppression - as peasants in general, and as peasants of a colonial country."

Nguyễn's speech at the international forum brought out his profound internationalism, and his striving for unity in the fight against imperialism and colonialism. "Our International will not be a truly international organisation of the working people," he said, "until it encompasses the peasant masses of the entire East, especially those of the colonial countries, who are subjected to the most brutal exploitation and oppression."

After sending Lenin a message of greetings, the closing session of the Conference elected the governing bodies of a Peasant International - the International Peasant Council and its Presidium. And Nguyễn Ái Quốc was elected to the Presidium from the Asian countries along with Sen Katayama, an active Comintern functionary and one of the founders of the Communist Party of Japan.

At the end of 1923, in an interview to the popular Soviet weekly *Ogonyok*, Nguyễn said sarcastically that the best propagators of Bolshevism in Indochina had been the French. "They began persecuting Communists in Annam," he explained, "while there wasn't even a hint of any Communists. And that was the best propaganda. "The journalist described Nguyễn as possessing inborn tact and refinement, as a man of an entirely new culture, "possibly, the culture of the future".

In Moscow, Nguyễn soon developed into a capable international affairs analyst. He contributed prolifically to the journal *Inprecor* (International Press Correspondence), among others. Hungarian Communist Gyula Alpari, who was chief editor of *Inprecor*, considered Nguyễn one of his most active non-staff contributors right up to 1939, when the journal closed down. Now and then, Nguyễn also contributed to the Soviet press. Nor had he broken off contact with his friends in Paris, and kept on writing for *L'Humanité*, *La vie ouvrière*, and *Le Paria*.

His subject-matter ranged far afield. He exposed the abuses of the French in Indochina and the British in China. He wrote of the growth of the labour movement in China, Japan, and Turkey, and of the condition of peasants in Asia, of racial oppression in the United States, and of the expansionist policy of the imperialist powers in Asia and the Pacific.

While still in Paris, Nguyễn was fired by the idea of writing a book about French colonialism. His Comintern comrades and friends from the *Inprecor* helped him with his project. The book, *French Colonisation on Trial*, appeared in Paris in French in 1925, when Nguyễn was already far from Moscow and still farther from Paris. Included in the book were Nguyễn's articles and reports of 1920 to 1925 in left-wing French papers, *Le Paria*, and *Inprecor*.

Some copies found their way to Vietnam, where the book instantly captured the interest of the patriotic youth. For the first time, a Vietnamese writer discussed colonialism from the Marxist-Leninist point of view, showing the irreconcilable contradictions between the French colonialists and the people of Vietnam, the irrepressible growth of the national liberation struggle of the colonial peoples, and the inevitable collapse of colonial rule. Nguyễn showed that imperialism was the common deadly enemy of all the oppressed, leading to the conclusion that struggle for the national salvation of Vietnam was the part of the worldwide struggle for liberation from colonial slavery. Those of the Vietnamese patriots who read *French Colonisation on Trial* perceived its author as a fundamentally new type of leader - an adherent of the communist doctrine and a consistent internationalist.

Speaking of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's first book and its impact on revolutionary developments in Vietnam, Vietnamese historians stress that it was "like a burst of wind that drove away the clouds which screened off the sun". *French Colonisation on Trial*, they held, was "a product of the dialectical, living, and organic combination of Lenin's ideas about the essence of imperialism and the national question with the experience of the anti-colonial national liberation movement and deep study of the experience of the October Revolution".

Ever since Nguyễn set foot in Moscow, he kept hoping he would one day meet Lenin. He was sure Lenin would soon get well and take part in the coming 5th Congress of the Comintern. At the Peasant Conference in the Kremlin he applauded happily with the others when it was announced that Lenin was much better, that he was on his feet

and doctors had permitted him to read the papers. But a few weeks passed, and it became clear that the improvement in Lenin's health had been no more than temporary. On January 21 came the sad news that Lenin had died.

Hồ Chí Minh recollected, "We were having breakfast at the restaurant on the ground floor of the hotel when the news of Lenin's death reached us. No one believed it at first but when we turned and looked out we saw the flag of the Moscow Soviet flown at half mast. A great shock came to us... Lenin was dead. I had not yet been able to meet him and this is a big regret in my life."

Nguyễn was with the first group of Comintern people who came to the Hall of Columns in Trade Union House to pay tribute to the deceased leader of the world proletariat. Giovanni Germanetto recollected:

"Moscow, January 1924. The Russian winter is at its height. The temperature sinks at times to 40 degrees below zero. A few days ago Lenin died. That morning, a quiet knocking on our door in Lux Hotel aroused me. The door opened and a frail young man entered.

"He said he was Vietnamese and his name was Nguyễn Ái Quốc. He also said he intended to go to Trade Union House and see off Lenin...

"I told him he was too lightly dressed for the freezing cold outside. I said he should wait, we'd get him some warm clothing."

"Ái Quốc sighed, and sat down to have tea with us, and finally went to his room. We thought he had taken our advice and had stayed indoors.

"Somewhere around ten at night I heard a soft knocking on the door again. It was Comrade Ái Quốc. His face was blue, and the ears, nose and fingers on the hands were blue, too, from the fierce cold.

"Ái Quốc said he had just seen Comrade Lenin. He was trembling from the cold as he explained that he could not wait until tomorrow to pay homage to the best friend of the colonial peoples... He finished by asking if we didn't happen to have some hot tea?"

Years later, in the jungles with the guerillas, resting after a long march, a comrade would ask Hồ why he had black marks on the ear and toes. And he heard a tale about that sad day in 1924 when, defying the Russian frost, Hồ had stood nearly a whole day lightly dressed at the entrance to Trade Union House to pay tribute to the great Lenin.

The funeral of Lenin was on January 27 on Red Square. The cold was practically unbearable. It was as though nature had frozen from despair. Bonfires had been lit at street corners all over Moscow. Guns were fired in Red Square as a tribute to Lenin. Factory and locomotive whistles resounded in mourning all over the city. Over the radio people were told to stand up, for that minute Lenin was being lowered into his grave.

All trains and cars stopped in their tracks, and all factories and offices ceased work for five minutes. Then the whistles ended, and the radio announcer said, "Lenin is dead - Leninism lives on!"

That phrase resounded in Nguyễn's ears for a long time like the pounding of the unforgettable village tom-toms at home. That day, on returning from the Hall of Columns, he locked himself up in his room and wrote until late at night, seeking to express his feelings of grief on paper. He kept writing, while tears rolled down his cheeks. And here is what he wrote:

"Lenin is dead! This news struck people like a bolt from the blue. It spread to every corner of the fertile plains of Africa and the green fields of Asia. It is true that the black or yellow people do not yet know clearly who Lenin is or where Russia is... But all of them, from the Vietnamese peasants to the hunters in the Dahomey forests, have secretly learnt that in a faraway corner of the earth there is a nation that has succeeded in overthrowing its exploiters... They have also heard that that country is Russia, that there are courageous people there, and that the most courageous of them all was Lenin...

"Lenin is dead, so what will happen to us? Will there be other courageous and generous people like Lenin who will not spare their time and efforts in concerning themselves with our liberation?..."

"We believe that the Communist International and its branches, which include branches in colonial countries, will succeed in implementing the lessons and teachings the leader has left behind for us. To do what he advised us, is that not the best way to show our love for him?"

"In his lifetime he was our father, teacher, comrade, and adviser. Now he is our guiding star that leads to social revolution. Lenin lives on in our deeds. He is immortal."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc's piece appeared along with numerous other items sent in by foreign friends in *Pravda* on January 27. Later, in "Lenin and the East", an article for the Moscow newspaper *Gudok*, on the second anniversary of Lenin's death, Nguyễn would give a comprehensive view of Leninism's international relevance as a universal revolutionary doctrine. Leninism was especially invaluable and important for the colonial peoples, he wrote, for through its prism they saw the contours of a radiant future, and put their trust in it.

"*Lenin opened a new, truly revolutionary era in the colonial countries,*" Nguyễn wrote. "He was the first to understand and stress the paramount importance for the world revolution of finding the correct solution to the colonial problem... He was the first to realise that a social revolution was inconceivable without the participation of the colonial peoples. With his characteristic insight, he knew that success in the colonies depended on using to the full the developing national liberation movement, and that by supporting this movement the world proletariat gained new powerful allies in the struggle to bring about a social revolution."

Wanting to understand the greatness and extraordinary attractiveness of Lenin not only as revolutionary but also as fighter, leader and simply a man, Nguyễn avidly read his works and the remembrances of his comrades. He questioned people who had known Lenin. And he marvelled at how much Lenin resembled the knight in shining armour whom he had created for himself in his younger years as the image to strive for. To his friends in *Le Paria*, he wrote: "It is not only his genius, but his disdain of luxury, his love of labour, the purity of his private life, his simplicity, in a word, it is the grandeur and beauty of this

master, which exert an enormous influence upon the Asian peoples and irresistibly attract their hearts."

For Nguyễn Ái Quốc, the ideal he strove for was embodied in Lenin.

The lofty ethical principles his father had cultivated in him from childhood, blended in the course of his revolutionary work with the standards of revolutionary morality, and, in the final analysis, yielded that precious alloy which enabled him not only politically but also morally to become the undisputed leader of the Vietnamese national liberation movement and the burgeoning proletariat, and its vanguard, the Communist Party. Subsequently, in his writings on revolutionary morality, and in talks and conversations, Nguyễn Ái Quốc-Hồ Chí Minh would call on the Vietnamese Communists to be like Lenin in their daily life and struggle.

Shortly before his death, in an interview to a *L'Humanité* correspondent on the approaching centenary of Lenin's birth, Hồ Chí Minh said: "In the eyes of the peoples of the East, Lenin was not only a leader, a commander. He irresistibly attracted our hearts. Our respect for him was close to filial piety, one of the fundamental virtues in our country. For us, the victims of ill-treatment and humiliation, Lenin was the embodiment of human fraternity."

But, of course, what Nguyễn mainly looked for in Lenin's works was an answer to the many questions that the liberation movement posed in Indochina. He set out to read everything Lenin ever wrote or said on the colonial question. And in those days this was not simple. Only a few of Lenin's works had been translated into other languages. Nguyễn spent hours in libraries and with his Russian comrades who helped him pick up the requisite literature at the Comintern Secretariat. His notebooks were full of extracts from Lenin's works. In between, he put down the fruits of his own reflections that later became the nucleus of a new book on the Vietnamese revolution.

Gradually, the contours of the only correct road came into focus. In colonial and dependent countries, Nguyễn felt, the revolution would initially have to be mostly a peasant revolution directed against colonialists and local feudal lords. A broad and dependable national

front, he held, would come about on the basis of an alliance between the vast majority of the peasants and the working class. But the peasants in the colonies were ignorant and downtrodden. A revolutionary party was needed to organise and politically educate them. Without such a party, a Communist Party, victory could not be assured. In due course, a Leninist understanding of the specific social and political conditions in the colonies, and of the vital imperative of tackling the peasant question, enabled the Vietnamese Communists to win the support of the vast majority and carry out the victorious August 1945 revolution.

3

In Moscow, Nguyễn had an opportunity to put order into his already fairly extensive knowledge of revolutionary theory gained through his work with the French Communist Party and his study of Lenin's works and Comintern documents. While working in the Eastern Department of the Comintern Executive, he also attended short-term courses at the Communist University of the Working People of the East.

One of the first Soviet political educational establishments, it was founded in 1921 on Lenin's instructions. Its purpose was to train revolutionaries from the East. Most of its students came from the Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics - Azerbaijan, Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, and so on. But the number of revolutionaries from foreign countries, mainly countries in Asia, kept rising year after year.

Nguyễn was deeply impressed. He sent a detailed account of the marvellous educational establishment attended by more than a thousand students of different nationalities to *La vie ouvrière* in Paris. He described the university's nine buildings, two libraries, cinema, polyclinic, hostel, and farm, and also its holiday home in the Crimea.

"The Russian revolution," he wrote, "is not satisfied with making fine platonic speeches and drafting 'humanitarian' resolutions in favour of the oppressed peoples, but it teaches them to fight... Despite its internal and external difficulties, revolutionary Russia has never hesitated to come to the aid of peoples awakened by its heroic and victorious revolution. One of its important acts was the founding of the University of the East."

On March 15, 1924, *l'Unità*, the Italian communist newspaper, printed Giovanni Germanetto's contribution describing the Eastern University and its first Indochinese student, written in the form of a dialogue.

"The constitution of the Bolshevik university," Nguyễn Ái Quốc told his Italian friend, "ushered in a new era in the history of the Eastern peoples. Here we learn the principles of class struggle. Here we establish contacts among ourselves and with the Western nations. Here we are given knowledge of what has to be done..."

"Many are the people who recognise our sad condition," Nguyễn went on to say. "But no one except the Russian revolutionaries are showing us the way to liberation. It was Lenin, our dear Lenin, who told us Eastern revolutionaries what road to opt for. It was he who helped us make our first steps so that we should go forward hand in hand with the world proletariat."

Germanetto asked Nguyễn what he intended to do after finishing the university?

"I'll go back home to fight for our cause. We in Vietnam will have to fight very hard. For at the moment the only right we have is to pay taxes to 'Mother' France and our own landowners. We are outcasts, we are classed as the 'low', we have no right to elect or to be elected. Whereas in Russia, that barbarian country, as it is called by bourgeois democrats, we have the same rights as the Russian workers."

He went on to say that his countrymen had suffered a lot, and would suffer still more, for those who had come to make civilised people out of them would never grant them freedom of their own free will. "But we will follow the road of the October Revolution and will make full use of its lessons," Nguyễn Ái Quốc concluded.

On April 21, Nguyen was invited to the Eastern University's third anniversary celebrations. Speakers recalled one of Lenin's last articles, "Better Fewer, But Better", which said the October Revolution in Russia had generated a revolutionary upswing in the East, where the

majority of the population 'has been drawn into the struggle for emancipation with extraordinary rapidity' <sup>(1)</sup>. They pointed out that the role of individuals was gaining ground and that the need for people who cultivated the revolutionary outlook among the masses was increasing. And it was these people, they said, that the University of the East was training on the basis of the political and ideological experience of the proletariat in the more developed countries, notably Soviet Russia.

Nguyễn listened to the speakers and looked around him at the students. "No Vietnamese revolutionaries here," he thought. "Yet there are so many of them, impetuous, temperamental, ready to lay down their lives for the liberation of Vietnam, who do not know what road to take, how to arouse the people, organise them, lead them into battle." He made a mental note to see to it that Vietnamese should make their appearance among the students of the University of the East.

On May 20, he wrote a letter to the Eastern Bureau of the Comintern Executive, suggesting that a separate Asian group of students should be established at the Eastern University. "The University of the East," he wrote, "is at present giving training to 62 Eastern nationalities. This number will increase as the action and propaganda of the International expand. The University is a mould which shapes the first propagandists for countries of the East. It must be the basis on which a Communist Federation of the East will be founded."

May Day, the international day of labour solidarity, was approaching. A May Day appeal to the peasants of the world to act in solidarity with the workers issued by the International Peasant Union was printed in *Pravda* on April 30. Among those, who signed it was a member of its governing body, Nguyễn Ái Quốc. That day, Nguyễn received a note from Vasil Kolarov, Comintern General Secretary, asking him to speak at a May Day meeting.

It was drizzling monotonously. But this did not prevent Red Square from appearing in the scarlet splendour of holiday flags and streamers. A huge poster on the wall of the History Museum, read: "Give all of yourself to the Revolution as Lenin had done."

<sup>1</sup> V.I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.33, 1973, p 500.

Like other foreign Communists in Moscow, Nguyễn was in the grandstands beside the Kremlin wall. Nguyễn could not hide his elation as he watched demonstrators stream past the Mausoleum. They carried posters with stirring slogans. Huge cartoons of Raymond Poincaré, then the moving spirit of the bourgeoisie's anti-Soviet crusade, floated past the grandstands. A Frenchman, most likely Gaston Monmousseau, who had come to the festivities at the head of a French trade-union delegation, shouted, "A bas Poincaré," <sup>(1)</sup> and the crowd in the square cheered loudly.

At the end of May, the Paris workers at a city-wide meeting in memory of the Communards had decided to turn over the banner of the Paris Commune, a priceless relic, for safekeeping in Moscow until the proletarian revolution won in France. Fourcade, an 80-year-old veteran of the Paris Commune, carried the banner through the streets of Paris for the last time. Now, in Moscow, on Red Square, the banner was being handed over to the Moscow workers. To the tune of revolutionary marches, the banner was placed inside the Lenin Mausoleum. The French Communist Party delegation that had come to the 5th Congress of the Comintern, of which Nguyễn Ái Quốc, representing Indochina, was also a member, took part in the ceremony

4

Never before in his life, Hồ Chí Minh recalled years later, had he experienced such a sense of freedom and elation as he had in Moscow at that time. "And yet," he used to say, "I counted the days before the Comintern Congress, because right after it I would go home and start on my revolutionary activity."

The 5th Congress of the Comintern opened on June 17, 1924, in the Bolshoi Theatre building. It was the first such congress after Lenin's death. Fidelity to Lenin, whichever country they belonged to, was the predominant idea expressed by most speakers at the Congress. In fact, the Congress was preceded by a memorial meeting in Red Square, where Mikhail Kalinin delivered an impassioned speech.

<sup>1</sup> Down with Poincaré (*Fr*). Poincaré was then head of the French government. He represented aggressive, extreme anti-Soviet segments of the French capitalist class.

"It is self-evident," he said, "that the first word at the Congress refers to Comrade Lenin. He was the leader of the Russian revolution, the leader of Bolshevism, and also the leader of the Communist International. We accept that as natural. For what we call Leninism includes the most consistent, fullest, and most effective internationalism."

Nguyen spoke three times at the Congress - on the activity of the Comintern, on the national and colonial questions, and on the agrarian issue. He spoke impetuously, and criticised his own Party for its flaws.

*Pravda* published his intervention on the national and colonial questions under this headline, "From Words to Deeds. Speech of Indochina Delegate Nguyễn Ái Quốc".

The 5th Congress proceedings contain an interesting dialogue between Vasil Kolarov and the Indochina representative at the opening session:

"Kolarov: The presidium has submitted a resolution in support of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples.

"Nguyễn: Will the Congress issue any special address to the colonies?"

"Kolarov: On the agenda we have the colonial question, the question of the Eastern countries, and the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Anybody who wants to speak on the subject will have an opportunity to do so.

"Nguyễn: Before voting on the address, I suggest adding the words, 'To the colonial peoples.' This was accepted.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc had spoken from his seat, and his insistence became clear after Manuilsky delivered the report on the national and colonial questions. He criticised the French Communist Party for not conducting anti-colonial propaganda, and cited several serious facts. During the FCP Congress in Lyons in January 1924, the Comintern issued an address to the French workers and the peoples of the French colonies. The editors of *L'Humanité*, which published the address, had deleted the words "to the colonial peoples". About a year before the 5th Congress, the Comintern called on the colonial peoples to rise against their oppressors. In Algeria, an FCP section passed a resolution which

opposed this Comintern call. Manuilsky reported to the Congress that the French Communist Party had adopted no document proclaiming the right of colonies to secede from the metropolitan country. He also pointed out that its revolutionary propaganda and organisational work among the 300,000 colonial workers living in France and the 250,000 Blacks in the French army was far short of the mark.

The delegate from Indochina, that is, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, spoke to the same effect, and emphasised the necessity for close cooperation between the European communist parties and the mass of the working people in the colonies.

"So long as the communist parties of France and Britain fail to conduct a vigorous colonial policy and make no contact with people in the colonies," Nguyễn said, "all their mass propaganda will be fruitless because out of step with Leninism. According to Lenin, he continued, the revolution, if it was to win in the West, had to be closely related to the anti-imperialist movements in the colonies and semi-colonies. The national question, he pointed out, was part of the general issue of proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship. This, he said, was how Lenin conceived it. "As for me," Nguyễn added, "having been born in a country that is now a colony of France, and being a member of the French Communist Party, I must say with regret that my party has done very very little for the colonies.

Nguyễn set forth a number of concrete proposals which, to his mind, would enliven the work of the FCP and invigorate revolutionary propaganda in the colonies.

"I think these proposals are sensible," Nguyễn said, "and if the Comintern and our Party approve them, I am sure that at the 6th Comintern Congress the FCP will be able to say that the united front of the peoples of the metropolitan and colonial countries has at last been shaped."

Nguyễn knew better than anybody else why his Party was so passive.

Many French Communists at that time fell for Rosa Luxemburg's idea that the political independence of the colonies would not come about until a socialist overturn in the metropolitan countries made it

secure, and that, therefore, there was no special need to invigorate revolutionary work in the colonies: once the revolution in the metropolitan countries won, the proletariat would simply grant the peoples in the colonies freedom and a socialist future.

Nguyễn disagreed. And it was due to the explicative work of the Comintern and the efforts of revolutionaries from the colonies, Nguyễn Ái Quốc among them, that the FCP finally shifted to a truly internationalist position. It began supporting the struggle of the colonial peoples for national liberation in every possible way, and in the 1940s and 50s opposed the French colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc, who was the sole representative of far-away Indochina at the Congress, was highly popular. Communists from different continents were glad to make his acquaintance and to talk to him. One day, a Moscow painter asked him to pose for a portrait. The portrait appeared in Moscow's *Rabochaya Gazeta* on July 29.

The 5th Congress of the Comintern was followed by a succession of other important international forums - all of them in Moscow, and all of them attended by the Indochina representative. When in Paris, Nguyễn had joined a workers' trade union affiliated with the United Confederation of Labour founded under communist guidance, and now, along with his old friend Monmousseau, attended the 3rd Congress of the Profintern as plenipotentiary delegate. He was also a delegate to the First Conference of the International Relief Association (for revolutionaries). A few years later, this organisation would play a decisive part in saving him from incarceration in colonial prison. He was still young, and looked no older than a youth, which was why his appearance in the presiding party of the 4th Congress of the Communist Youth International looked quite natural. Finally, since he was still the sole representative of his downtrodden nation, of its workers, peasants, youth, women, and so on, he was also invited as an honorary guest to attend the International Women's Congress.

At the Women's Congress he met Nadezhda Krupskaya, who sat a few seats away in the presidium. He spoke with that "very kind and simple woman", as he would later describe her, during the interval.

Krupskaya showed genuine interest in Nguyễn's account of events in distant Indochina. She asked how the revolutionary movement there was making out, what forces stood in the vanguard, and whether or not women took part in the revolutionary movement. She pointed out that Indochina's revolutionaries faced incredibly difficult tasks. "What an intricate knot of contradictions!" she exclaimed, and added: "I don't think it can be unravelled without mastering communist theory and applying it correctly."

Nguyễn said that they had also come to that conclusion. He said he had first spotted this thought in Lenin's works. Speaking at the 2nd Congress of the Communist organisations of Eastern peoples, he recalled, Lenin had said they would have to adapt themselves to the specific conditions that did not exist in the European countries and apply communist theory where the peasants comprised the vast majority - with the struggle proceeding against medievalism, not against capitalism.

"In my country," Nguyễn added, "there is also brutal colonial oppression in addition to this."

"If you only knew, Comrade Krupskaya," Nguyễn exclaimed, "how Lenin is revered in the East, and notably in my country, Indochina. He is leader and guide and teacher to the European workers, but for the peoples of the East he is something still more." He said that on his way to Soviet Russia he has hoped to meet Lenin, and regretted that he had not been able to. "We Vietnamese patriots," he added, "had been in darkness and did not see how to liberate our countries. Lenin showed us the way, and we will never depart from it."

5

Only a year had passed since Nguyễn disembarked in Petrogra. It was a year so filled with events that it became a special milestone in his life of professional revolutionary. He studied Lenin's works, was active in the Comintern, and attended the Communist University of the East. He acquainted himself with the life of the Soviet people, their revolutionary activities, and their experience of building socialism. All this rounded out his ideological and political development. He was now a convinced Communist of the Lenin school who had mastered the



fundamental principles of Lenin's doctrine, an experienced member of the worldwide league of Communists, and an acknowledged representative of revolutionary Asia who had faith in his own ability to tackle complicated tasks.

He thirsted for revolutionary action which would, even if only slowly, bring closer the liberation of his people.

Nguyễn requested that the Comintern should send him to South China in order to work among Vietnamese political emigrés who, as he had been informed, were gathering there then, being enticed by the Sun Yatsen government's revolutionary programme.

Soon, he was invited to see Manuilsky, whom the 5th Congress had elected to the Presidium of the Comintern Executive. A member of the Bolshevik Party since 1903 whom old party members knew from the underground, Manuilsky enjoyed the respect of the Cominterners.

The two acquaintances needed no interpreter. Both spoke good French. After the defeat of the 1905 revolution in Russia, Manuilsky had emigrated to Paris, and there finished the Sorbonne law school.

"Comrade Nguyễn, I can see you're spoiling for a fight," Manuilsky said, smiling warmly.

"Yes, terribly. The past congress has given all Communists an action programme. Thought we in Vietnam have no communist party so far, I understand the call of the Congress for the bolshevisation of communist parties in capitalist countries - that is, introduction of the ideological, organisational and tactical principles of Bolshevism - is applying to us as well. We must form a Bolshevik-type party in Indochina as quickly as possible," Nguyễn replied.

He said objective conditions were available, the Vietnamese working class was gaining strength, and many patriots had left the country, settling in the southern regions of China - Canton, Shanghai, Hongkong, and Macao. He said he considered it his duty to conduct revolutionary work among them, for they would one day be the nucleus of a communist party in Indochina. Besides, he added, it will be much easier to maintain communications with Vietnam from there.

Manuilsky said the Executive had complied with Nguyễn's request, and that he was appointed plenipotentiary of the Far Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern Executive. Nguyễn's main job, Manuilsky added, would be to organise his fellow countrymen and set the stage for the founding of a communist party in Indochina. "But considering your knowledge and experience," he said, "the Executive hopes that you will do everything you can to help revolutionaries from other Southeast Asian countries as well."

Manuilsky said Nguyễn was right to want to go to South China, where the situation was favourable at that time. The Canton government was formed early in 1923 under Dr. Sun Yatsen, leader of the Kuomintang, who was a friend of the Soviet Republic. "And, as you know," he added, "the first Congress of the Kuomintang, held in Canton in January 1924, ended in a victory for the revolutionary wing."

He explained that the Soviet government, acting in line with the 2nd Congress of the Comintern, supported revolutionary-democratic movements in colonial and dependent countries, and therefore also the Kuomintang. This was yielding good results. Soviet political and military advisers, he added, were doing useful work in South China. "Sun Yatsen's political adviser, Mikhail Borodin," Manuilsky said, "is also the Comintern representative in China." Borodin, he said, was an old Bolshevik versed in the ways of the underground, and had attended the Inaugural Congress of the Comintern. Manuilsky advised Nguyễn to contact Borodin as soon as he arrived.

In parting, Nguyễn said he hoped when they met the next time, he, Nguyễn, would be representing the Communist Party of his country, Vietnam.

## IN SOUTH CHINA

### 1

The ship, flying the red flag of the Soviet Republic, steamed slowly up the Pearl River. The tiring voyage from Vladivostok to Canton was about to end. On the shore, Nguyễn saw low mounds sparsely grown with trees and single-stories little houses of a dirty grey colour crowding

closely together. Junks sailed by. Their peculiar sails made them look like huge butterflies or bats sitting on the surface of the dark brown water. Thousands of junks were ranged along both banks of the river, serving as homes for entire families.

A while later, the voyagers glimpsed the central embankment, which was like an alien body among the innumerable narrow little streets of the Chinese part of the port. In sharp contrast were the multi-storied modern houses, many of them covered with large advertisements. Prominent among these were Sincere's and Sun department stores. In the middle of the river lay the sandy island of Shameen, the settlement of foreign consulates, joined with the mainland by a bridge whose approaches were fenced off with barbed wire. British soldiers wearing cork helmets and khaki shorts guarded the bridge.

The moment he came ashore, Nguyễn felt the breath of his native land, for from Canton it was a stone's throw to Vietnam. Many things were just as he knew them at home. Orchids everywhere, banana palms growing along the sidewalks, and the dizzle hanging like water dust in the air just as in Vietnam in winter. In summer, on the other hand, showers which were more like waterfalls were a common occurrence, turning streets into streams. Then, with the evening's breeze came the cicadas, clustering in a large tree and producing a deafeningly shrill concert.

Nguyễn looked at the Pearl River, and in his mind's eye saw the rivers of his youth - the Blue River and the River of Fragrance. Their water was just as brown, and fishmen's junks sailed upon it just as noiselessly. The tireless Canton rickshaws wearing broad-brimmed straw hats looked almost the same as their brothers in Huế and Saigon. The last time Nguyễn had seen a rickshaw was at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseilles. The people, too, were reminiscent of those at home. He himself was little different externally, and their sing-song Kwangtung dialect also sounded much like the tongue of his country.

Again, as in Soviet Russia, Nguyễn marvelled at the cleansing force of revolution. How brightly and joyfully sparkled the eyes of the Cantonese, unlike those of his downtrodden countrymen. Oppressed and

abused by imperialists, the East arose before his eyes in the act of throwing off the chains of colonial slavery.

On the day he arrived, Nguyễn saw a mass action. Spontaneous meetings in support of Sun Yatsen's revolutionary programme erupted here and there in Canton. The streets were patrolled by groups of workers. They were in semi-military garb, wearing armbands, and carrying rifles. The twelve-rayed Kuomintang stars were attached to their caps. Young Pioneers in khaki suits, white caps and red ties, marched along the streets. Posters and leaflets were stuck on the walls of houses and poles.

Reg flags were flown out of windows, and streamers were stretched across the streets.

Situated at the extreme southern tip of China, Canton had always been fairly independent. This left a peculiar imprint on its citizens. They were always free-thinking, always striving for independence, and always receptive to new ideas. "All new things come from Canton," people said in China, and the activity of Sun Yatsen's government bore them out.

When Nguyễn arrived in Canton, the Chinese national-democratic revolution was at its peak. Sun Yatsen, idol of all Chinese progressives, was still backed by the national bourgeoisie. Everyone saw the Kuomintang as a truly revolutionary party fighting for the country's national liberation, against imperialist incursions and the countless warlords who were tearing China to pieces. The Kuomintang's revolutionary potential swung high when Sun defined his new political course at the end of 1923: alliance with the Communists, alliance with Soviet Russia, support of the worker-peasant movement.

It would have been a mistake to ignore this. Acting on the interests of the Chinese working class, for democracy and socialism, the Comintern Executive recommended the Chinese Communists to work hand in hand with the Kuomintang. At the 1st Congress of the Kuomintang, which Borodin, who had just come to China, helped to prepare, the Communist Party of China was admitted to the Kuomintang as an individual member, while maintaining its organisational and

To extend the social and political base of their colonial rule, the French carried through a number of liberal reforms, primarily in education, accompanied by far-flung propaganda of their civilising mission in Vietnam, and extolling Franco-Annamite cooperation.

The educational reforms generated other processes. The new Vietnamese script, *quốc ngữ*, quickly took root in the country. More newspapers were being put out, more books published. A reading fever broke out.

Educated Vietnamese, pupils and students especially, read everything that reached the bookstalls after the rigid police censorship - in Vietnamese, Chinese and French. And books on major socio-political problems were read most widely.

But while Nguyễn had climbed the peak of socio-political thought and had become a champion of Leninism, that most advanced revolutionary doctrine, during his years abroad, his countrymen at home still stumbled about in semi-darkness and raptly absorbed such new concepts as freedom, equality, and fraternity, and the ideas of the French enlighteners. Thirstily, they read Liang Ch'ichao, who inspired a sense of national pride, and heatedly compared the pros and cons of various political doctrines - Sun Yatsen's three people's principles, Mahatma Gandhi's sarvodaya doctrine of a universal welfare society and satyagraha of passive resistance, and also the socialist theories of Proudhon, Blanqui, and the utopians.

It was not until after the founding of the French Communist Party that the works of Marx and Lenin began filtering through to Vietnam in French translation. They reached only a limited number of readers at first, but the ideas they contained spread like wildfire. The seed fell on fertile soil. Thus, a few dozen years later than in Europe, such words and notions as "bourgeoisie", "proletariat", "the right of nations to self-determination", "imperialism", "colonialism", "bourgeois-democratic revolution", and so on, appeared in Vietnam's political vocabulary.

Nguyễn's new friends had been members of the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam (Viet Nam Quang Phục Hội), professing the ideas of Phan Bội Châu. The membership consisted mainly of Confucian patriots, many of them of an advanced age. They stigmatised

the colonialists in elegant literary style at various gatherings, but were no longer capable of action. And the young people among them gradually drifted away, until finally Hồ Tùng Mậu and Lê Hồng Sơn set up the secret Union of Hearts Association (Tam Tam Xa). Its youthful members counted mostly on terrorist action. The tragic death of Phạm Hồng Thái after his attempt on the French governor, confused them. They had come to a crossroads, for they had heard a lot about things in Soviet Russia and knew the Russians working for Sun Yatsen's government.

Nguyễn, however, was the first of their compatriots to come directly from that country, and they hung on his every word.

"No, Vietnamese patriot can fail to revere Phạm Hồng Thái's exploit," Nguyen said to them. "Out of all the seeds that fall to earth, a martyr's blood sprouts the quickest. Phạm Hồng Thái's death is the harbinger of spring. His name will live down the ages because he did not hesitate to lay down his life for freedom. But, brothers, are you sure the road you've chosen is correct?"

Nguyễn said that in Russia, too, people had begun that way. Lenin's elder brother had taken part in an attempt on the tsar's life, and was hanged for it. But Russian revolutionaries had found the right way speedily, and established a monolithic party modelled on an effective revolutionary theory. "That," Nguyễn added, "is what we must do as well if we want to liberate our country." He said this called for knowledge, especially political knowledge, and suggested that political education courses should be started for young revolutionaries right there, in Canton.

2

In a letter to the Comintern of December 18, Nguyễn wrote: "Arrived in Canton in mid-December. I am a Chinese now, not Annamite any more, and my name is Li Chui. Met a few Annamite nationalists. Picked five of them from different provinces. Will teach them methods of organisation."

Soon, a signboard saying, Committee for Special Political Studies, appeared on the door of house 13 (a three-storey villa of tropical design)

on ostentatiously named Văn Minh (Civilisation Street). In a large second-floor classroom, the walls were hung with portraits of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Sun Yatsen, and Phạm Hồng Thái. Young people who had come to the courses directly from Vietnam, where they had miraculously avoided arrest, went reverently from one portrait to the next.

For the rest of their lives, they would remember the words spoken at the opening ceremony by a man who called himself Comrade Vương.

"What must revolutionaries learn first of all?" he had asked them. And his reply was: "They must learn the right revolutionary theory. Then they will be like travellers in the dark of night lighting their way with a torch. There are many doctrines and theories. But the truest, the most reliable, the most revolutionary, is Leninism."

The curriculum was fairly large. Students studied the international situation, the history of the October Revolution in Russia, the history of the three Internationals and the national liberation movement, and Sun Yatsen's political programme. They also studied economic sciences, journalism, the principles of organising mass work, and foreign languages.

Some of the lectures were by Whampoa Military Academy instructors.

The Committee for Special Political Studies was, indeed, considered a kind of branch of the Academy, and functioned under its auspices. The main instructor was Nguyễn, who devoted all his free time to the courses.

Those who remembered him at the time said Comrade Vương had looked very young. He was now 35, slim, his finely chiselled face lit up by an unusually bright pair of eyes. He was dressed in a paramilitary jacket, like that of Sun Yatsen. Lively, quick, soft-mannered, but of firm and confident speech, he had the knack of instantly winning the attention of his audience. He was annoyed with people who indulged in fantasy, and was always intent on hitching his thoughts to actual practice. "Revolution," he often said, "is the cause of the mass of workers and peasants, not some handful of people. Our main job, therefore, is to work patiently and regularly with the mass of the people." He had the requisite statistics at his fingertips, and used figures

skilfully to argue a point. He told his audience that figures were the most convincing evidence.

"As Lenin said," he would add, "the peasant believes figures more than theories." He also tried to cultivate Lenin's approach to the study of the revolutionary's environment. "A revolutionary," he would say, "must always be abreast of all political events. Read the papers - they are the mirror of life and help understand what is going on."

Out of the subjects studied at the courses, the students were naturally most interested in the Vietnamese revolution. They wanted to know everything about it: what its character should be, and what social and political forces, what social classes, would take part in it?

Following World War I, the relationship between the Vietnamese imperial dynasty and the French colonialists changed. Cowed by French power, Emperor Khải Định and his mandarins abandoned even the slight opposition put up by their predecessors, and cooperated obsequiously with the colonial authorities. Khải Định's visit to France in 1922, his honeyed speeches and fawning behaviour during that visit, redoubled the hatred of the Vietnamese.

The colonialists went out of their way to revive the former worship of the emperor. Now, this would work in their interests. A monarchist party with its own newspaper was founded for this purpose, recruiting a membership among French-educated Vietnamese. People who propagated monarchist ideals and Confucian canons, led by Phạm Quỳnh, one of the most zealous collaborationists, gathered round the young, Western-educated Prince Vĩnh Thụy. But it was impossible to rebuild the prestige of the imperial dynasty. So, when Phan Chu Trinh, who returned to Vietnam, called for a "reform of the ruling dynasty" this badly hurt his prestige. By the 1920s, the programmes of all patriotic parties and groups in Vietnam associated liquidation of colonial oppression with the overthrow of the imperial dynasty.

The nature of the feudal class on which the imperial dynasty relied, had also changed radically. During the period of colonial rule, and especially at the time of the First World War, the feudal gentry in Vietnam increased in numbers. In the capital, it was the emperor and

his venal court that backed the French; in the countryside it was the reactionary landlords. There, and this applied especially to Cochin China, the national struggle against foreign oppressors gradually acquired ever more distinct social overtones, and tended to merge with the struggle of the poorest peasants against the abuses of the landlords, who, in fact, personified the colonial regime. By the early 1920s, it was quite clear that the bulk of the feudal lords in Vietnam had become servile allies of the French colonialists.

It followed that Lenin's postulate that the national liberation revolution was sure to be anti-feudal, thus conditioning a powerful revolutionary surge among the peasantry, was entirely valid for Vietnam. Nguyễn and his comrades were aware of this. The "land to the tiller" slogan imposed by objective necessity, became the main slogan of their political platform. But who, what social forces, would carry the slogan into effect and mobilise millions of villagers against colonialism and feudalism? Nguyễn pointed out that the working class alone was grown to this task, because the workers were, in effect, the most consistent fighters against colonialism and the truest bearers of the national interest. The bourgeoisie was out, because its interests were increasingly interwoven with those of the landlords. In Cochin China, it was the landlords who were turning capitalist, while in Tonkin the bourgeoisie, which was buying up land, was turning into landlords.

Nguyễn and his new friends were convinced that the Vietnamese working class had to have its own party, its own political vanguard, and as quickly as possible. But unlike his friends, Nguyễn knew of Lenin's warning that artificial and premature founding of communist parties, especially in the backward East, could have deplorable consequences. The objective need for a working-class party already existed, but the subjective conditions in Indochina were not yet ripe for it. An organisation was needed to act as an intermediate link.

Nguyễn learned that in June 1924 Phan Bội Châu, impressed by Sun Yatsen's ideas, had founded a Vietnam Nationalist Party, consisting of Vietnamese emigrés who had settled in China. The Party's programme censured French colonialism and demanded national self-determination, equality, a constitutional republic, liberation of all political prisoners,

the right for Vietnamese students to go abroad, and freedom for the activity of different parties. In a report to the Comintern, Nguyễn spoke highly of the Nationalist Party's patriotic spirit, but noted the faults of its leaders, who, as he put it, "were at sea in politics and had no skill at all in organising the masses."

He met Phan Bội Châu several times - in Canton and Shanghai. Speaking on behalf of the Comintern, he demonstrated the need for revising the Nationalist Party's programme and tactics so as to make it more revolutionary. And his arguments did, albeit slowly, yield the desired results. It was decided to call a Nationalist Party conference in the summer of 1925 in order to determine its further activity. But the decision was not fated to be carried out. On May 18, 1925, Phan Bội Châu was spotted and seized by agents of the French police in Shanghai, and shipped to Vietnam, where he was thrown into a Hanoi prison.

At the end of June 1925, gathering on the top floor of the Wenminlu villa after the lectures, Nguyễn and his young friends formed a new patriotic organisation called the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth Association. Here was how Nguyễn defined its objectives:

"The main thing for us today is to propagate the fundamentals of Lenin's doctrine, and the decisions and instructions of the Comintern. We must never forget that nothing can substitute for Leninism. The Association with its revolutionary platform must become a bridge for the establishment of a communist party when conditions permit."

He suggested forming a communist group inside the Association. It would operate clandestinely at first. The local authorities, and especially the French police, would of course show an interest in the nature of the Association. That is why, he said, it would be advisable to use a less radical name for it in public. He suggested calling it Youth Party of Vietnam.

It was agreed to put out a paper. *Thanh Niên* (Youth), and, as in Paris Nguyễn was made its chief editor. The paper was stencilled in a few hundred copies, and distributed in South China among Vietnamese emigrés, and among French seamen in Canton and Shanghai, who shipped it secretly to Vietnam, France, and Siam. The paper's calls for

national and social liberation, and its exposures of the crimes committed by colonialists and collaborationists, won it much popularity among progressives in Vietnam. So much so that the colonial authorities became aware of it. "The paper founded by Nguyễn Ái Quốc," said a report to the French Governor-General, "is read not only in Vietnam, but also abroad - read and often transcribed."

The 61st issue of the paper created a commotion at secret police headquarters in Indochina. Across the front page ran this banner headline:

"Only the Communist Party Can Bring Freedom to Vietnam." This meant to say that the Vietnamese national liberation movement was about to embark on a new stage, and that the objective need of the hour was to set up a genuinely revolutionary vanguard, a Communist Party, the only force that could take the liberation movement from the goldforsaken paths of defeat to the highway of victory.

The Vietnam Revolutionary Youth Association was not officially affiliated with the Comintern. But it followed Comintern recommendations, and maintained close ties with communist parties in other countries, notably the Soviet Union, France and China. In due course, as Nguyễn had foreseen, it became the nucleus of the future communist party.

The Association had a rigid system of selection and training worked out by Nguyễn. Most of the recruits came from the political courses. Those joining the Association had to take an oath of loyalty to the ideals of the revolution on Phạm Hồng Thái's grave. On completing their training, many were sent to Indochina for underground work. Years later, when the revolution had won, they recalled how thoroughly each of them was briefed by Comrade Vương:

"Find old friends you can trust. Whatever you may be talking about, try to switch the conversation to the brutality of the French in our country. If you feel a response, ask: How much longer are we Vietnamese going to suffer foreign oppression? If you are asked how to get rid of the French, say unity is the key."

In July 1926, Nguyễn wrote to the Comintern:

"Here is what we've managed to do since I came here:

"1) An underground group has been organised;

"2) A peasant league has been organised (for Vietnamese living in Siam);

"3) A group of Young Pioneers has been formed out of peasants' and workers' children. They live in Canton and we pay for their schooling (at the political courses, Nguyễn had separate lessons with eight Vietnamese boys and girls. He gave them new names to mislead the police, and one surname for the lot - Li. They were considered Li Chui's 'nephews' - Ye.K.);

"4) A group of revolutionary women (ten) has been organised;

"5) A school of political propaganda has been opened, with students arriving in Canton secretly. They go home after six weeks' training. The first group consisted of 10 persons. The next group, which will finish in July, consists of about 30."

The young Pioneer Organisation in Moscow also received a letter from Canton, signed Li Chui. It said there was a small group of Vietnamese Children aged 12 to 15, who were the first Young Communists of Vietnam. "They are still very young, though they have endured much grief," the letter said. "They say they would like to come to your country, to be Lenin's pupils like you. We hope you will not refuse to take them..."

The reply from Moscow was affirmative. The children set out for the Soviet Union accompanied by Vương Thúc Tín, the son of Nguyễn's unforgettable teacher and an active member of the Association. The journey was long and difficult. Thúc Tín and the children (of whom, seemingly, there had been five) took several months to reach Moscow.

Those who studied at the Canton political courses and were active in the Association and the newspaper *Thanh Niên*, received an excellent revolutionary training. It would be fair to say, indeed, that they received true Hồ Chí Minh schooling, in which the fundamental principles of Leninism were intricately woven into the specific conditions of Vietnam without coming into conflict with them and finding support in the complicated socio-political situation and the national psychological traits of the Vietnamese of that time.

The Association and the newspaper were the training ground for a powerful group of professional revolutionaries who devoted their lives to the national and social liberation of their nation. Among them were future leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Tôn Đức Thắng, Lê Duẩn, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Hoàng Quốc Việt, and prominent Party activists who did not live to see the revolution, Lê Hồng Phong, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, Hồ Tùng Mậu, Lê Hồng Sơn, Ngô Gia Tự, Hà Huy Tập, Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, the first Vietnamese Komsomol Lý Tự Trọng, and many others.

3

Consistent internationalist that he was, Nguyễn went out of his way to establish ties with revolutionaries of other countries. Backed by Liao Chungkai, with whom he was on a friendly footing, he formed the Union of Oppressed Asian Peoples. Its membership included patriots from Indochina and revolutionaries from Korea, Malaya, Indonesia and India who had found refuge in the Canton Republic, and also prominent Chinese democrats, including Liao Chungkai himself, who was elected Union President.

But Liao's days were numbered.

On August 20, 1925, he was mortally wounded by a hired assassin outside the Kuomintang Central Executive Yuan building. Liao and worked resolutely to improve the life of the workers and peasants, and was a stout supporter of the Kuomintang's alliance with Soviet Russia. That was why, indeed, he was the first on the Chinese reactionaries' blacklist.

Nguyễn's activity in Canton did not escape the watchful eye of the French secret police. The archives of the French Colonial Affairs Ministry contain the following confidential message from Hanoi, dated February 27, 1925.

"Hanoi police headquarters has been informed of an Annamite who has come to Canton from Europe, and established ties with revolutionary elements. He calls himself Li Chui and associates with the Russian Communists. He is well informed about Annamite revolutionaries in

Europe and about Russian revolutionary methods... He is highly energetic and has organised a federation which is training Communists with the help of a few Annamites who settled in South China. They have issued leaflets, a few of which have reached Indochina, calling on people to join their federation."

The secret agent who wrote this message was certainly observant: though very far from the Soviet Union, Nguyễn had not relinquished ties with it for a single moment. He acted on Manuisky's advice and contacted Borodin as soon as he arrived. This was easy to do. The Canton papers regularly carried want ads for translators inserted by the Soviet mission. Nguyễn had a fluent command of French, English and Chinese, and a smattering of Russian. Holding a copy of the *Canton Gazette* in his hand (as camouflage) he came to Borodin's offices, and was given a job.

Borodin was respected and liked in Canton. An old-time Bolshevik, he had joined the Party at 19 in 1903, and had lived a long time abroad. After the Revolution he returned to Russia, where he was put in charge of the Party's international relations, and was active in the world communist movement and the Comintern. He knew Lenin, and enjoyed his trust.

A friendship developed between Nguyễn and Borodin. Borodin was always ready to counsel and guide the Vietnamese Communist as the latter was building up ideological and political structures for Vietnamese patriots living in South China. He helped Nguyễn to pick out the worthiest young people for study in Moscow's Eastern University. The first group of five such young people, which included Lê Hồng Phong, left for Moscow in early 1926. It was also on Borodin's recommendation that Soviet instructors of the Whampoa Academy lectured at Nguyen's political courses. Among the lecturer was the future Soviet Marshal Vassily Blücher, known in China by the name of Galin, P.A. Pavlov, M.V. Kuibyshev (V.V. Kuibyshev's brother), V.M. Primakov, and others.

The offices of the Canton government's chief political adviser were in a fashionable villa behind a tall wall with an arch gate, opposite the Kuomintang's Executive Yuan. Borodin and his family lived on the first

floor. The translation bureau, which was on the ground floor, was headed by Chiang Tai-ai, Borodin's consultant and aide, and future hero of the Canton Commune. Here, Nguyễn spent most of his time, gathering information from Chinese and English newspapers for transmission to the Soviet news agency ROSTA, whose non-staff correspondent he had become when leaving Moscow.

V.V. Vishniakova-Akimova, a member of Borodin's staff, wrote in her book, *Two Years in Rebel China*:

"I am privileged to have known one of the remarkable people who were then in Canton: the Vietnamese Li. In jest, we called him Li Annam.

"I recall his slight frame in a white linen suit that hung on him loosely. He spoke good French, good English, and knew the Kwangtung dialect. He also knew Russian. He gave me lessons in Vietnamese, and enjoyed giving them. He was friendly but restrained, and never said anything about what he was or had been doing. We knew nothing about him except that the French had promised a large sum for his head and that the Kuomintang government had granted him political asylum. He was quite at home in Borodin's house... It was not until much later that I learned from Borodin's wife that our Li Annam was none other than Hồ Chí Minh."

Early in 1927, a pamphlet by an unknown author, *The Revolutionary Road*, was published in Canton under the auspices of the Union of Oppressed Asian Peoples. Those who attended the political courses instantly guessed that it was written by Comrade Vương, as Nguyễn called himself, because it summed up his lectures on Leninism and the tasks facing the Vietnamese revolution. The pamphlet was a logical continuation of *French Colonisation on Trial*. In that first book, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had exposed the crimes of the French imperialists in their far flung colonial possessions, and in the second, *The Revolutionary Road*, he charted the concrete ways of liberating his nation.

To defeat their powerful enemy, revolutionaries in Vietnam had two cardinal tasks to accomplish without delay: to learn the advanced revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism, and to establish a revolutionary party.

"There has got to be a revolutionary party," the pamphlet said, "in order to arouse and organise the masses at home, and to contact the oppressed peoples and working class abroad. The revolution can be successful only if the party is firm, and to be firm, the party must have an ideology which all its members understand and follow. A party without an ideology is like a man without intelligence, like a ship without a compass."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc set forth the basic principles of Lenin's revolutionary doctrine to suit the conditions of colonial Vietnam. Vietnam, he pointed out, was on the brink of a national liberation revolution that would put the country on the road to a socialist revolution bypassing the stage of capitalist development. The main task of the future Marxist-Leninist party in Vietnam, he wrote, was to fight the colonialists. In view of this, Nguyễn elaborated on Lenin's proposition and introduced national elements of patriotism into the idea of merging the working-class movement with socialism. The chief motive forces of the future Vietnamese revolution, Nguyễn Ái Quốc declared, were the peasants and the burgeoning working class, that is, the bulk of the nation. In the Vietnamese setting, with the masses thirsting for liberation, patriotism was a people's patriotism with a class complexion.

This important point later became the determining guideline in Nguyễn's own activity and that of his associates, enabling the small party of Vietnamese Communists to put themselves at the head of the people and secure victory first in a general armed uprising, and later in two long wars of resistance.

To really appreciate the conclusions drawn by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, we might recall that many other prominent personalities of the worldwide national liberation movement of his time did not see the connection between national liberation and the class struggle. They held that national independence could be won without socialism. For Nguyễn, however, those two objectives - national liberation and socialism - were closely connected. "Only socialism and communism can bring the peoples full liberation," he once said, and his words became the motto of the Vietnamese revolution.



True patriotism, he continued, was not to be separated from proletarian internationalism. That was why it was the internationalist duty of Vietnam's revolutionaries to study the experience of the Great October Revolution in Russia. He pointed out its main lessons: that there must be a strong and tenacious Marxist-Leninist party; that the working class and the peasantry were the chief motive forces of revolution, and that the mass of the people should be united and committed. The road of the Vietnamese revolution, Nguyễn wrote, was the same as the road of the October Revolution. The struggle of the Russian proletariat was an example for the people of Vietnam to follow. The national liberation movement in the colonies must seek alliance with the revolutionary proletariat in the metropolitan countries. There must be no trace of any yellow racism or xenophobia which some Vietnamese patriots were prone to display in the past. To tie in the struggle of the Vietnamese people with the worldwide revolutionary movement, was an issue of strategic importance. The Vietnamese revolution," Nguyễn wrote, "is a part of the world revolution. All revolutionaries are comrades of the Vietnamese people."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc devoted a chapter to the question of revolutionary ethics and morality. This had always preoccupied him. No party could be tenacious and combative, he pointed out, if it did not follow the foremost revolutionary theory and did not consist of people who had all the finest qualities of revolutionaries. Among these qualities the author listed a consistently revolutionary spirit, devotion to the revolution, readiness for self-sacrifice, a striving for unity, diligence, thrift, selflessness, concern for the common good, self-criticism, contempt of glory, absence of excess pride, ability to endure want, and indifference to material wealth.

*The Revolutionary Road* was the first book by a Vietnamese showing the substance of Lenin's doctrine, emphasising the importance of proletarian internationalism, and setting the objectives of the Vietnamese revolution. Complicated theoretical problems were set forth in popular form, so as to be understood by the broad mass of people.

In the history of the Vietnamese revolution Nguyễn Ái Quốc's book played the same role as Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* had played for the Russian revolutionary movement. According to Vietnamese historians it laid the foundation for a Communist Party in Indochina and became the

basis for the Party's political programme. Many leaders of the CP of Vietnam and of Socialist Vietnam had later advised those who wanted to learn Marxism to start by reading Nguyễn Ái Quốc's *The Revolutionary Road*. For that was the book which had hitched their own lives to the revolutionary struggle of the working people.

Two-and-a-half years of highly fruitful work in all but ideal conditions yielded splendid results: nearly 200 trained activists who would soon form the nucleus of a working-class party. What more could a professional revolutionary want? It was sad to note, however, that the end was approaching. Canton's political horizon was clouded over. Having begun with acts of terrorism, reactionaries had finally gone on the offensive all a long the line.

On April 12, 1927, Chiang Kaishek started a counter-revolutionary coup in Shanghai. On the following day, his friend, General Li Chisheng, did the same in Canton. Rightist troops seized control of the Whampoa Academy. Three hundred of its trainees were put behind bars in a floating prison on the Pearl River. Roundups and arrests in the next several days saw more than 2,000 people being detained, with several hundred of them, mostly Communists, being put against the wall and shot. Even some members of the government and of the Kuomintang's provincial committee, suspected of communist leanings, were taken into custody. In the Cantonese suburb of Tungshan, rightist troops blockaded the houses of the Soviet advisers.

A few days after the coup, Borodin and his staff left for Wuhan, where the national government of Kuomintang left-wingers was still in power. Nguyễn, who had stayed in Canton, looked for a new job and new lodgings. Again, as in distant Paris, he endured hungry days, with only casual earnings to support him - selling newspapers and cigarettes in the streets, and abiding by the rules of the underground, for Chiang Kaishek's bloodhounds had somehow learned of his connections with Borodin and Kuomintang left-wingers.

One warm night in May a Vietnamese by the name of Lym, employed in the Kuomintang's security department came to Nguyễn's little room in the outskirts of Canton and told him there was an order out for his arrest. "Don't waste time, go to some other town," he said.

A few hours later, Nguyễn was on the Canton-Kowloon express. After a little over an hour, the train crossed the bridge joining Chinese territory with the British colony. But in Hongkong, the local police detained Nguyễn. The police officer did not trust Nguyễn's Chinese papers, and, following local regulations, ordered him to leave within 24 hours.

So Nguyễn changed trains. This time his destination was Shanghai, where he joined a group of Soviet people who crossed all China and finally reached Soviet Russia after a long and exhausting march across the Gobi. In so doing, they followed the route that Borodin had taken a little earlier.

The reign of terror loosened in Canton by the reactionaries did not at first affect the Vietnamese emigrés. Though the political courses were closed down, the Association continued to function. Many of its members still attended Whampoa Academy and were employed in various bodies of the Kuomintang and in the army.

On December 11, 1927, a Communist-led uprising erupted in Canton, known in Chinese history as the Canton Commune. A Council of People's Commissars was formed, which proclaimed the transfer of power in Kwangtung to soviets of workers', peasants' and soldiers' deputies. The Commune survived for only three days. It was crushed jointly by Chiang Kaishek's people and the British and Japanese militarists, who killed or tortured to death more than 6,000 workers. At the height of the bloodbath the staff of the local Soviet consulate also laid down their lives.

Some Vietnamese students of the Whampoa Academy joined the insurrectionists and fought with them on the barricades. Chiang Kaishek's secret agents, who had long since put the residence of the Association under surveillance, noticed one day that a Vietnamese with a red badge, like those worn them by members of the Canton Commune, had entered the premises. The police raided the Association and arrested all Vietnamese who were there. Among the arrested was Li Chui's favourite "nephew", Lý Tự Trọng. That was when the 13-year-old boy performed his first act of heroism: despite blows and threats he betrayed nothing and no one to the gendarmes.

## BIRTH OF THE PARTY

### 1

In the central part of Siam (as Thailand was then called), among picturesque banana groves and palms, some two dozen huts clustered on the hilly bank of the Mê Nam. The little village was peopled exclusively by Vietnamese. After dark, they used to gather in the courtyard of the village school, which had a portrait of the Siamese king on one wall and a portrait of young Phạm Hồng Thái on the other. The patriotic villagers were homesick. They sang Vietnamese songs and listened to the stories of the older men, who had fought some fifty years before in the guerilla detachments of Phan Đình Phùng and Hoàng Hoa Thám.

Recently, an unknown stranger had become the main figure at these nightly gatherings. No one knew where he was from, though, judging by the way he spoke, he must have been born in Central Vietnam. He did not look a day over 40, but out of respect, by local custom, they called him Thầu Tín, meaning Esteemed Tín. After the villagers seated themselves in the school courtyard, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, for it was him, would go to the centre of the circle and, pronouncing every word carefully, read a newspaper or recite old Vietnamese poetry. Thereupon he would answer the questions people asked him. And, so it seemed to them, he knew practically all the answers - how things stood at home in Vietnam, and what was happening in the world.

The idea of organising the political struggle among Vietnamese emigrés in Siam had come to Nguyễn back in Canton. It was on his initiative that the Association regularly sent its people and printed matter to northeast Siam, where some 20,000 Vietnamese were residing at that time. There were old-timers among them - the descendants of the first Vietnamese Catholics. In the early 19th century they had in some way annoyed the emperors Ming Mạng and Tự Đức, who considered them servants of the white intruders, and they were compelled to flee to Siam. The bulk, however, left Vietnam during the First World War, looking for escape from recruitment in the French

army or from hunger. There were those, however, who had come to Siam recently. Those were participants in various patriotic movements who managed to elude the French police. They were eager to return home, for Siam was for them a temporary asylum, where they gave no thought to revolutionary work among their fellow-countrymen. Not until the establishment of the Association did the echo of the stormy events at home and in South China reach the sleepy Vietnamese settlements. In 1926, Association activists formed a society of Vietnamese emigrés in Siam and called it *Thân ái* (Friendship), with branches opening soon in the Siamese provinces of Udon, Nonkai, Sakonnakon, Nakonikhan and Mukdakhan.

In April 1927, when it gradually sank in that he would have to leave China soon, Nguyễn had been thinking of moving to Siam.

He knew from comrades who had been in Siam that a lot could be done among the Vietnamese there. Doubly so, because the local authorities were not too particular as to what the Vietnamese were doing.

Nguyễn did not stay long in Moscow. In December 1927, he headed for Brussels, where he took part in a General Council session of the Anti-Imperialist League. The League, formed in February of that year, was the first broad organisation that united the working-class movement and progressive intelligentsia of capitalist states with the freedom fighters in colonial and dependent countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Active in the League, among others, were Sun Yatsen's widow Sun Chingling, Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sen Katayama, and Henri Barbusse.

After the session, Nguyễn visited France, Switzerland, and Italy, and in Naples boarded a ship for distant Siam.

The Siamese province of Udon was the gathering place of Vietnamese emigrés. Here the Association was able to set up a fairly large branch. But on arriving, Nguyễn saw that it was functioning in low gear, gripped by pessimism owing to news of the brutal colonial terrorism in Indochina.

Though members of the Association had lived in Siam for some years, they wanted no contact with the local people, and had not learned the Siamese language or local customs. At the very first general meeting, Nguyễn pointed out these faults and called for action within the framework of the *Thân ái* Society. It should train cadres for the coming revolution, he said. He said political work should be conducted among the local people, who should be won over to the side of the Vietnamese against the colonialists.

One day, a comrade lamented that revolutionary work among Vietnamese emigrés held little promise.

"I've been to see the thirty Vietnamese families living at the river crossing in Mukdahan," he said. "The market women curse louder than anyone. And the men drink like pigs and play cards. Then they go to the temple to pray for forgiveness. And the young ones are like their elders - all they think of is liquor and wenches. No revolutionary propaganda can be conducted among these worthless people. I beg you, give me some other assignment."

Nguyễn said acidly that the comrade had learned nothing from all the books he had read. Revolutionaries must be with the masses, must teach the people, and enlist them for the revolution. "If all people were educated and faultless," Nguyễn said, "they would need no political agitators. But even the best jade has spots on it." Furthermore, Nguyễn added, these "worthless people" were homesick Vietnamese far from their country.

"Here's your assignment," Nguyễn concluded. "Go back, pick the most difficult family, live with it, and do your best to win their affection, to make them believe in our revolution."

Nguyễn had many irons in the fire. He began putting out a newspaper, and built up its circulation. He obtained permission from the Siamese authorities to start a Vietnamese school. The first such school opened in Udon. It was built by the emigrés themselves, and Nguyen pitched in, carrying bricks.

Though many of the emigrés worshipped the saintly Trần, and his little Buddhist temple was practically never empty, Nguyễn discovered

that few of the worshippers knew the fine works of their saint, the great ancient general Trần Hưng Đạo who had twice defeated the invading armies of the Chinese -Mongolian Yuan dynasty in the 13th century. Nguyễn wrote a patriotic poem, "The Song of Trần Hưng Đạo", which Trần's worshippers began to recite during services in the temple.

Nguyễn travelled a lot. He criss-crossed the northeastern part of Siam, mostly on foot. On his trips, Nguyễn took along clothes and a ten days' supply of food, which he carried in baskets attached at either end of a light, springy bamboo pole across his shoulder. He usually walked the mountain and forest paths barefoot, the heavy baskets swinging from side to side, and feet slipping on the smooth rocks. In Siam, Nguyễn became a first-class walker, and is said to have covered the 70 kilometres from Udon to Sawang in just a day and a night. The ability to walk long distances stood him in good stead later - during the guerilla struggle and the war of resistance.

It seemed a stone's throw from Udon to Vietnam, but the news they got from there was meagre and rare. Chiefly, it came by messengers travelling back and forth for the Association, and was both good and bad.

A communist movement was emerging fast in the country. By the end of the twenties, the Association had sunk deep root, furthering the spread of Marxist-Leninist ideas among the patriotic element, notably the youth. The working-class movement was making good headway, and underground communist groups had begun to spring up at industrial enterprises in the big urban centres. By mid-1929 they had formed three independent organisations: the Indochinese Communist Party in Tonkin, the Annamese Communist Party in Cochin China, and the Indochinese Communist Federation in the central regions. No sooner were they formed than squabbling broke out between them. Each claimed to be the sole communist party in the country.

The strife between the Tonkin and Cochin China organisations was especially serious. In many cases, both had cells at one and the same factory, and occupied themselves entirely in mutual attacks and discussion of unimportant matters. This, plus the absence of a single action programme, sapped their strength.

One early December day in 1929, a messenger brought Nguyễn word from Hồ Tùng Mậu and Lê Hồng Sơn in Hongkong.

"They asked me to tell you," the messenger said, "that the leaders of the different communist groups are so deeply involved in their conflict that they refuse to listen to reason. I was asked to tell you that only one person, Comrade Vương of the Comintern, could remedy the situation.

The Far Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern, too, is disturbed and wants the squabbling to stop. The rank and file want a single party, and as soon as possible."

Nguyễn lost no time. He reached Bangkok by train, and boarded a ship to Singapore, where he took another ship to Hongkong.

The voyage was slow. On the port side some distance away in a blue haze lay the cherished land of his people. This was the first time Nguyễn was so near his country since he had left Saigon eighteen years before. He fixed his eyes on the horizon, catching a glimpse of land now and again. Those were Vietnamese islands, and among them the sinister Poulo Condor, a devil's island where thousands of patriots languished.

A few dozen of miles away, where the sea merged with the black tropical sky, he glimpsed a barely visible ray of light going on and off. What was it? Was it a natural phenomenon or, perhaps, the light of the famous lighthouse on rocky Cape Saint Jacques.

*Where Indian bean trees rustle in the breeze,  
Young plants have grown to manhood...*

These lines of Nguyễn Du's came to his mind. Bean trees had for long been a symbol of his country. They are planted near the houses. How homesick he was, how he longed to see his folks. A pond has a bank, a river has a landing stage, and everyone should have a hearth to call one's own.

It was as though his grieving heart divined the bad news: his old father, he would soon learn, had passed away some weeks before. He had died at 66 in the poor quarter of the little town of Caolan in the Mekong delta. Alone, quietly, in the manner of old men, he had, as the

Vietnamese say, departed from the carnal world. Nor did Nguyễn know then that on November 11, 1929, the imperial court in Vinh had on French orders passed death sentences on seven Vietnamese patriots, and among them *in absentia* on Nguyễn Ái Quốc, and that this would delay his return home for many years.

2

Hongkong, the Fragrant Bay as its picturesque location was named by its old-time inhabitants, appeared before the eyes of the seafarer quite suddenly.

The ship steamed slowly into the large harbour enclosed on three sides by brownish-green hills in the light of the rising sun. At the foot of the hills rose white-walled buildings. Dozens of ocean liners were anchored in the roadstead. The agile and swift native *sampans* slid about between them.

What people call Hongkong consists of a little island of that name, the southern part of Kowloon peninsula known as the New Territories that Britain had leased from China until 1997, and 33 lesser islands adjoining Kowloon. In those days, Hongkong was an open port. No papers were needed to enter it. Democratic organisations could function there in relative freedom and people of different nationalities persecuted for their political views at home found asylum there. The border between Hongkong and Kwangtung Province in South China was practically unguarded.

Nguyễn was met by his old friends, Sơn and Mậu, whom he had not seen since December 1927. They handed him a letter of the Comintern Executive to all communist organisations in Indochina.

"The absence of a single communist party when the worker-peasant movement is in high tide, is fraught with grave dangers for the future of the revolution in Indochina," he read. "The hesitation of some groups to set up a communist party without further delay, is a mistake... The most important and urgent task facing the Communists of Indochina today is to establish a revolutionary party of the proletariat, that is, a mass communist party."

It was clear to Nguyễn and his friends that immediate action was called for. "Without a combative revolutionary party," Nguyễn observed, "the workers' liberation struggle will be like a ship without a helmsman." He suggested setting up a founding committee to prepare a conference at which all communist organisations of Indochina would merge.

A letter was drawn up to members of the communist organisations in Hanoi and Saigon. It said Comrade Vương of the Comintern suggested on behalf of the Comintern Executive that they should hold a unity conference in Hongkong.

Kowloon was a shack town of tin and cardboard in the mainland part of Hongkong. In an emergency, the comrades could easily cross into China. No less important for the security of the conference was its date.

The three friends timed it for Tet, the lunar new year's holiday. In those parts this most popular holiday lasted several days. At Tet time, the delegates would be able to vanish unnoticed from Vietnam, and in Kowloon, too, a gathering would create no suspicion.

Seven people gathered in Kowloon at the end of January: two of them from the Indochinese Communist Party, two from the Annamese Communist Party, Sơn and Mậu from the overseas communist organisations, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc from the Comintern. No delegates came from the Indochinese Communist Federation. The first sitting of the unity conference was held in a suite of a second-rate hotel where most of the arrivals were staying. On the table round which the representatives of the warring sides had seated themselves lay dice and other gaming appurtenances. Anyone who wondered what the noise behind their closed door was about, would at once see that a group of men had come for a bit of gambling. As a precaution, they held one of their sittings in the grandstand of the local football stadium, for the people around them did not know Vietnamese.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc's presence, as Sơn and Mậu had foreseen, created an atmosphere of comradesly trust. Not all the delegates knew him in person, but all had heard of him as the leader of a new patriotic movement and as an active member of the French Communist Party and representative of the Comintern. That is why, Nguyễn Ái Quốc's words made a special impact on the younger men at the conference.

"At first, owing to the recent ferocious squabbles between the Annamese and Indochinese communist parties, most people doubted that the conference would yield any results," wrote the Vietnamese historian Trường Chinh. "But gradually, as a result of a comradely discussion skilfully directed by Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc, and thanks to his outspoken and convincing arguments, the delegates reached agreement."

The conference opened on February 3, and by February 5 all points of dispute had been cleared up. A resolution was passed unanimously to unite all the communist organisations in the country. They would be a single Vietnamese Communist Party. Theses for the Party Programme and Rules, drawn up by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, were adopted, charting the line of march.

As a colony and a semi-feudal country, the Theses said, Vietnam was on the brink of a bourgeois democratic revolution of a new type (later, policy documents of the VCP described it as a "national, people's democratic revolution"). It would come about under the immediate guidance of the working class and lead up to a socialist revolution. Its purpose was to overthrow the rule of the colonialists and feudal lords, to secure national independence, give land to the peasants, set up a government of workers, peasants and soldiers, win democratic freedoms for the people, and constitute a worker-peasant army.

The Theses said the Vietnamese Communist Party was the vanguard of the working class, which was poised to lead the mass of the working people. The Party would work to unite the people of Vietnam with the other oppressed peoples of the world, and maintain close relations with the international working class, and notably with brother workers in the metropolitan country.

The delegates promised to end their squabbles, and to cooperate with open hearts in uniting the communist organisations. A provisional Central Committee was elected to take charge of the process. In substance, the unity conference did the job of a congress, for it founded a party and worked out its basic principles, the strategic and tactical line of the Vietnamese revolution, and elected the requisite governing bodies.

After dark on February 5, Nguyễn held a modest dinner party in his hotel room. His dream was coming true- a dream he had worked for nearly twenty years, braving all hardships. Now the Vietnamese revolution had the living Marxist-Leninist doctrine to back it, and a monolithic revolutionary vanguard that would use it with devastating effect.

"My brothers," Nguyễn said at the dinner, "today is a historic day. Great Lenin said only a party with the foremost theory could be a vanguard fighter. Now we have such a party. Our nation has always been heroic, but never it had a wise, knowledgeable helmsman. The part of helmsman will now be played by our Party, and I am sure it will lead Vietnam to victory and independence."

This was the gist of what they put down in their appeal on the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party, signed by Nguyen on behalf of the Communist International. It was published in the underground communist newspapers and aroused the democratic people in both parts of the country.

"The Communist Party of Vietnam has been founded," it said. "It is the Party of the working class. It will help the proletariat fight for the liberation of the oppressed and exploited. Brothers and sisters, join the Party, follow it, help it overthrow French imperialism and Vietnamese feudalism and the reactionary bourgeoisie, help it secure Vietnam's independence and establish a worker-peasant-soldier government."

On the day the Party was founded the Communists in Vietnam numbered 211. They received word of the unity conference with approval. To be sure, the ideological debate did not end. Some of the Communists had narrow nationalist and petty-bourgeois views. Most Communists were prompted by purely patriotic, anti-colonial feelings, and did not realise yet that the Communist Party was a new type of party with a backbone consisting of members of the foremost class, the proletariat and its main ally, the peasantry.

But these unavoidable growing pains were soon remedied. The building of a truly Marxist-Leninist Party went ahead rapidly. New party cells were springing up all over the country, notably at factories.

The French secret police got wind of this. The resolution of the Hongkong conference was received everywhere with great enthusiasm, reported a secret agent. He noted that goodwill on both sides had led to accords even on issues that had only recently created differences, "They have a provisional central committee, and committees in Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and also provincial committees. The old workers' and peasants' federations have been expanded, and new ones have sprung up," he reported.

The founding of the Communist Party was a turning point in Vietnam's history. At the junction of the 1920s and 30s, Vietnam was hit by the worldwide economic crisis, which shook up the entire capitalist world. The call for national independence blended ever more with the social demands of the Vietnamese working people.

In the new situation, the Vietnamese working class let it be known that it was the hegemon of the impending revolution. It was growing into a powerful political force, though the economy Vietnam, a captive of colonialism, was still exceedingly backward and semifeudal. Despite its relatively small numbers, the working class was quite highly concentrated in the small number of existing factories, and was furthermore homogeneous because no workers' aristocracy had yet sprung up.

Thanks to this, the Vietnamese Communists had no reformist influences and opportunist idea to contend with. Besides, the Vietnamese workers had a numerous and dependable ally, the peasantry, which was so terribly despoiled and poor that most of it was psychological close to the proletariat.

It so happened that in colonial Vietnam the working class grew into a serious political force before the national bourgeoisie did. By the early 1930s, the bourgeoisie was still small in number, and exceedingly weak politically and economically. There was no other tangible force save the Communist Party to head the national liberation struggle. The old Confucian and other feudal parties had long since lost their anti-colonial thrust. And after the arrest of Phan Bội Châu they had, in effect, withdrawn from the political arena. A Nationalist Party replaced them in the mid-twenties, but it embarked on the road of reckless, extreme

left actions. In the beginning of 1930, in a bid to seize the initiative, it started an uprising in Tonkin, and failed. As a result, it was almost completely destroyed, and those of its leaders who survived fled to China, where they espoused the political programme of the Kuomintang and gradually degenerated into a reactionary force hostile to the Vietnamese revolution.

The period that followed the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party was highlighted by unprecedentedly large demonstrations and strikes. Led by Communists, they involved both workers and peasants, who combined economic and political demands. The peak of this surge came at the end of 1930, when 116 villages in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh followed the example of the Russians and formed Soviets - the first bodies of national revolutionary power in Vietnam, mostly headed by Communists.

The Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets, as the people called them, were for nearly a year little enclaves of freedom and independence in colonial Indochina. They dismantled the local colonial administrative machinery, and drove out the feudal landowners and village headmen. Democratic reforms were carried out, namely: taxes established by the French were repealed, communal lands were redistributed among the land-hungry peasants, and landlords were ordered to reduce the ground rent and to claim no additional duties. Leaflets with the hammer and sickle were circulated all over the country, calling on the working people to follow the example of the people of the Soviet Union.

"The Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets," Hồ Chí Minh pointed out later, "demonstrated the spirit and revolutionary capacity of the Vietnamese working people. Though the movement failed, it paved the way for the triumphant August Revolution."

In October 1930, at the height of the uprising in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces, the Party's Central Committee held its 1st plenum. Nguyễn Ái Quốc could not take part. After the unity conference, he had returned to Siam, and had then gone to Malaya on Comintern business. The plenum was chaired by his associate Trần Phú, a former trainee at the political courses in Canton and then a student at Moscow's Eastern

University. He had just returned from Moscow with Comintern recommendations concerning the political objectives of the newly-formed party.

The plenum approved Trần Phú's theses on the bourgeois democratic revolution in Vietnam. They became the Party's political programme, which took account of the Comintern revolutions on the national-colonial issue, on the one hand, and the concrete conditions in Indochina, on the other. The theses said the revolution in Indochina would proceed in two stages. The first would see a bourgeois democratic revolution of a new type, under working-class leadership. It would depose the colonialists and feudal lords, secure national independence, and give the land to its tillers. The anti-imperialist and anti-feudal objectives of that revolution, the programme said, were intimately linked. Its main driving force were the working class and the peasantry. The Communist Party would strive to win the broadest possible segments of the people to the side of the revolution, and then, by revolutionary force establish people's power through an armed uprising.

The second stage, that of socialist revolution, would begin after these objectives were attained. The theses said that once they will have seized power, the peoples of Indochina, helped by countries where proletarian dictatorships were already established, would begin to build socialism by-passing the stage of capitalist development.

The plenum elected Trần Phú the first General Secretary of the Party, and renamed it the Communist Party of Indochina (CPIC). This was done on the recommendation of the Comintern, since French Indochina was at that time politically and geographically a single whole, and the working people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had the same goals, attainable only if they worked together and had close ideological and political ties.

The first glorious months of the new party, its firm guidance of the stormy actions against colonial oppressions and social inequality that shook up the country in 1930 and 1931, Hồ Chí Minh later described in the following terms: "Ever since it came into being, the Communist Party of Indochina was a Leninist and militant party of the young Vietnamese proletariat, which in due course succeeded in uniting under its banner the vast masses of peasants and working people."

## ARRESTED THE FIRST TIME

### 1

After his voyages to Siam and Malaya, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, this time with papers in the name of Sung Manchou, returned to Hongkong.

What may be described as a Vietnamese commune was installed at 186 Sanlung (Three Dragons) Road, Kowloon: eight young men and women who had come from Vietnam for political training, and Nguyễn and Mậu. Among them, Nguyễn was happy to recognise a few of his "nephews" and "nieces" who had been Young Pioneers in Canton.

Often, Nguyễn went to another part of Kowloon, three miles from Three Dragons Road, where the Comintern's Far-Eastern Secretariat had its mission on the second floor of a modest stone building under the umbrella of some commercial firm. One of the two Vietnamese girls attending the political courses, who were Nguyễn's messengers, was darkskinned, large-eyed Minh Khai, who would one day become the chief of the Saigon party organisation. At that time she was only 20.

Sung Manchou often went to Shanghai and Canton. There were many Vietnamese in the French concessions of those two Chinese cities, most of them Tonkin riflemen guarding French offices or servants in rich French homes. They had had contacts with the Association, and were now under the Party's influence. Nguyễn helped them put out underground papers, explained the current political situation, and the tasks of the Party. In the first few months after the Party was founded, some Communists, especially those who had lived a long time abroad and had only a vague idea of the state of affairs at home, succumbed to the "infantile disorder" of leftism. Encouraged by the founding of the Party, by the headway it was making, many young Vietnamese Communists - like their comrades in other, especially Eastern countries - were impatient to take up arms. They wanted socialism at once, and their recklessness found a ready response, especially among those who had only recently espoused the cause. Nguyễn never tired of explaining the harm of these sentiments.



"What is the use of bandying about such words as 'proletariat', 'peasantry', 'social liberation', and 'socialism', he used to say. "Our task is to drive out the French colonialists and win national liberation. The main thing, therefore, is to ignite patriotism in the heart of every Vietnamese."

But Nguyễn never forgot, and constantly reminded his comrades that, as Lenin said, the independence of the proletarian movement, even if embryonic, should always be protected.

Every party propagandist, Nguyễn held, should spread the truth about the Soviet Union, the world's first socialist country. Early in 1930, he began writing a book about life in the USSR. In his notes, he wrote: "The Vietnamese, above all the working people, want to know about Russia. But the French imperialists have banned revolutionary newspapers and books. Furthermore, most workers and peasants in Vietnam cannot read. And those who can, know no other language but their own.

It is our duty, therefore, to tell them about that worker-peasant country. To do so, I intend to write a book - in Vietnamese naturally - in the form of a travel account with many episodes. I want the book to be lively, engaging, and easy to read."

The book, entitled *Diary of a Survivor from a Shipwreck*, was a tale of three shipwrecked friends - a European, an African, and a Vietnamese - who were saved by Soviet seamen and brought to Russia. They saw how the Soviet people were building their new society, and got to know those whom "the revolution turned from slaves in free men".

The book was produced lithographically, and disseminated in Vietnam clandestinely.

After the founding of the Communist Party, and especially during the uprising in Central Vietnam, the French colonial police called on most of its agents to spot and capture the Party's leaders. In those days, a colonial kind of Interpol was active in South China and Southeast Asia, in which the British, French and Dutch secret police collaborated. They kept each other informed about revolutionaries, especially those connected with the Comintern, and exchanged prisoners. The arrest in

1925 of Phan Bội Châu in the International Settlement of Shanghai, for example, was the result of an operation jointly planned by the French secret service and the Shanghai Municipal Police, which was mostly British. The French repaid their colleagues by handing over a number of Indian and Burmese patriots.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc was at the top of the wanted list. In Siam, one day, French agents managed to spot him and came to terms with the local authorities on his extradition. Dressed in a Buddhist monk's clothes, Nguyen barely managed to escape and found refuge in a temple until things blew over. In Hongkong, however, his enemies finally managed to lay him by the heels.

Early one June morning in 1931, the door of the house on Three Dragons Road was rudely flung open, and an English officer accompanied by several Chinese police constables rushed in.

The officer, his pistol drawn, ordered everybody to raise their hands. Fortunately, only two were at home at that hour - Nguyễn and the 17-year-old-girl, Lý Tam.

The police searched the house from top to bottom. They tore up the walls and the tiles on the roof in search of arms, and cut up clothes, pillows and even pieces of soap in search of secret papers and explosives.

"Do you two live alone here?"

Nguyễn nodded, but the officer pointed at the pantry and asked why two people should want so much rice and salt.

The long search yielded no results. The police found nothing. They led Nguyễn and Lý Tam outdoors and pushed them into a vehicle with barred windows. At police headquarters, they were placed in different cells.

It was a puzzle how Nguyễn, a past master at camouflage, should have been caught off his guard. There are several versions. According to one, the French police had captured a Party member, Nguyễn Thái, some weeks before. A letter signed by Nguyễn Ái Quốc was found on his person, indicating that he was in Hongkong. A few days later, the

Colonial Affairs Minister in Paris was urgently informed that Nguyễn Ái Quốc's whereabouts had at last been established.

Then there was this second version: on June 2, 1931, the Singapore police detained Comintern "agent" Serge Lefranc (alias Ducroux). The arrest was carried off brilliantly, the papers wrote. Caught unawares, Lefranc had had no time to destroy documents that lifted the veil on some Comintern activities in Southeast Asia. It may well be assumed, that a slip of paper with Nguyễn's address may have been found on Lefranc, who had probably met Nguyễn in Hongkong.

But the third version seems to be the likeliest. A man named Lâm Đức Thụ, who had infiltrated the ranks of the Vietnamese active in South China at that time, was later found to have been a French police stoolpigeon. He had come to Canton early in 1924 and had taken part in the revolutionary activities of the Vietnamese emigrés. True, his behaviour had aroused suspicion even at that time. He married the daughter of a rich Chinese businessman, and lived an idle life of luxury. Not until many years later, however, were his ties with the French Consulate in Hongkong finally discovered. The French had him start a photo studio and provided the necessary funds. He promised his Vietnamese comrades that all profits would go to the Party treasury, and that, besides, the place was convenient for clandestine meetings. In fact, however, he took advantage of the studio to surreptitiously photograph Vietnamese patriots and gave their pictures and names to the French Consulate. Nguyễn Ái Quốc was one of those who were trapped by him. The French lost no time to inform the Hongkong police of the whereabouts of Nguyễn Ái Quốc.

Hồ Chí Minh, too, evidently accepted this third version. In any case, he refused to see Lâm Đức Thụ, when the latter, who must have thought no one knew of his betrayal, returned to Vietnam after the revolution won and came to the President's office as an "old comrade" wishing to offer his services to the new government. Hồ Chí Minh, though foreign to any thoughts of revenge, looked at him coldly, and said: "Those who chew betel nuts are betrayed by the colour of their lips. As you see, the revolution has won despite your treachery."

Under the scenario worked out by the French and British police, Nguyễn Ái Quốc was to be shipped to Vietnam in a special boat sent to Hongkong, so that the death sentence passed on him *in absentia* could be carried into effect. Counting on this course of events, the police chief in Hongkong did not bother to obtain a warrant for Nguyễn's arrest. He figured that the fewer papers there were pertaining to the case, the better.

At first, things had gone smoothly. Word of Nguyễn's arrest reached the Colonial Ministry in Paris two days later. A French ship left Hải Phòng for Hongkong to pick up the man kept in solitary confinement with no hope of outside help. The French bourgeois press was jubilant. On July 7, *L'Opinion* of Saigon wrote: "The British Intelligence Service picked Nguyễn Ái Quốc like a flower off a meadow. An excellent catch, for which we must be grateful to our English friends. It means that the communist headquarters in Indochina has been captured, and the Communist Party is now paralysed."

But outside help did come, and from an entirely unexpected quarter. The plans of the Hongkong police were frustrated by an Englishman, head of an influential firm of lawyers and a man of liberal views, Francis Loseby. He knew a number of Vietnamese patriots, and on one occasion before had by his brilliant performance in court secured the release of an arrested Vietnamese revolutionary. When the Hongkong representatives of the Comintern learned of Nguyễn's arrest, they contacted Loseby and secured his legal services.

Loseby took on the case. On the very same day he asked the police for an interview with his client, a foreign citizen, Sung Manchou. This came as an unpleasant surprise for the police. They had not expected anyone to know about the arrest, which they thought had been skillfully and secretly carried off. They could not permit Loseby to see the prisoner. He would then discover that Sung had been arrested unlawfully, without a warrant, and would immediately intervene. So Loseby's request was turned down without an explanation.

Knowing that the lawyer would now take the matter further, the police chief was compelled to report the case to his superiors. A post-dated warrant was issued over the Hongkong Governor's signature, with the result that the official date of the arrest was June 12.

Loseby, naturally, continued to insist on seeing Sung Manchou. On his third try, after the police had "legalised" the arrest and carried out other formalities, his persistence was rewarded. In the visitor's room, Loseby met a lean man with a dry, sickly cough, whose face, with its tightly drawn parchment-like skin, was lit up by a pair of strikingly large, bright eyes. He recalled later that at first Sung Manchou aroused a sense of pity, which changed to respect and reverence after their 30-minute conversation, and the wish to help the prisoner at any cost.

"A fellow-countryman of mine," Loseby said when they were seated at the table in the visiting room, "saved the life of Dr. Sun Yatsen when, as you may recall, Sun was kidnapped by his enemies in London. Now I want to help you, and ask you, therefore, to trust me. You must tell me everything about your case. It will enable me to defend you in court. But don't tell me any more than is necessary, because, as I know, a revolutionary has his secrets."

On obtaining the essential information, Loseby realised that the main thing was to prevent Sung Manchou's extradition to Vietnam. He submitted the case to the Supreme Court of Hongkong.

The case was heard in open session. But guards were placed in and around the courtroom to prevent escape. The trial proceeded in the best traditions of British justice. The judge, his aides and the lawyers, dressed in black gowns and wearing powdered wigs on their heads, dominated the scene. On the tables before them lay thick volumes of law. The prosecutor and defender kept paging through them and citing precedents to back up their arguments. None but the prosecutor and defender were allowed to speak. The defendant and his lawyers communicated in writing. Loseby handled the case, but his colleague, Dr. Jenkins, was the defender in court.

"The second time I met Sung Manchou was in the courtroom," Loseby recalled. "He stood in the dock behind bars, and I noticed that

he had been handcuffed. I told Jenkins about it. Jenkins asked the judge to let the defendant show his hands to the court. Sung Manchou raised his handcuffed hands. Then Jenkins said that handcuffing any defendant in the courtroom was contrary to the law. The judge ordered the handcuffs to be removed. Then Jenkins began his speech in Sung Manchou's defence."

The lawyers' job was not easy. The prosecutor raised stereotype charges that the defendant was a "Bolshevik", a "Moscow agent" who had come to Hongkong in order to overthrow the government of the Crown Colony. He asked for a long term of imprisonment or, if possible, deportation to Indochina. He said the French authorities in Indochina were interested in the case and had sent their people to Hongkong to assist in the trial and secure the extradition of the Vietnamese revolutionary.

Loseby and his colleague decided to make the most of the British judicial rule that required scrupulous observance of procedural regulations.

They argued that 1) Sung Manchou's arrest had been unlawful (because it took place on June 6, while the Governor had not signed the official warrant until June 12); 2) the investigators acted unlawfully by asking impertinent questions (according to British justice, a detained person could be asked no more than 5 questions - his name, occupation, and so on. Loseby had found out, besides, that in addition to those five general questions the police had asked Sung Manchou several times whether he had been to Russia, and why); 3) the prosecutor's demand of deporting the defendant to Indochina, where he would be executed, was contrary to the law (British law and, among other things, official documents of the Crown concerning the colonies, said that if a criminal condemned by, say, a Shanghai court, appeared in Hongkong, the Hongkong authorities should turn him over to the Shanghai authorities. But this applied exclusively to British subjects. Sung Manchou, however, was a foreigner, and this procedure did not apply to him.)

Initially, the authorities had counted on securing the defendant's extradition to Indochina aboard a French ship that had already dropped anchor in the Hongkong harbour, at the very first sitting of the court. But the defence frustrated their designs. Its arguments extended the case

to nine sittings, which lasted from June to October. Finally, the court adopted a dual decision: all charges against Sung Manchou were dropped, but he was to be expelled from the British colony and deported to Indochina.

3

All was lost, it seemed. But once more international solidarity came to the fore. Acting through the French branch of the International Organisation for Aiding Revolutionaries, the Comintern Executive had Loseby appeal against the ruling of the Hongkong court before the Privy Council in London. At his request, Sung Manchou's defence there was undertaken by Noel Pritt, then one of the best known lawyers in Britain.

All they could do now was to await results. Nguyễn spent his monotonous and lonely days and nights in single confinement at Victoria prison, an austere three-storeyed building with long narrow corridors and barred cells on both sides. Nguyễn's cell was barely large enough for a person to lie in. Near the ceiling three metres above the floor, was a narrow barred window through which at night, he could see the bright stars of the black tropical sky.

Each day, like all other prisoners, Nguyễn was allowed a 15-minute walk. The warden was a bearded Gurkha. The prison yard, with tall walls around it, was reminiscent of the bottom of a deep well. Still, the walk was pleasant: Nguyễn heard people talk, and was able to talk himself, he saw people's faces, and a bit of the sky.

Fairly often, Nguyễn was visited by Loseby and his wife, who had become fond of him. In a letter to Sung Manchou's friends, Loseby wrote:

"I should like to point out that my client is a most knowledgeable person and that for a number of reasons I am the only one he can trust (this applies to my staff, but not all of it). Out of humanitarian feelings, I visit him as often as possible and I can say that a warm relationship has arisen between us. I would therefore take it as a personal loss if he were handed over to the French or if he were killed by their agents.

"That he might be killed by a French agent worries us. We have seen to it that no one apart from myself and my wife should be able to visit him. I know from a trustworthy source that a reward of 75,000 piastres has been posted on my client's head... So, even if the appeal is granted and my client will be given his freedom, he will still be in danger of being killed by the French. He must not stay in the Crown Colony, because most of the Hongkong police know him. There is only a small chance of his leaving the colony without the knowledge of the French, who are paying good money for any information about him."

Though Loseby took every precaution and no one apart from himself and his wife could visit Sung Manchou, the number of the latter's Hongkong acquaintances increased unexpectedly by two - two persons well known in Hongkong.

After several months of solitary confinement, Sung Manchou's lung troubles returned. Loseby had him removed to the prison hospital. One day, on the way to the hospital, Loseby's wife dropped in at a florist's to buy flowers for the sick man. There she met the wife of Hongkong Vice-Governor Thomas Sowton, better known in the Crown Colony's literary and theatrical world as Stella Benson. The two ladies were close friends, and Mrs. Loseby finally told Stella about Sung Manchou.

Under the impression of that story, Stella said she wanted to visit the prisoner. And the next time, Mrs. Loseby came to the hospital with her celebrated friend. The latter talked to Sung Manchou and did not hide her delight over his good English and his good manners. On coming home, she vented her outrage on her husband, saying that so knowledgeable a man, and a foreigner to boot, should never be kept in prison. She took her husband to the hospital, and had him speak to the prisoner.

Nguyễn made a favourable impression on him. Later, this played an important part in the happy conclusion of the "Sung Manchou case".

Early in June 1932, a year after the trial of Sung Manchou first began, Loseby received welcome news from London: his appeal was granted.

A colleague told him that Stafford Cripps, who represented the Hongkong authorities, decided that in the event of another trial, the

Hongkong police would lose the case because of the absence of any conclusive evidence. To save their face, Cripps settled the matter out of court, as it were, and agreed to the release of the Annamite.

The Hongkong newspapers reported that the trial was over, that the Annamite convict had won his freedom, that he would not be deported to Indochina, etc. One paper said that the appeal in the Privy Council on behalf of Sung Manchou, charged of being an Annamite revolutionary, had been granted on the strength of the Habeas Corpus Act. The case was dropped, and the Crown would not insist on the earlier decision of deporting the defendant to Indochina. A compromise was reached, under which Sung Manchou would be deported to any place of his own choice. Everyone concerned, with the sole exception of the French authorities, the paper said, was gratified.

The long-awaited day of Nguyễn's release finally came. Now he had to leave Hongkong without the least delay, and without anyone knowing. At a family council at the Loseby's, they decided to buy him a ticket for the next ship leaving for Europe, which he would abandon at the very first opportunity. The parting was a little sad - Mr. and Mrs. Loseby had become very fond of Nguyễn during the past year. The ship raised steam, crossed the picturesque Hongkong harbour, and faded away on the horizon.

A few days later, however, Loseby received a letter from Sung Manchou, saying he had been arrested the moment he set foot in Singapore, and was brought back to Hongkong under guard.

"I was outraged," Loseby recalled. "I sat up late at my desk, wondering what I could do. Finally, I made up my mind. In the morning I went to the Governor's residence. I told Sir William Peel what I thought of the authorities not keeping their word. I asked him to let Sung go to Hsiamen, a little Chinese seaside resort northeast of Hongkong.

I said I would choose the ship and the sailing date. The following day I received a personal note from the Governor that he had given oral orders to release Sung, but added that he feared the waterfront police, which checked the list of passengers before a ship's departure, would again detain him."

After his second release, Loseby arranged for Nguyễn to stay at the Chinese YMCA hostel. He was given typically Chinese clothes to wear - a wide sleeved long gown of the educated class, a black mandarin cap, and soft shoes. Nguyễn also wore a false beard and moustaches, and was unrecognisable.

Now the question was how to leave Hongkong unnoticed. To avoid the police it would probably be best, though a little adventuresome, to take Sung out into the open sea on a motorboat or junk, and wait for the next ship heading for Hsiamen. But this was hardly feasible without outside help. The Losebys decided to take a chance and ask Thomas Sowton. And the Vice-Governor did, indeed, agree to do what he could. He asked Sir William Peel for the use of his personal launch, while Loseby brought two first-class tickets on a Japanese ship sailing for Shanghai: one for Sung Manchou and the other for his Chinese clerk whom he trusted and had asked to accompany his Vietnamese friend as far as Hsiamen.

On the day the ship was departing, some time before dawn, the Governor's launch flying his flag and with an armed guard aboard, tied up at Hsiuang jetty in Hongkong's aristocratic quarter. A fashionably dressed Chinese and his secretary came aboard. He embraced the two Europeans, a man and a woman, who had come to see him off, and the launch headed for the open sea. When they sighted the Japanese ship, they radioed its captain, asking him to stop and take aboard two guests of the Governor, for whom a cabin had been reserved. The captain met the high-ranking guest beside the ladder lowered to the launch, and showed him the way to his cabin. A few hours later, the ship tied up in Hsiamen, where neither the British nor French arm of the law could reach Nguyễn.

Hồ Chí Minh was grateful to the Losebys all his life. As President of Free Vietnam, he sent them New Year's cards and flowers every year. In January 1960, Loseby, an old man by then his wife and daughter, visited Hanoi on Hồ Chí Minh's invitation, spending a month in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as his guests, visiting various parts of North Vietnam, and celebrating the Tet holiday with Hồ Chí Minh and his colleagues.

In Hsiamen, Nguyễn lived the idle life of a rich vacationing Chinese. The Hongkong press had no news of him. Evidently, his disappearance had passed unnoticed. After a while, Nguyen decided that it was safe to move to Shanghai. There he counted on boarding a Soviet ship going to Vladivostok. That, indeed, was the road taken by groups of young Vietnamese patriots en route to the Eastern University in Moscow.

Shanghai was in the hands of the imperialist powers. Japanese, American, French and British warships rode anchor along the Whangpoo. A municipal council consisting of men of different nationalities, British, American, Italian, and so on, ran the International Settlement and had its own police force. The French concession was like a little piece of France, but with a predominantly Chinese population. The ruins of Chapei, a workers' quarter in the Chinese part of the city, made a painful impression. The year before, the people of Chapei had held off a Japanese naval landing party, and to avenge the setback, Japanese warships had shelled it.

To board a Soviet ship, Nguyễn had to make contact with someone from the Comintern. But how? Somewhere in the European part of the city Nguyễn's comrades were doing their work unnoticed - such Comintern representatives with the Communist Party of China as Arthur Ewert, Otto Braun and Manfred Stern (or General Kleber, as he came to be known among his comrades during the Spanish Civil War). But Nguyễn could not reach them. To try and find them in the International Settlement, which teemed with secret police agents, would have been the height of folly.

But to hide out in the Chinese part of the city was also hazardous, for Chiang Kaishek's spies were everywhere. Nguyễn continued to pose as a rich Chinese, staying at a fairly expensive hotel. But this could not go on forever. His money was running out. After nightfall he used to retire to his room for a frugal meal, and laundered his precious Chinese gown, for he had no change of clothes.

One morning he learned from the local papers that a delegation of European MPs opposing war, had come to Shanghai. On that

delegation, to Nguyễn's joy, was Paul Vaillant Couturier. Here was an extraordinary stroke of luck! But how to get in touch with him? Who could he ask to deliver a letter stating the time and place of a meeting. The paper said Sung Chingling, Dr. Sun Yatsen's widow, had met the delegation.

In the continuous infighting that went on in the Kuomintang, Sung Chingling was always on the side of the left. After Chiang Kaishek's coup, in fact, protesting against breaches of Sun Yatsen's ideals, she had gone to the Soviet Union and stayed there for a number of years. That, Nguyễn decided, was a woman he could trust.

He wrote a letter to Vaillant Couturier, and though it was unsigned, the recipient would be sure to understand who it came from. Nguyễn reminded him of episodes from their previous meetings known only to the two of them. He then took a cab to Sung Chingling's residence. People knew this modest building in a tree-grown garden in the French Concession. The house had been a gift to Dr. Sun Yatsen made in 1919 by his overseas Chinese admirers at a most difficult moment in his life. As the taxi pulled up, Nguyễn jumped out, dropped his message in the letterbox, and drove away.

Late at night on the following day, in Jessfield Park on the border between the Chinese part of town and the International Settlement, he finally saw his first friend in Shanghai.

"Even a thousand li's from home you need a close friend!" Nguyễn exclaimed as he embraced Paul Vaillant Couturier.

"Mon Dieu, Nguyễn, so you are alive! And we had buried you. Which, so Frenchmen believe, means that you are going to live a long time." Paul slapped him on the shoulder. And, responding to Nguyễn's puzzled look, added: "Yes, of course, you don't know about it."

Paul told him that a short time after his disappearance from Hongkong a report of Sung Manchou's death in a Hongkong prison appeared in the French papers. *L'Opinion* wrote, for example:

"The much spoken of Bolshevik chief Nguyễn Ái Quốc had died of tuberculosis in a prison hospital." The paper carried Nguyễn's picture

and an obituary, giving a sketch of his political activities. Praising his gift of leadership, the paper wrote: "This frail Annamite who has just died in a prison hospital in Hongkong could, if he had chosen the right way, been a true helper to his countrymen, and to France."

The report coincided in time with the death of Trần Phú in a Saigon prison. *L'Humanité* commented: "Like Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Comrade Tran Phu was a great fighter in the ranks of our International." Soviet newspapers, too, picked up the news of the death of the two revolutionary leaders of Indochina. A commemorative meeting was held by the Vietnamese group of Eastern University students, some of whom had been personally seen off to Moscow by Nguyễn or had studied with Trần Phú. Representatives of the Comintern and the Eastern University administration spoke at the meeting.

The report of Nguyễn's death had probably been invented by the French police to save face after the collapse of the Sung Manchou case. On the other hand, they may have wanted to create confusion in the communist movement in Indochina.

In an interview to a Reuters correspondent in 1969 at the time of Hồ Chí Minh's death, Loseby's wife claimed, however, that rumours about the death of Sung Manchou were specially spread by her and her husband to throw the French off his trail. This seems to be closer to the truth. And evidently the French secret police did believe the rumour, because for many years Nguyễn's name never appeared either in the police records or the French press. It was not until the early 1940s that a Sûreté agent informed his superiors in Hanoi that in Cao Bằng Province of North Vietnam a revolutionary leader named Hồ Chí Minh had appeared, whom some people consider to be Nguyễn Ái Quốc. The answer he received was that his report was groundless, because Nguyễn Ái Quốc had died in Hongkong in 1932.

The secret police had evidently not seen (or did not believe) a small report that appeared in the Saigon paper *L'Opinion* on April 18, 1933, when Nguyễn was already in Hsiamen.

"The man... by name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc," it said, "whose death the press reported a year ago, is alive and free. He is out of prison. The

Hongkong court had sentenced him to two years' imprisonment, but since he suffered from TB everybody thought he would die in his cell. This did not happen, however."

Nguyễn told Paul he had spent two years on what was for him a desert island, cut off from world events and from the cause. He wanted to know what had happened in his country during that time.

The story he heard was a tragic one. The colonialists had brutally suppressed the revolutionary action in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces.

The Foreign Legion had been deployed against the rebels, and many of the villages that had set up Soviets were wiped off the face of the earth by the French air force.

After the Soviets were crushed, the colonialists launched a reign of terror throughout the country, spearheaded against the newly-founded Communist Party. Many of its primary organisations and governing bodies were destroyed. Tran Phu and a few other members of the Party's Central Committee were killed in September 1931. Nguyễn's faithful friend and comrade, Lê Hồng Sơn, lost his life on the guillotine in 1932.

So did Nguyễn's favourite "nephew", little Lý Tự Trọng. At a public meeting he had shot and killed a French police officer, and was sentenced to death despite being a minor. Little Trọng went to the guillotine with proudly raised head, singing the Internationale. Four years before, in Canton, he and his friends had learned the words of that proletarian anthem from Comrade Vương, who had translated it into Vietnamese.

"Unfortunately," Paul Vaillant Counturier said bitterly, "revolutions always take a toll of life. But the Communist Party of Indochina is doing good work. Many of its organisations are back in action. And the French Party, too, is gaining strength. Socialism, is making headway all along the line in Russia. Do you know the words industrialisation, collectivisation, and the five-year plan? You will soon see what tremendous changes these words stand for?."

A few days later Nguyễn was visited by a man who brought him greetings from his comrades. The long-awaited contacts, without which a revolutionary is in fact ineffective, had at last, after so many hardships, been restored.

The subsequent train of events was simple. A Soviet merchantman, which dropped anchor in Shanghai for repairs, took Nguyễn aboard. A few days at sea, and the panorama of Vladivostok harbour opened before his eyes.

## HIS SECOND HOMELAND

### 1

Nguyễn emerged from Yaroslavsky Railway Station on to the large Moscow square and glanced at the familiar little spires topping the imposing building of Kazan Railway Station across the way. It seemed to him he had never left the city.

Moscow seemed the same at seven years before. But in some way it was unrecognisable. Signs of innovation were in evidence wherever he looked. To begin with, there were more cars in the streets. The square between the railway stations had a tower ringed by a wooden fence at the site of the future subway station.

In Okhotny Ridad he missed a familiar church, and on the left-hand side they were building a large hotel in place of the old shops. Along Tverskaya Street he saw buses and trolleybuses in addition to the tramcars. On the corner of Gazetny Lane, where there had been the unfinished brick walls of a cinema where homeless kids, unwashed and unmanageable, had made their home, now towered the impressive Central Telegraph building.

The changes in the life of Soviet people were still more striking. On streamers and posters, and on the front pages of newspapers, he read slogans and appeals that thrilled him: "The five-year plan in four years!", "Industrialisation forward!", "Collective farms are the future!" and "Cadres are crucial!"

The question of who beats whom had already been settled in socialism's favour. Now it was a matter of eliminating all exploiting classes, doing away with the exploitation of man by man, and building socialist society. The second five-year plan envisaged unprecedentedly high rates for the production of means of production. Their output was to be nearly doubled. The papers carried blazing news of the big building projects - the Magnitka, Azov Steel, Zaporozhye Steel, the Urals Engineering Works, and so on. The countryside, too, was embarking on the socialist road. New collective farms were springing up all over the country. The Arctic regions were being developed.

After his two agonising years in the Hongkong prison and his lonely life in Hsiamen and Shanghai, and after the sense of bereavement that gripped him on learning about the death of some of the finest members of the Party, his friends and pupils, everything Nguyễn saw in the Soviet Union was like a soothing ointment, giving him new faith, new strength and vigour.

At the Comintern's Eastern Secretariat, Nguyễn Ái Quốc was given a hero's welcome. He was warmly greeted by its head, Otto Kuusinen. Like all other Soviet people, those in the Comintern were still stirred by the grand battle fought all over the world for the lives of the Bulgarian anti-fascists Georgi Dimitrov, Popov, and Tanev, who had been the central figures in the Reichstag fire trial in Leipzig. The battle ended in a complete triumph: Georgi Dimitrov and his friends were set free and had come to the Soviet Union. Now, said Kuusinen, one more witness of the power of international proletarian solidarity had reached Moscow - this time from the Far East. Haggard, sick, a feverish glow on his parchment-like cheeks, but with a happy glitter in his eyes and a joyous open smile.

The Eastern Secretariat shipped Nguyễn off to a Crimean sanatorium: he needed long and serious medical treatment. But after a short rest he was eager to rejoin his friends in Moscow, and take up his work of professional revolutionary.

On the Comintern's recommendation, he was admitted to the International Lenin School. In the questionnaire he had had to fill in,



he wrote of his social status that he was a revolutionary and of his basic profession that he was a Party worker. As a student of the Lenin School, he picked a new alias. Now he was Linov, and remained Linov throughout his stay in the Soviet Union.

Linov quickly became the recognised head of the now fairly large community of Vietnamese revolutionaries in Moscow. For many of them he was not only the legendary Nguyễn Ái Quốc but also a senior in age. There were Vietnamese in the Comintern's Eastern Secretariat, and Vietnamese in the Lenin School, and many also in the Institute of National and Colonial Problems founded in 1932 in place of the colonial department of Eastern University. Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, a Party veteran who was in Moscow at the time, recollected:

"A Vietnamese comrade and I were summoned to the headquarters of the Comintern. We were taken to the office of the comrade in charge of the Vietnamese group at the Institute, on the fourth floor of a building on Mokhovaya Street. Uncle Hồ was there.

"Thenceforward, Uncle Hồ was the leader of the Vietnamese group at the Institute... he kept in very close touch with us. In the evenings, he often came to talk to us about his experiences putting heavy emphasis on revolutionary morals, especially solidarity. Among the younger students squabbles occurred of a mostly personal character, and he arbitrated.

What he sought to weed out was arrogance, egoism, indiscipline. He wanted us to be united and to put the interests of the revolution above everything else. He often said to us: "If even this little group of ours cannot live in harmony and solidarity, how can we hope to unite and rally the masses against the colonialists to save the nation?"

Though Linov was the eldest among them, Nguyễn Khánh Toàn recalled, he always took part in their various undertakings - writing articles for the wall newspaper, taking part in their singing and amateur theatricals, visiting museums, hiking and translating Comintern resolutions into Vietnamese.

In 1935, the Institute suggested that Linov should lecture on party history and the fundamentals of organisation in the Vietnamese group. He followed the progress his students very closely, and was especially watchful with those who had had no proper education. After a lecture, he would make sure that the students had understood him, then asked how they would tie up their new knowledge with practice, and checked if they had grasped the new terminology.

Though Linov was under medical care, his appearance was sickly and he was just as frail as ever. But strangely, no one had ever seen him sick and in bed, though the severe Russian winter was not easy for the Vietnamese to bear. He always looked sprightly, his way of life was austere, and he kept scrupulously to a fixed routine, did his exercises every day, and had dumb-bells and a chest expander in his room.

2

From January 1935 on, all services and institutions of the Comintern in Moscow launched preparations for its 7th Congress. The Vietnamese Communists looked forward to it with impatience, for it would be the first since the founding of their Party. Soon, an official party delegation arrived from distant Vietnam. It was headed by Lê Hồng Phong, who had grown to adulthood. He came with two companions - the dark-skinned large-eyed and very youthful Minh Khai, and a little known youth by name of Hoàng Văn Nọn, who represented Vietnam's northernmost Cao Bằng Province that had a fairly strong communist organisation ever since the Party was founded, well backed in the countryside.

It was decided that every member of the delegation would speak, and they worked together on the texts - members of the delegation and local activists under Linov. Lê Hồng Phong would make the main report, "Struggle of the CPIC and the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets", while Hoàng Văn Nọn would speak about the revolutionary struggle in Indochina and the emergence of a democratic front. Minh Khai, who was the youngest of the few Asian women delegates, was asked to speak on behalf of Eastern women.

The Vietnamese in Moscow celebrated the first communist wedding. At the district register office, in modest surroundings and in the presence of just a few close friends, Phan Lan (Minh Khai) and Hải An (Lê Hồng Phong) were married. The young revolutionaries cherished the love that had flared up between them in Moscow throughout their short but dramatic lives.

The 7th Congress of the Comintern opened on July 25, 1935, in the House of Trade Unions. Though Linov was not formally a member of the Vietnamese delegation, he took part in the Congress as a member of the Comintern's Eastern Secretariat. There he again met his old friends Nadezhda Krupskaya, Dmitry Manuisky, Iosif Pyatnitsky, Marcel Cachin, Vasil Kolarov, and Sanzo Nosaka (Okano), and got acquainted with such distinguished personalities of the world communist movement as Georgi Dimitrov, Klement Gottwald, Bela Kun, Wilhelm Pieck, Palmiro Togliatti, Maurice Thorez, and others.

The resolutions of the Congress were invaluable for the Vietnamese revolution. The Congress produced a full-scale definition of fascism as an open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, and most imperialist elements of monopoly capital, and set forth the tasks of the communist and workers' movement in face of the looming fascist peril. Though the matter concerned the European communist parties most of all, the Congress resolution on the fascist peril subsequently helped the Vietnamese Communists to follow a consistent policy vis-à-vis Japanese militarism, which was even then driving farther and farther south in China and becoming a dangerous potential enemy of the Vietnamese revolution.

The popular anti-imperialist front policy in colonial and dependent countries, as formulated in Dimitrov's report and the Congress resolutions, was especially important for the Communist Party of Indochina. The 7th Congress had indeed, revived and elaborated upon a thesis of the Comintern's 4th Congress worked out with Lenin's help on the united anti-imperialist front of colonies and dependent countries as a form of uniting the forces of national liberation.



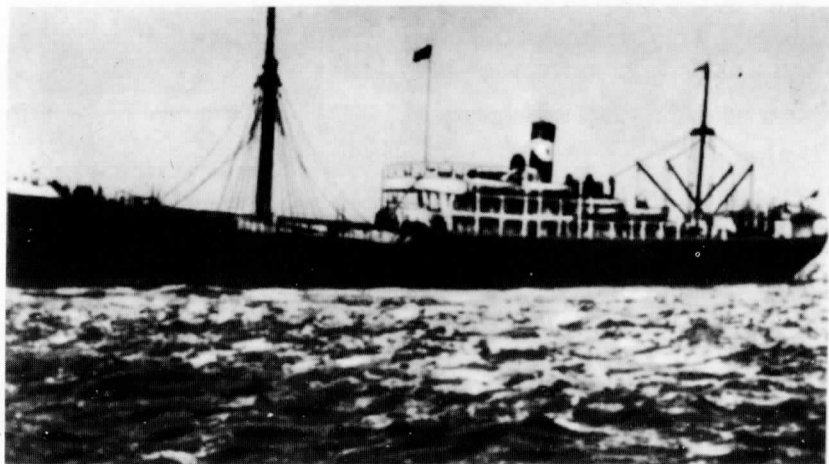
Hồ Chí Minh's father, Nguyễn Sinh Sắc



Phan Bội Châu, 1867-1940



Phan Chu Trinh, 1872-1926



This is the ship young Hồ Chí Minh boarded in June 1911 to begin his travels



Hồ Chí Minh in Canton, (1925-1927)



Hồ Chí Minh in France, 1920



Hồ Chí Minh speaking at the Tours Congress of the French Communist Party, 1920





Hồ Chí Minh in 1923, when he first came to the Soviet Union



Trần Phú, first General Secretary of the Communist Party of Indochina



Lê Hồng Phong

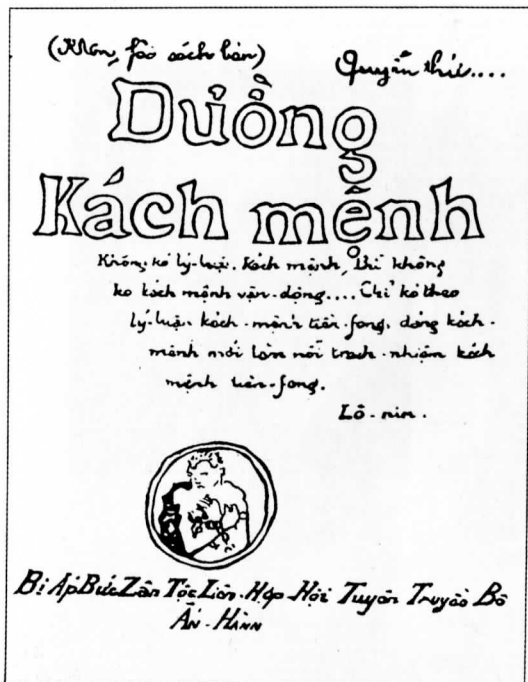


Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai



Lê Duẩn, in the 1930s





Title page of Hồ Chí Minh's  
book, the *Revolutionary Road*



On 18<sup>th</sup> February 1941, Hồ Chí Minh crossed the China-Vietnam border to return home after 30 years abroad (oil painting by Zheng Fang-suo)



The decision to establish  
the Vietminh front was  
taken in a forest shack  
like this one



The first armed unit of the Vietnamese revolution. Võ Nguyên Giáp (left)



The famous banyan in Tân Trào



He and his Hermes-baby



In a cave in the Việt Bắc mountains



A few words before a battle

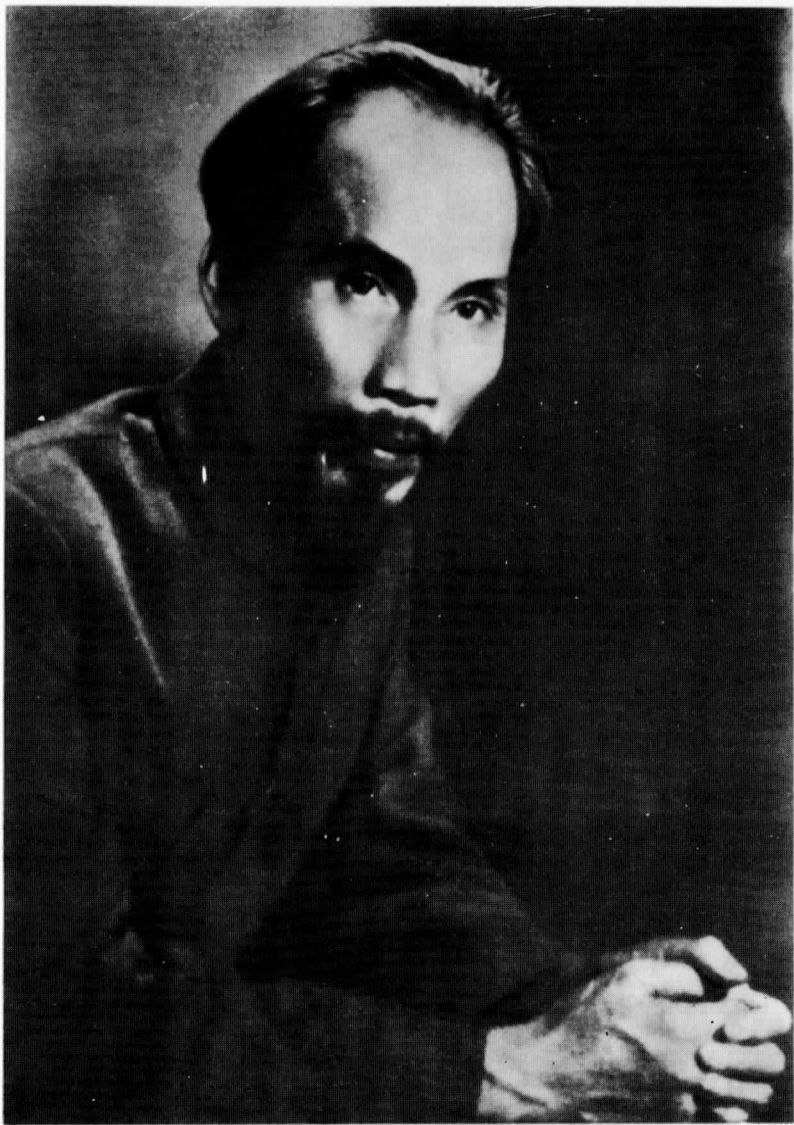


At an observation post during the war of resistance, 1950



Hồ Chí Minh was an excellent walker





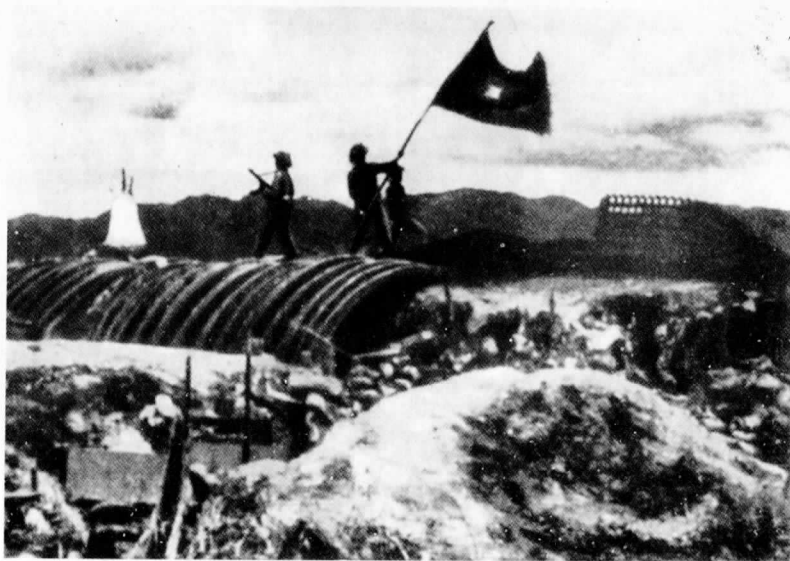
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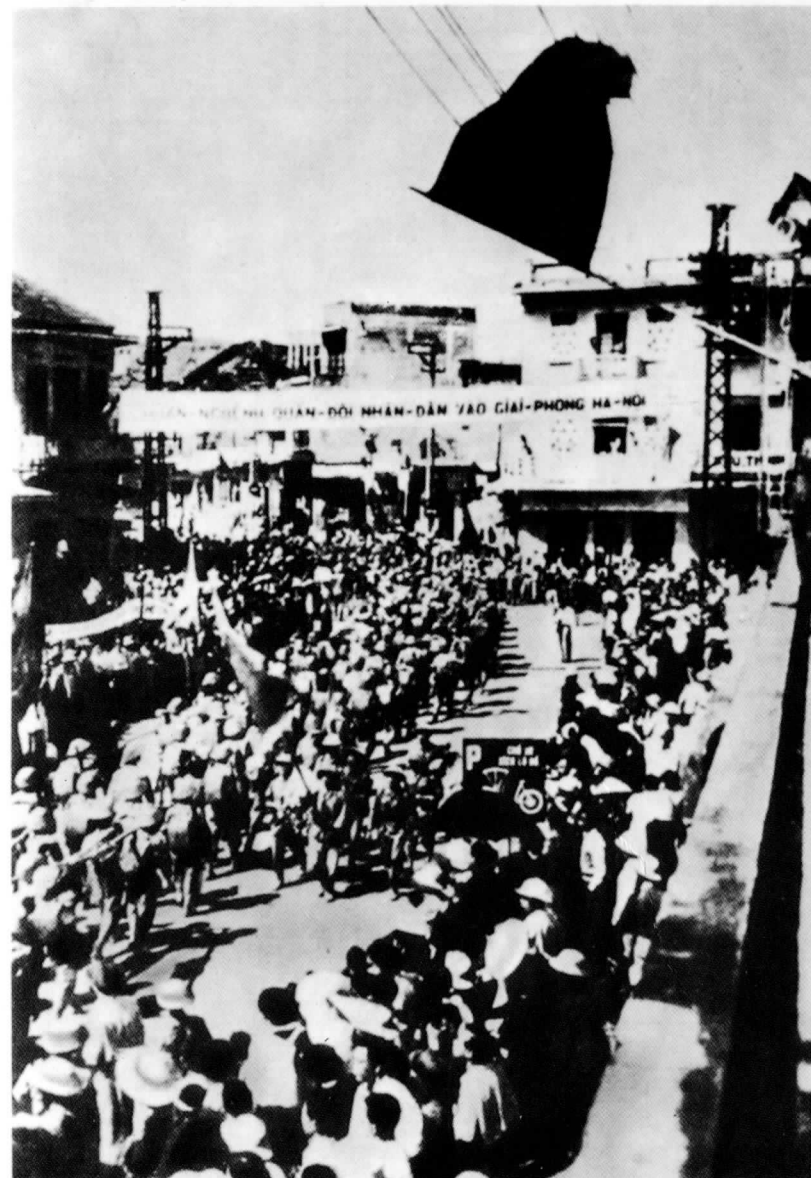
Hồ Chí Minh on the day of victory, 1954



One of the last sittings of the Democratic Republic's government in Việt Bắc



A Vietnamese flag is raised over General de Castries' command post



The glorious capital regiment back in Hanoi



Ho Chi Minh was very fond of children



The joy of constructive peaceful labour



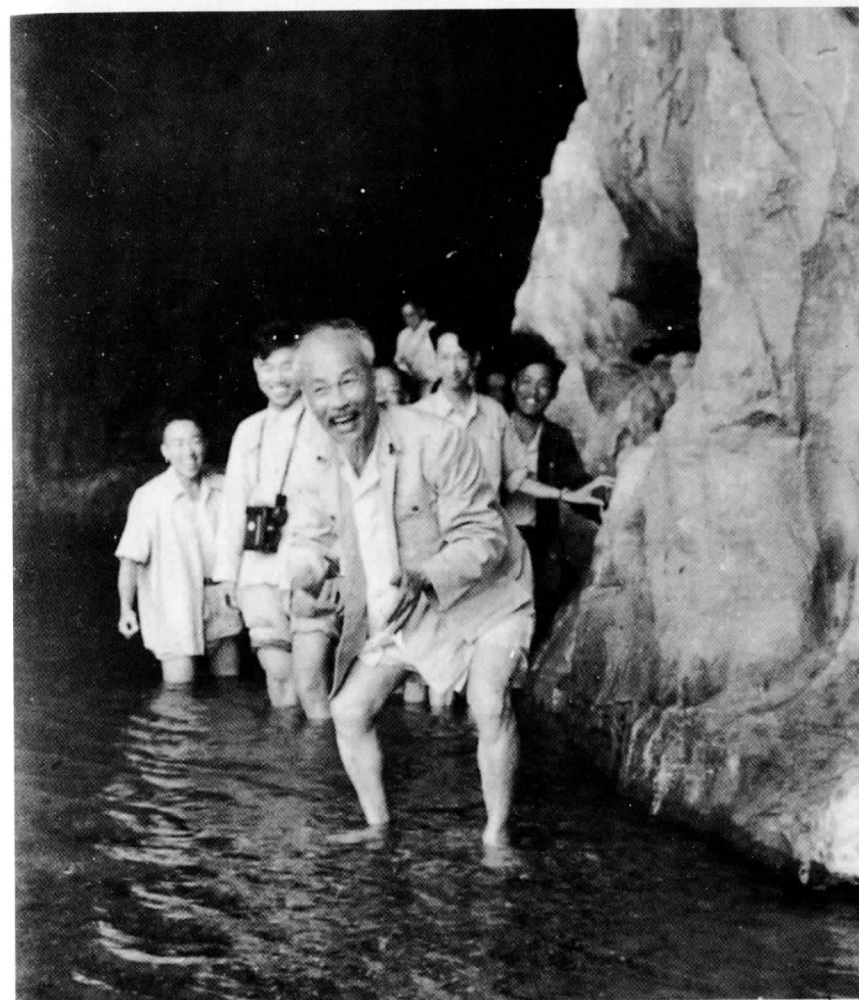




Hồ Chí Minh and Tôn Đức Thắng at a National Assembly session



Uncle Hồ among Beijing children on the International Day of the Child (1<sup>st</sup> June 1966)



Hồ Chí Minh visiting the Lijiang river, China (May 1961)



A guest of the Soviet Young Pioneers



In the garden inside the Presidential Palace



Hồ Chí Minh in the 1960s

What was most important for Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his mates was that the 7th Congress repudiated the earlier ultra-leftist principles urging "worker-peasant revolutions" and the establishment of "Soviet government" in colonial and dependent countries. This call was obviously premature in the case of most of the countries concerned, and clearly under-rated the national anti-imperialist tasks.

The first step for most colonies and dependencies in a real people's revolution, the Congress said, was to fight for national liberation against the imperialist oppressors. It would be an unforgiveable mistake, it said, to put off national liberation until the country was ripe for worker-peasant power; it was essential to work for a united popular front: to enlist the greatest number of people in the fight against the mounting imperialist exploitation, against colonial oppression, and for the expulsion of imperialists, and the country's independence, on the one hand, and to participate in mass anti-imperialist movements headed by national revolutionaries and national-reformists, on the other.

In Vietnam, to be sure, there was no mass movement headed by nationalist elements nor any organised national bourgeoisie. The existing bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties were weak politically and organisationally, and incapable of advancing a political programme of nationwide impact that would fire the broad mass of the people. The Vietnamese Communists, therefore, did not face the question of whether or not to participate in some movement, which usually caused agonising discussion and debate. They had what may be described as a virgin land in that respect - a land they had to turn up and cultivate, that is, put forward national and general democratic slogans, find an acceptable form for a united front, and waste no time in recruiting all those willing to join the fight against the colonialists, including the national bourgeoisie, most of which, like the rest of the nation, was oppressed by the French.

Today, when we know how and why national liberation revolutions triumphed in Vietnam and other lands, the aforesaid may appear elementary, though, indeed, the question of a united popular front is still relevant in quite a number of countries. For the Vietnamese Communists, however, who were looking avidly for what Lenin called the *transition*

or the *approach* to the proletarian revolution, the basic propositions of the 7th Congress on united front tactics became central guidelines. They discussed them again and again at Party plenums and congresses.

United national front tactics carried out flexibly and with an eye to the maturity of the national liberation movement and the specific tasks facing it, were the decisive factor that led to the victory of the people of Vietnam in August 1945, and then in two wars of resistance - first against the French colonialists and then against the U.S. aggressors.

For the Vietnamese delegates, the 7th Congress was also important because it recognised the newly-formed Communist Party of Indochina internationally. When young Minh Khai ended her tale of how quickly the downtrodden women of Indochina were responding and joining the revolution, other women delegates rose from their seats and embraced her as the hall applauded. And in the interval between sittings she was heartily greeted by Nadezhda Krupskaya.

While the Congress proceeded, lasting for nearly a month, the Vietnamese delegates were welcome guests at Moscow factories and Red Army barracks, and also met Communist Party delegations of other countries.

At the closing session, the Congress endorsed the Executive's admission of the Communist Party of Indochina to the Comintern. The Vietnamese delegation was overjoyed. And this for yet another reason: Lê Hồng Phong was elected member of the Comintern Executive. Henceforth, the growing communist movement in Indochina would be represented on the governing body of the international communist organisation.

On the Executive's instructions, Lê Hồng Phong was to take the Comintern resolutions to Vietnam, and launch preparations for his Party's Central Committee plenum. Minh Khai and Nộn, who went home via France, left a few months later, posing as a married couple.

Before their departure, they saw Linov. All three were in a good mood: shortly before, a Popular Front government had come to power in France, and the French Communist Party was a member of it. They

did not know yet what effect this would have on the situation in Indochina, but were sure that new, favourable possibilities would arise for their Party.

"The Popular Front victory in France," Nguyễn Ái Quốc said to his two companions, "is a rare chance, and we must not fail to use it. The main thing now is to secure complete unity inside the Party, especially between its homeside and overseas units. On reaching Saigon, please tell Lê Hồng Phong the following three things:

"One. The Popular Front victory in France is sure to bring about positive changes in the situation in Indochina. For this reason the overseas Central Committee should go home at once and assume guidance of the patriotic movement. I should leave no more than a token group of comrades abroad to maintain contact with the outside world.

"Two. The Troskyites have betrayed their reactionary essence everywhere, and in Vietnam as well. Our Party must dissociate itself from them most resolutely. There must be no compromises.

"Three. Every effort must be made to form an anti-fascist and anti-war democratic front. It must embrace all patriotic forces, all those who want to fight for the country's salvation. But never forget when striking up alliances that the vital interests of the Party and the working class come first."

In July 1936, Lê Hồng Phong returned to Saigon from Shanghai in the guise of a rich Chinese merchant. He was accompanied by another member of the Party's Central Committee, his Eastern University mate Hà Huy Tập. They called a Central Committee plenum to amend the resolution of the Party's 1st Congress in line with the decisions of the Comintern's 7th Congress. The plenum formulated the tasks of the revolution in Indochina in the first stage as follows: to join the worldwide front for democracy and peace headed by the Soviet Union, and combat fascism and war. It reaffirmed the goal of establishing a national anti-imperialist front (which came to be known as the Democratic Front of Indochina).

The Democratic Front movement elicited unprecedented enthusiasm. Action committees sprang up all over the country to convene a congress



of the peoples of Indochina. Meetings and other gatherings were held to draw up demands and send them to the French Popular Front government, calling for democratic reforms in Vietnam and a better life.

A French governmental commission under Justin Godard reached Saigon in late 1936 to study the situation at first hand. All along the 1,500 kilometre route from Saigon to Hanoi, the commission was met at every train stop by crowds of people, who handed in petitions.

The strike wave that rolled across Vietnam, backed up by meetings and demonstrations, called for freedom, democracy, and release of political prisoners. In the autumn and winter of 1936 hundreds of political prisoners, and among them prominent party leaders, were indeed released from prisons and forced labour camps. They returned to the movement and buttressed the democratic leadership. Hoàng Quốc Việt, a veteran of the Vietnam revolution, who was a Poulo Condor prisoner, recollected:

"We learned of the brilliant Popular Front victory in the general elections of May 1936 from the French papers. Our hopes soared. The sounder nationalist elements shared our feelings. When the new French government was formed, the waiting became almost unbearable. At long last, the first group of amnestied prisoners was set free. The summer, which seemed endless, passed, and we had almost stopped hoping. Then, one morning, the chief of the guards summoned us. He was obviously vexed as he looked at us, especially at comrades Lê Duẩn and Phạm Văn Đồng.

"What? You too?" he said with distaste.

"How else? You must know, there wasn't a shred of evidence against us..."

After six years of hard underground work in a setting of brutal terrorism and persecution, the Communist Party of Indochina at last gained an opportunity to address the nation openly. The books and newspapers it was allowed to publish propagated the ideas of Marxism-Leninism, explained the policy of the CPIC and the Comintern, and printed Party and Comintern documents. Just a year or two before, the Communists could not have hoped to publish these things unhindered in their Saigon and Hanoi papers.

The police taboo on the subject of the Soviet Union was lifted too. And the Party's press made up for the many years of silence by extensive and diverse coverage of the life and struggles of the world's first worker-peasant state. In November 1937, shortly before the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia, the journal of the Indochina Communist Party's Central Committee wrote:

"The October Revolution ushered in a new era in the history of the world - the era of proletarian revolution and the building of socialism in the USSR, the common motherland of all proletarians and enslaved peoples. It is our duty to combat imperialist designs to destroy the Soviet Union. We must defend our first socialist state."

Legal public activity and a public press enhanced the Party's influence. The persecuted "handful of rebels" turned out to be a strong, well-organised and disciplined political force. While fighting for democratic freedoms and for a better life for the people, the Party managed to shape a political army of millions of people in town and countryside, and to train a large contingent of party activists. In that sense, the Democratic Front had laid the requisite ideological organisational groundwork for the founding soon of a united national front under whose banner the August revolution was, in fact, carried out.

The three years of hard work for the Democratic Front of Indochina (1936-1939), when the tactic of combining legal, semi-legal, and underground methods was first used, and when the Party was able to mount a truly massive political and ideological drive, when major achievements alternated with mistakes that were unavoidable during that swift course of events, enabled the CPIC to gather experience that it would otherwise have taken decades to gather. That, indeed, was why subsequently the Party leadership described the time of struggle for the Democratic Front of Indochina as the second dress rehearsal of the August Revolution, the first having been the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc followed events at home as closely as possible. He did his best to help his comrades there with information and advice. His letters from afar, handwritten articles on little sheets of rice paper, covered the thousands of kilometres from Moscow to Hanoi or Saigon



by many unfathomable ways, and appeared in *Notre Voix* and other legal party papers over the signature of P.K. Lin.

The ideas he expounded about the ways of securing a single Democratic Front in Vietnam were summed up in a report he submitted to the Comintern Executive. A Democratic National Front, he wrote, "should embrace not only Indochinese but also progressive French people residing in Indochina, and not only toiling people but also the national bourgeoisie.

"The Party's attitude to the national bourgeoisie should be tactful and flexible. It is essential to draw them into the Front and keep them there, and urge them into action wherever possible, while isolating them politically wherever necessary. At any rate, they must not be left outside the Front, lest they should be recruited by the reactionaries, whose camp they would then strengthen."

Speaking of CPIC tactics inside the Front, Nguyễn Ái Quốc stressed that the Party "cannot demand that the Front recognise its leadership. It must instead show itself to be the Front's most loyal, active and sincere member. It is only through daily struggle and work, when the mass of the people acknowledges the Party's correct policy and its capacity for leadership, that it can win leading positions... To carry out this task the Party must fight sectarianism and organise systematic study of Marxism-Leninism in order to raise the cultural and political standard of its members."

The four years of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's life and study in the Soviet Union were years of extraordinary enthusiasm and grand achievements across the country. What the finest minds had dreamed of for centuries and what Marx, Engels and Lenin had predicted, was turning into fact. Socialism was winning once and for all on one-sixth of the Earth's surface.

Socialism's victory not only confirmed the Marxist-Leninist idea that it was objectively inevitable for socialism to take the place of capitalism. It also proved that socialism could be built in one country, and a fairly backward one. This was a source of inspiration for the Vietnamese Communists, for all freedom fighters, fighters for socialism, all over the world.

Like other foreign Communists working or studying in Moscow, Nguyễn Ái Quốc thrived on the interests, joys, and aspirations of the Soviet people. The world's first socialist country was, after all, the offspring of the world revolution, and therefore also their country. N.N. Golenovsky, a former Comintern functionary, recalled his relationship with Nguyễn Ái Quốc at that time:

One day, I got to know an Annamite who was called Linov. I was at the Eastern University hostel in Pushkin Square. He had friends among the Indonesian Communists for whom I was responsible, and came to their room quite often. I remember him as a most gentlemanly, even tempered young man. He spoke Russian quite well, though with an amusing accent, and was fond of jokes. He laughed infectiously.

"When he had time, we'd sometimes play a game of chess. He had only just learned to play, and sometimes confused the chessmen by analogy with the national game of Vietnamese chess. (In Vietnam they play *quo tyong*, a variety of the ancient Chinese chess game -*Ye. K*). But frequently he would come up with quite unexpected and original solutions that astonished me, a more experienced player."

The Indonesian, Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, and Arab students lived in the hostel like one family. While dreaming of returning home and of active revolutionary work, they did not set themselves apart from, and shared the aspirations and interests of the Soviet people. Like the Soviet people, they took part in communist *subbotniks*, and went to the country on Sundays to tend their garden plots. They joined the hundreds of thousands of Muscovites on Gorky Street, giving a hero's welcome to Chkalov, Baidukov and Belyakov, the Soviet fliers who had made the first non-stop flight to America via the North Pole. In the evenings, they went to Tsentralny Cinema in Pushkin Square to see newsreels of the Spanish civil war, rejoicing or mourning for the Spanish Republicans who were the first to have come to grips with the fascist plague. They went to see "Chapayev", the splendid film about the legendary hero of the civil war in Russia, several times over.

"I was always astonished at the youthful ardour Linov displayed at our *subbotniks*", Golenovsky recollected, "for he was older than most of the other Vietnamese, and at how he rejoiced over Soviet achievements, and at how close to heart he took the tragic events in Spain. In mid-1938 he disappeared. And it was not until 1945 that I learned from an Indonesian Communist that Hồ Chí Minh, President of the new Vietnam, was none other than our Linov."

By the middle of 1938 important changes had occurred on China's political scene. In face of the undisguised Japanese aggression, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China came to terms on joint action in the war of resistance. As a result, the united national front that the left in China had worked for, became a reality.

This development was important for the Vietnamese. Now they could again plot a route back home to Vietnam via the Chinese lands under Kuomintang control bordering on their country. By the end of the 1930s a large number of Vietnamese Communists who had been studying in the Soviet Union left for home. A few, it is true, were still in Moscow and faced the perils and hardships of World War II together with the Soviet people. When the Nazis came to the gates of Moscow, an International Regiment was formed on Georgi Dimitrov's initiative, which distinguished itself in the fighting near Moscow as part of the Separate Special-Purpose Motorised Rifles Brigade. According to Ivan Vinarov, a veteran of the Bulgarian working-class movement, who had been the commissar of the International Regiment, there had been six Vietnamese among the German, Austrian, Spanish and Bulgarian anti-fascists who comprised the bulk of the unit.

For years the names of those six had been unknown. There was not a single Vietnamese name in the regiment's roll. For as a rule the Comintern Vietnamese had aliases. Nor had any photographs come down to us. It was not until 1985, the year of the 40th anniversary of Victory, that Soviet and Vietnamese historians and journalists finally identified five of the six Vietnamese who had taken part in the defence of Moscow.

They were Vương Thuk Tinh, son of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's first school-teacher who had on Nguyễn's orders accompanied the first group of Vietnamese pioneers to Moscow, and three of Nguyễn's "nephews": Ly Thúc Tiat, Ly Nam Thanh, and Ly An Tao. All of them hailed from Nghệ Tĩnh Province, and their names were listed in documents found in the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets Museum in Vinh. They had defended Moscow bravely and laid down their lives somewhere at its approaches. The fifth was Ly Fu San, who had served in a military hospital during the war, and lived to see the Victory. He returned home in the early 1950s, where he was an active member of the Vietnamese-Soviet Friendship Society until his dying day.

In December 1986, on the 45th anniversary of the Soviet counter-offensive at Moscow, the five Vietnamese were posthumously awarded the Patriotic War Order First Grade.

It is said that on his death-bed the unforgettable Vương Thuk Qui, Nguyễn's village teacher, having already lost the power of speech, scribbled eight characters with a faltering hand: "Father's death has not been avenged... I've lived in vain." But the facts repudiated these words. Not only had he himself gone down in history as the first teacher of Hồ Chí Minh. His son laid down his life defending the capital of the world's first socialist state, making his contribution thereby to the future national liberation and the victory of socialism in Vietnam.

All in all, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had spent more than six years in the Soviet Union. It became his second motherland.

"I lived in Soviet Russia in an atmosphere imbued with Lenin's thoughts," he would write afterwards.

Those six years he remembered all his life. They made him a faithful friend of the Soviet people. When he returned to Vietnam, he told his comrades-in-arms of distant and boundless Russia, of the great achievements of the Soviet people, and his stories warmed the hearts of his mates, giving them fresh strength and steeling their determination.

## THE FOREST DWELLER

1

In early February 1941, six men were making their way through the thick undergrowth covering the picturesque mountain slopes at the juncture of the Chinese province of Guangxi and the Vietnamese province of Cao Bằng. They were moving in a southwesterly direction. All six were clad in the usual homespun indigo dress worn by Nung natives.

The group was headed by a lanky man of about fifty, the oldest of the group. He carried a bamboo cane, but leaned on it only when descending a steep slope. His gait, though, was youthful and light, as he leaped from rock to rock.

By evening, having cleared several mountain passes and elbowed through the dense mass of reeds, they reached a huge keisi tree, whose mighty crown could have provided shade for half a dozen peasant huts.

Nearby stood a striped pillar of stone with the number 108 on it. A sign in French and Chinese announced the beginning of Vietnamese territory.

The middle-aged man laid down his cane at the foot of the hill, knelt, took a handful of earth and put it to his lips. The others followed suit. He then raised his eyes and gazed south, as though trying to catch a glimpse of his faraway native village somewhere there, on the hazy horizon. In the distance, at the foot of a majestic mountain, one could barely make out the outlines of peasant huts on piles scattered here and there amid the yellow fields of maize. The green rice paddies scaled the mountain slopes. The air was laden with the smell of peach and apricot blossoms.

Their rosy flowers stood out among the mulberry, grapefruit, guava and wild banana trees.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc - for it was he - could not tear his eyes away from that blessed land. For thirty years he had dreamed of that day, fancying in his sleep the joyous moment when, after so much wandering and misery, he would at long last return to his native Vietnam. Looking at the mountain peaks receding in the haze beyond the horizon, where the

orange sun was now setting, he remembered the long and arduous home stretch of his thirty-year journey.

He remembered the dreary expanses of the Gobi Desert and the towns of Urumchih, Xian, and Yanan, just as dreary and devoid of vegetation, through which he passed after having left Alma-Ata and crossed the Soviet Chinese border in October 1938. He remembered the dangerous trek from Xian to Yanan, which had taken a week. It had been mostly on foot, holding onto one of the wagons carrying rags for the manufacture of cloth-shoes. Some of those wagons were quite a sight, drawn by a threesome consisting of an ox, an ass, and a horse.

Yenan, situated in the Yanshui River valley and surrounded by flat hills, was the capital of the Liberated Areas and the headquarters of the Chinese Red Army and the Communist Party of China. The loess hills resembled honeycombs, riddled with hundreds of caves housing army depots and providing shelter for servicemen, party functionaries, and peasants from neighbouring villages. Every now and then there would be an air alert, as Japanese bombers were becoming frequent visitors.

In Yanan, Nguyễn Ái Quốc met several old Chinese acquaintances with whom he had made friends in Moscow, at the Comintern Executive. By force of habit they continued to call him Comrade Ling, although his identification papers said he was Hu Kuan, a Chinese citizen.

From them he learned that a United National Front had finally taken shape in China. Chiang Kaishek's government had declared it would recognise the existence of the Liberated Areas and the armed forces under Communist Party command. Besides the North of the country, Liberated Areas existed in Central China, the Yangtse basin, where the New 4th Army operated under the command of Communist Yeh Tin.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc decided to press southward - through the provinces of Shensi and Hunan. He was accompanied by another Vietnamese whom he had met by chance in Yanan. To avoid unwanted attention, each played a role and dressed accordingly: Nguyễn's companion was a travelling mandarin and Nguyễn was his servant. Although the stretch to Kweilin, an administrative centre in Quangxi Province, took a long time, it went off smoothly. The travellers decided to stop over in

Kweilin and make contact with the Indochina Communist Party's Central Committee.

But their attempts were in vain. So they moved to the neighbouring province of Yunnan. Finally, in Kunming, Nguyễn was located by a Party liaison, who several days later put him in touch with a group of top Party officials, including Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Phùng Chí Kiên. Their meeting coincided with the sad news from faraway Europe that on June 14, Paris had fallen to the German army and a few days later France had surrendered. That changed the situation radically and demanded urgent decisions. At a meeting in Kunming, Nguyễn Ái Quốc said that most, if not all, Party cadres working abroad should return to Vietnam. Nguyễn himself, and his companions, went to the border town of Chihsi and prepared to cross the border into Vietnam.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc remembered the large junk that took them to Chihsi. On board were a few Chinese and several Vietnamese they did not know. To be on the safe side, Nguyễn Ái Quốc spoke Chinese only, passing himself off as a local journalist. They spoke as little as possible, but it was hard to conceal the excitement they felt. When their last landing stage came in sight, one of Nguyễn's comrades dropped ashes from his cigarette on his trousers, which began to smoulder. Nguyễn Ái Quốc exclaimed:

"Hey, you're burning!"

Then he bit his tongue, for he had said it in Vietnamese. Later, already on shore, they all had a good laugh at his blunder.

In Chihsi they had a pleasant surprise: a large group of young people from Cao Bằng Province had crossed the border in search of the leaders of the patriotic movement and said they had come to take part in the revolution. The first leader these young people had met was Trương Bội Công, a functionary of the National Party who had long since emigrated from Vietnam and had joined the right wing of the Chinese Kuomintang. Although he had no military training, Chiang Kaishek had made him brigadier-general and entrusted him with recruiting men for the Kuomintang from among Vietnamese emigrés.

When he met the young people from Cao Bằng Province, Trương Bội Công referred to himself as a well-known patriotic leader and veteran revolutionary, and said he would take them under his wing. However, his free-and-easy manner put the young people on their guard. Soon, most of them realised that he was no revolutionary and, to use a Vietnamese idiom, had the head of a dragon but the tail of a shrimp. If Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his comrades hadn't arrived when they did, most of those young people would have crossed the border back again.

For Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his friends this meeting was also welcome. Many of the young people were experienced guides. They knew secret trails through the forest, and willingly agreed to take their new acquaintances across the border. While preparations were under way for the crossing, Nguyễn organised a political crash course for the Cao Bằng youths who were joined by a couple of dozen Vietnamese from Chiang Kaishek's army yearning to return home. The lectures were held in a shady grove on a hillside right outside the town. And shortly before the Tet holiday, they had a makeshift graduation ceremony. The young men lined up in the middle of the clearing, and each came forward and kissed a red flag with a yellow star. Neither the young men from Cao Bằng nor their Vietnamese comrades had ever seen such a flag before. It had appeared only two months earlier among the insurgents on the bank of the Tien river.

Having finished the crash course, the Vietnamese returned to their homeland in small groups. After seeing off the last group, Nguyễn Ái Quốc said:

"Well, forty-three eagles have taken to the sky. We shall hear glad tidings from them before long. Let us, too, prepare to depart."

Now Nguyễn Ái Quốc was looking at Pác Bó from the top of the mountain which marked the frontier. A line of boulders descended the slope, showing the way to the faraway village. A new leaf was being inscribed in his own life and in the history of Vietnam's liberation movement. It was symbolic also that the new chapter - just like that of 1930, when the Party was being born - began during the Tet holiday, a holiday that fell in spring, with which every Vietnamese, no matter where he happened to be, connected his most fervent hopes.

Getting ready to cross the frontier, they decided to stay the night at the home of Mai Ly, a local Nung peasant who sympathised with the revolution. However, after going to see Mai Li alone, Nguyễn Ái Quốc changed his mind: six men would hardly find room in the small bamboo hut. Besides, it was in the middle of the village, and was not entirely safe from prying eyes.

"There's a cosy little cave in the jungle not far from the village," Mai Ly suggested. "Its entrance is concealed by a thick growth of reeds.

Every time bandits raid our village, we hide there."

He led the group down a jungle path and then up an almost bare cliff. The cave was, indeed, pretty small - there was just enough room for half a dozen men. At the entrance was a huge boulder, which the wind and rain had sculpted to a human form. Mai Ly called the cave Koc Bo, which in the local dialect meant "a spring". Somewhere near it was the source of a mountain stream, which weaved its way around the cliff and crashed down in a frothy waterfall.

Everyone seemed to like this natural shelter. They brought a few boards from the village, which the men covered with dry leaves and grass to sleep on. After that, the six decided to explore the neighbourhood. They stopped beside the stream, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc said thoughtfully, as though continuing an earlier conversation:

"I have an idea. This stream is as pure as a pearl. Besides, it has its source here. I suggest we give it the name of Lenin. And that majestic mountain (he pointed to the left), let's call it Karl Marx Peak."

In the morning, Nguyễn Ái Quốc got up with the birds and woke the others. Then he did a set of strenuous exercises on a little patch he had cleared outside the cave. Instead of dumbbells he used stones. He also climbed up cliffs barefoot, choosing the steepest ones. "You've got to train your feet to do all kinds of work," he explained to his friends. After the workout, he went down to the stream and took a dip in the ice-cold water. The path leading to the stream was very steep and almost entirely grown over by thorny bushes. After a rain, it was so slippery that it was almost impossible to climb. Meanwhile, tree leaches would drop from the branches on people's heads and backs.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc also worked by the stream where he found a flat polished boulder that served him as a desk. His tool was a typewriter with Vietnamese letters, given him by friends a few years before. His desk was well concealed by a thick growth of rubber plants. Behind him was the cliff, in front was the Lenin Stream, which at this point broadened out and flowed freely. From time to time he would throw grains of cooked rice into the crystal-clear water, attracting scarlet-finned goldfish.

Within a few days they had got to know him, and gathered near the bank as he approached. It was in that peaceful spot that he wrote the following verse, known to every Vietnamese:

*I come to the stream in the morning,  
And the cave gives me shelter at night.  
The meal that we cook is  
Of tender bamboo shoots.  
On a boulder I write the translation  
Of the history of Russia's Bolsheviks.  
A life devoted to the right cause  
Is glorious forever.*

In rainy weather the cave became damp and cold. Water dripped from the moss-covered vault, relentlessly as in a torture chamber. So as not to freeze at night, they had to keep a fire going, and stayed up by turns to watch it. Before going to sleep, the men liked to sit around the fire and listen to their leader and older friend. He had indeed seen a lot. He told them about his visits to the Soviet Union, and the momentous achievements of the world's first socialist state. Listening to him, they pictured to themselves the vast expanses of Russia and her gigantic building-sites. He spoke of the Soviet conquest of the Arctic and of the Soviet pilots who flew to America over the North Pole.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his comrades would later remember the months spent in the cave as a joyous holiday coloured by the anticipation of great change. They were directly involved in the revolutionary renewal of society; they were witnessing and, moreover, were instrumental in creating a new life, a fundamentally new people

and a new type of relationship. And if Vietnam still continued to live under the colonial jackboot, here revolution had, in effect, triumphed, with a new democratic system arising.

Never before had Nguyễn Ái Quốc worked so hard. He felt he was twenty years younger. He wrote articles, translated, met Party comrades, messengers, local residents, and looked into all matters. Every morning he would ask his companions what each of them was doing. For those who were not busy he would immediately find a task, including such seeming trifles as mending clothes and shoes. All those who worked with him were impressed by his organisational talent, which he showed from the moment he set foot on Vietnamese soil, and such qualities as total commitment to each undertaking and personal responsibility for its completion, efficiency and promptitude, simplicity in dealing with his associates, his demanding attitude, close rapport with the local people, and the drive to give them essential political knowledge. In a word, Nguyễn Ái Quốc possessed the qualities of a Party leader described as Lenin's style of work.

2

The swift political developments in Vietnam and around it presented the Communist Party of Indochina with a new formidable challenge. After France's surrender, fascist elements siding with the Vichy puppet regime came to power in Indochina. But an even greater threat came from the North. By May 1940, Japanese forces had occupied South China and approached the Vietnamese border. Since France no longer existed as a great power, Japan put pressure on the Vichy authorities. In August 1940, Vichy and Tokyo signed an agreement under which the French recognised Japan's supremacy in the Far East and conceded certain military rights in Indochina.

That did not, however, satisfy the Japanese. In September 1940, they mounted a military intervention, taking a number of Vietnamese towns near the border and landing a naval force at Hải Phòng. After that, taking advantage of the weakness of the French authorities, who made one concession after another, the Japanese continued their "peaceful expansion" in Indochina. By the end of 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl

Habor, unleashing a war in the Pacific, it controlled the whole of Indochina and turned it into a staging area for further expansion in Southeast Asia.

Having established control over Indochina, the Japanese left intact the French colonial machine on a power-sharing basis. Thus the Vietnamese people came under a double yoke.

Vietnamese patriots responded with insurrections. One revolt flared up after another. The one that began in South Vietnam on November 23, 1940, had the most serious implications.

The conditions for a nationwide uprising were highly unfavourable. So the 7th Plenum of the Party's Central Committee, which was held in late October 1940 in North Vietnam, turned down the proposal of starting an uprising. That, it said, would be ill-timed. It was important, the Plenum stated, to preserve and build up the revolutionary forces, establish a network of guerilla bases, and prepare for a nationwide uprising.

However, the Plenum's decision did not reach the Namki Party branch. Its delegate was arrested right after he returned to Saigon. Besides, the French secret police managed to intercept a message stating the date and hour of the uprising. Many of the leaders were arrested and the revolutionary-minded Vietnamese soldiers disarmed and locked up in their barracks. Nevertheless, the uprising started as planned. At first, the insurgents scored some successes - with people's soviets being set up in several districts. They survived for nearly two months - but were brutally crushed. More than a hundred people were executed, including several prominent leaders of the Vietnamese Communist movement.

Among the victims were some of Nguyễn Ái Quốc's closest associates and disciples - Lê Hồng Phong, Secretary of the Party's Central Committee, and Minh Khai, Secretary of the Saigon Party Committee. Lê Hồng Phong, "the Red Wind", had been betrayed by a renegade and caught by the secret police back in 1938. But the police lacked enough evidence to send him to the guillotine. He was jailed on charges of carrying forged identification papers. The authorities were waiting for a chance to do away with the revolutionary altogether. Such a chance presented itself - or so it seemed - when at the height of the

preparations for the uprising, Minh Khai, Lê Hồng Phong's wife, walked into a police trap. The last time the young husband and wife had met was at a confrontation in the Saigon central prison.

It seemed it had been only yesterday that they roamed, her hand in his, along the Moskva embankment and stood on Red Square listening to the chimes of Kremlin's Spassky Tower. Now they stood handcuffed opposite each other in the stuffy interrogation room. Though exhausted after weeks of torture, their eyes did not betray that they knew each other.

They knew that one of them must survive - for the Party, for the revolution, and for the tiny helpless creature, their daughter, who had been born only a year before. In memory of their stay in the Soviet Union, they had named their newborn Hồng Minh, Red Aurora.

For her loved ones she would always remain the tender and cheerful Minh Khai; for the colonialists she was "a most dangerous ringleader". A mere ten years had passed since the day her hair was gathered up in a bun with a silver clip to indicate her coming of age. In those ten years the authorities had sentenced her *in absentia* to a five-year prison term, then to twenty years of solitary confinement, then to hard labour for life, and twice to death. The last of these sentences they finally managed to carry out: on May 24, 1941, together with other members of the Party's Central Committee - Hà Huy Tập, Nguyễn Văn Cừ, Phan Đăng Lưu, and Võ Văn Tần - she was shot in the prison yard - shot, but not broken. Her last words were: "Long live the Communist Party of Indochina! and "Long live the Soviet Union!"

In Minh Khai's cell an inscription was found scratched on the wall:

"I'm not worried about myself. All my thoughts are about saving the Party."

Her husband lived only a little longer. From the Saigon prison he was moved to Poulo Condor to die a slow death with hundreds of other rebels. Locked up in a "tiger cage", he was humiliated, denied food and water, beaten and tortured. After a few months of such treatment, he contracted galloping consumption. On September 6, 1942, he died. His death was witnessed by the inmate of a neighbouring cage, Dương Bạch

Mai, another graduate of Moscow's Eastern University. Lê Hồng Phong begged him as he died:

"Comrade, tell the Party that I, Lê Hồng Phong, was true to our revolutionary cause to my last breath."

The Party survived and continued to fight. But to get on its feet again and lead the national liberation movement to victory, it needed a new strategy that would match the new political situation. This new tactic was outlined in November 1939 at the 6th Plenum of the Party's Central Committee secretly convened in Saigon. The Plenum resolved that the Party should concentrate on national liberation and begin with establishing a united national anti-imperialist front. The slogan calling for confiscation of all privately owned land and transfer of land to the peasants was temporarily replaced by a slogan calling for confiscation of the land belonging to the French colonialists and their collaborationists.

The Plenum also temporarily replaced the idea of setting up a government of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Councils with the idea of forming a Union of Democratic Republics of Indochina as "a form of government representing all the sections of society taking part in the national liberation movement, including that part of the bourgeoisie which aspires to national independence with the toiling masses."

The Plenum decisions laid the groundwork for a broad national liberation front under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party of Indochina. However, this policy was put into practice only after Nguyễn Ái Quốc and the other members of the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee returned to Vietnam.

Immediately after his return, Nguyễn Ái Quốc started preparing the ground for the next Plenum of the Central Committee. As in Hong Kong in 1930, he acted as a Comintern representative. World War II had disrupted the work of the Comintern's foreign sections both in the West and the East, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc had received no news from the Comintern Executive for some time. Yet he remained true to the international communist brotherhood and still considered himself the Comintern's envoy plenipotentiary, acting on its behalf in the Cao Bằng backwoods.

On May 10, 1941, a bamboo hut on piles hidden in the jungle became the venue of the 8th Plenum of the Party's Central Committee. There were almost no delegates from the Nam Kỳ Party branch - most of its leaders had been killed, or jailed, or sent to Poulo Condor.

The meeting was chaired by Nguyễn Ái Quốc. His authority was in disputable. Among the delegates who had met the Party's founder for the first time was the young Communist Hoàng Quốc Việt. When he was introduced to the wiry, middle-aged man and told it was Comrade Nguyễn Ái Quốc, representative of the Comintern, the young man was so overwhelmed that he lost the power of speech and only squeezed Nguyễn's hand.

"Nguyễn Ái Quốc! His name was the inspiration for all Party members, for all Vietnamese," Hoàng Quốc Việt wrote later for all those whose hearts beat in unison with the heart of their country and people. "When the news of his arrest in Hong Kong reached us in Poulo Condor, we were gripped with anxiety. But when we learned that the International Organisation of Assistance to Revolutionary Fighters had managed to secure his release, it was a tremendous load off our minds. In later years, we undergrounders often remembered Nguyễn Ái Quốc with love and admiration. But few believed that they would ever meet him in person..."

The participants in the Plenum, which was in session for ten days, analysed the causes and development of the Second World War and expressed their confidence that it would end in the total destruction of fascism.

"Having crushed France, Nazi Germany has conquered half of Europe," said Nguyễn Ái Quốc, who was the main speaker on international issues. "The Nazis are getting ready to invade the Soviet Union, the first workers' and peasants' state in the world. But we Communists are confident that the day Hitler attacks the Soviet Union will be the beginning of the end for German fascism. We can be sure that, whereas the First World War resulted in the creation of the first socialist state, this time the rout of fascism will spark off victorious socialist revolutions in many other countries."

These words were reflected in the Plenum's resolution, which pointed out that the Vietnamese revolution was an integral part of the world revolution, and fully supported the international anti-fascist movement. Therefore, the destiny of the Vietnamese people was for the first time in history directly connected with that of the Soviet Union. And the victory of the Vietnamese revolution was fully dependent on whether the anti-fascist forces would stand up to the Axis.

The conferees endorsed the previous plenums' decisions on tactical changes in the Party's policy with priority going to national liberation objectives.

"We've had three uprisings within the space of just a few months," said Nguyễn Ái Quốc. "In September 1940 at Bắc Sơn, two months later at Nam Kỳ, and in January this year there was the mutiny of the Tonkin riflemen at Đồ Lương in Nghệ An Province. All these events show that our nation will take any opportunity to rise up in arms. Today more than at any time our people are determined to win independence. We must fully appreciate their revolutionary enthusiasm and use it intelligently. The Party should appeal to people's patriotic feelings, try to win the support of all sections of society, and rally the nation's forces to drive out the French and Japanese."

The Plenum's resolution stated that the banner of national liberation was in the reliable hands of the Party, which was calling upon those who cared about the future of Vietnam to join the liberation movement:

"Today, individual and class interests should be subordinated to the interests of the nation, since it is now a question of life and death for our country. If our country does not achieve national independence, not only will the whole nation forever remain in shackles, but the right of every individual and every class will be trampled underfoot."

A year earlier, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had spoken of the need to establish a mass patriotic organisation whose objectives, structure, and whose very name would appeal to the broadest sections of the population, while the Communist Party would be its guiding force. Now, at the Plenum, this idea was put into practice. After a prolonged discussion, the participants came up with a suitable name. Someone suggested



League for National Resurgence, but it was rejected: these sacred words had already been defiled by pro-Japanese elements, who called the replacement of French colonialism by the Japanese occupation the national resurgence of Vietnam. The word "anti-imperialist" did not suit either, because it was too radical in relation to the goals that the Communists set for the new national front. Finally, the organisation was called League for the Independence of Vietnam. Nguyễn Ái Quốc insisted that the League should also have a short everyday name - pleasing, easily remembered, and imaginative. He suggested Vietnam - it was accepted, and for many years sounded like a call to the people to join the battle for their country's freedom.

The Plenum decided that the various anti-imperialist patriotic organisations under Party control representing different sections of the population - workers, peasants, young people, women, servicemen, and Buddhists - would be called national salvation societies. The Vietnam programme adopted at the Plenum stated that for the Vietnam the nation's interests were uppermost and that it was ready to co-operate with all individuals and organisations who sincerely wanted to drive out the French and Japanese and form an independent and free state of Vietnam. Subsequent events showed that this programme, based on general democratic demands which took into account the interests of the national bourgeoisie, was entirely consonant with the aspirations of the broadest sections of society and helped to rally people in a united national front.

After analysing the situation in the country and on the international scene, the 8th Plenum came to the conclusion that for the revolution to succeed there had to be an armed uprising. Its resolution stated that "preparation for an uprising was the Party's and nation's main objective at the present stage". Drawing on the experience of the People's Councils in Nghệ Tĩnh and the Party-led uprisings at Bắc Sơn and Nam Kỳ, the Plenum adopted a new party strategy in preparing for the armed uprising: first, setting up guerilla bases wherever possible; second, armed revolts and seizure of power in separate areas, above all those inaccessible to enemy troops; and third, starting a nationwide armed uprising when objective and subjective conditions, including a favourable international situation, permitted.

Vietnamese historians today see this important decision of the 8th Plenum as the creative development of Marxist-Leninist theory applied to the specific conditions of colonial Vietnam.

The Plenum also demonstrated a new approach to the nationalities question. In the past, the Party considered this question in the context of the colonial Union of Indochina, whereas the 8th Plenum took into account the deepening social and political differences between the three countries of Indochina, especially aggravated since the Japanese invasion, and suggested addressing the nationalities question within each country separately. Consequently, the Party's slogan for "establishing a government of the Federal Republic of Indochina" was replaced by the slogan for "establishing a Democratic Republic of Vietnam". This new approach helped to foil the propaganda plans of France and Japan, who had intended to drive a wedge between the patriotic forces of Vietnam, Cambodia and, as subsequent developments showed, encouraged the national liberation movement in all three countries. At the same time, it was emphasised once again that the national liberation revolutions in all three countries were closely connected and should support each other.

The Plenum was held in a shack in a remote part of the jungle where human beings were rare visitors. The forest resounded with the shrieks and incessant chattering of monkeys and the shrill cries of birds. Now and then, one heard the roar of a tiger. The lush growth of branches, leaves and lianas concealing the shack was so dense that there was little air to breathe. In the mornings, the conferees would struggle to the edge of a clearing for a breath of fresh air.

Yet by the end of the session even this became impossible because of the rain. The downpour raged for several days. The tons of water crashing down from the sky were reminiscent of an avalanche. The small stream near the shack left its banks, engulfing the piles and coming dangerously close to the entrance.

It was hard to believe that there, in that wild jungle, far away from any human settlement, in a flimsy bamboo shack on piles, prominent leaders of the Communist Party of Indochina were gathered round an

improvised table to take decisions that made Vietnamese history and had profound implications for the entire revolutionary movement of Indochina.

The customary form of address among Party members was *đồng chí*, comrade. But Nguyễn Ái Quốc was seldom addressed in this manner. In Pác Bó the locals had nicknamed him Thu Sơn, Forest Dweller, and since he had a beard and whiskers, they called him Grandfather Thu. Yet grandfather was hardly appropriate, since his hair was still jet-black even on his temples and he was always so energetic in his work. A comrade once called him Bác - that was the way village youngsters call adults, it is something like "uncle", although the English word does not convey all its shades of meaning. The name stuck: they called him Bác Thu, which became Bác Hồ when he called himself Hồ Chí Minh, and in his later years simply Bác. Whenever this commonly used form of address, "uncle", was written with a capital letter, everyone knew that President Hồ Chí Minh was meant.

3

When the water went down a little and the sky cleared, the conferees started leaving. The first to go were the delegates from the central and southern provinces, who had the longest way to travel. Bidding them farewell, Nguyễn Ái Quốc said:

"I hope you haven't forgotten what I told you - whatever you do, don't carry around written records of our meetings here."

It turned out that some of the delegates had ignored Nguyễn Ái Quốc's warning and had summarised the proceedings on tiny bits of paper, which they had then rolled up and sewn into the seams of their clothes. Nguyễn Ái Quốc insisted that they destroy all the evidence right then and there.

"How many times must I say it? Our grandfathers and greatgrandfathers used to say: 'Even jungles have paths, even walls have ears.' Remember how many failures we've had. The youngest ones here are a little over twenty, the rest are approaching thirty. You've got your whole life ahead of you. Don't you know how much effort the Party has invested

to make reliable and staunch fighters out of you? If through your own negligence you fall into enemy hands, who's going to replace you? I've told you already that you'll get all the documents of the Plenum later, from our liaison."

The mass arrest of Party members in Canton, Hong Kong and Saigon, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc's own experience had taught him to be cautious and vigilant. He devised a ramified network of outposts at Pác Bó to protect Party headquarters - at first the cave of Koc Bo and later, in the latter half of 1941, the shack in the jungle. The approaches to the guerilla camp were protected by local residents; the most vulnerable spots were guarded by guerilla patrols, and sentries were posted outside headquarters around-the-clock.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc stood watch at night just as everyone else, although the others protested, saying he could be excused because of his age and poor health. Since their protests were ignored, they decided not to wake him when his turn came. But that did not help. Uncannily, he would wake up by himself.

Vũ Anh, a veteran Communist, who had lived a long time with Nguyễn Ái Quốc at Pác Bó, recalls what importance the latter attached to the rules of conspiracy. Without knowing these rules, he said, a revolutionary was doomed. Once, Vũ Anh relates, a new messenger girl from the Central Committee arrived in Cao Bằng with a letter for Comrade Thu. On entering the Pác Bó cave, she saw a man dressed in Nung clothes. It was Nguyễn Ái Quốc. He took the letter from her, and said:

"Comrade Thu is out at the moment. I'm his liaison and I'll give him the letter." The girl stayed on at the guerilla camp to attend the political course. A few days later, she noticed that most of the lectures were by Comrade Thu's liaison. "What remarkable people," she thought. "I've never heard an ordinary liaison explain politics like that."

She never did meet Comrade Thu, but on several occasions heard young people at the courses talk about a Nguyễn Ái Quốc. After completing the courses, the girl was sent to Hà Đông province, where she took part in an armed uprising. In August 1945, after the triumph of the revolution, a provisional government of the Democratic Republic

of Vietnam was announced. However, hard as she looked at the list of names, the girl could not find either that of Comrade Thu or that of Nguyễn Ái Quốc. By that time it was Hồ Chí Minh. Only on September 2, 1945, when the new government appeared on Hanoi's Ba Đình Square, did she find to her surprise that the President was the old liaison to whom she had given the letter.

It was thanks to Nguyễn Ái Quốc's tireless efforts to impress upon his comrades the need for vigilance that the colonial secret police never did locate the Party's headquarters, although they knew that the head Communist was somewhere in Cao Bằng Province. Several times, enemy scouts were a few hundred yards from his headquarters, but never found it.

As the guerillas stepped up their activity, the authorities cracked down. All roads and mountain trails leading to the area were now patrolled by Green Girdles, the emperors's security police. A curfew was imposed. Anyone found outside his village after dark was arrested.

The guerillas learned that some of their secret hideouts had become known to the police, possibly even the headquarters. It was decided that Nguyễn Ái Quốc should move to a safer place. But that was easier said than done. At night it was almost impossible to move through the jungle and, besides, one could walk into an enemy ambush. And to try to penetrate the line of security agents in the daytime would have been sheer madness. The situation looked hopeless. But Nguyễn Ái Quốc, having heard the different opinions, said:

"Has anyone ever used a shaman?"

"Of course," his comrades said.

In fact, people in those parts had hardly ever seen a physician in the European sense of the word. Instead, there were shamans or witch doctors."

"Then get me all the things a shaman needs," Nguyễn Ái Quốc replied.

A young Nùng Party member agreed to escort him. His comrades got him a shaman's paraphernalia. The young man carried a yoke over his shoulder with two baskets containing a couple of ancient books on

black magic, wooden chips with magic signs, a box of goose feathers, a small gong, incense sticks, a magnum of moonshine, and a live chick, whose blood shamans use to drive out disease. Nguyễn Ái Quốc wore a black ankle-length gown with mysterious Chinese inscriptions embroidered on it, cloth slippers on his feet, an improvised turban on his head, a cone-shaped straw hat on his back, and a bamboo staff in his hand.

He set out around noon. At the first checkpoint the young man explained he was bringing a shaman to treat his sick wife. Thus, they cleared several checkpoints without much trouble. After a while they saw a head of them a group of peasants returning from the market, and going in the same direction. Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his young companion decided to join the group. At the next checkpoint, the search seemed to be more thorough than before. The soldiers scrutinised every object, leafed through the shaman's books and even palpated the chick.

At that moment, they were approached by the security chief of the local commune.

"What on earth makes you travel in such heat?" he asked.

"I'm taking the shaman to see my sick mother-in-law," the young man answered obsequiously.

"Oh!," the officer exclaimed, "my wife is also sick. Could I ask you to see her too?"

"He only treats colds," the young man mumbled in confusion. "Besides, he's hard of hearing."

He looked around and noticed in the group of peasants an old acquaintance, a member of the national salvation society. The young man instinctively felt for the gun hidden under his clothes. If things got bad, he thought, he'd signal the man, who must also have a gun. They'd make a dash for the forest together. There were plenty of men around who'd provide help.

Meanwhile, the officer approached the shaman and, tapping him on the shoulder, repeated his request:

"Could I ask you to come and see my wife?"

The old man slowly turned his head, and put his hand to his ear:  
"What's that?" he asked.

The officer got a glimpse of the old man's goldish-black teeth. It was an old custom in Vietnam to coat one's teeth with black lacquer to protect them from rot. Even today you find old people in Vietnamese villages with teeth edged with red from chewing betel. And before setting out on his journey, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had rubbed his teeth with young resin to look like an old village man.

"He's hard of hearing. But my mother-in-law is so sick... We really should be getting on," the young man said.

"Oh, all right, run along", the officer gestured. "But tell the old man to come to my place on his way back, will you?"

The rest of the journey was uneventful. When they reached their destination, the young man told his comrades about their adventure. His face was beaded with cold sweat, his voice excited. Every now and then he would exclaim:

"Uncle Thu has such nerve! Such nerve! If it hadn't been for him, I'd have spoiled everything."

In June 1941, Nguyễn Ái Quốc wrote an appeal to his fellowcountrymen, calling on them to take up arms for national liberation. He wrote that "the French rulers have become even more ruthless in carrying out their policy of exploitation, repression and massacre," while "shamelessly surrendering our country to Japan... As a result our people are languishing under a double yoke of oppression. They serve not only as beasts of burden to the French, but also as slaves to the Japanese.

"What sin have our people committed to be reduced to such a wretched fate?" Nguyễn Ái Quốc asked. "Are we to await death with folded arms? No! Certainly not! The twenty-odd million descendants of Lạc and Hồng\* are resolved to win freedom."

The address ended with a call to start an armed uprising to throw out the Japanese and the French.

\* According to Vietnam tradition, Lạc Long and Hồng Bàng were the country's first kings.

It was heard by the whole nation. Leaflets with its text were passed from hand to hand. In town and country, agitators went from door to door.

4

The Vietminh movement gathered momentum. New national salvation societies and selfdefence detachments sprang up in Cao Bang Province. Gradually, guerilla camps appeared in neighbouring provinces too. Yet the conditions for a large-scale guerilla movement were far from favourable. The guerillas had almost no firearms. All they had were spears, swords and daggers. But worst of all, there were too few politically competent and committed Party activists who could explain the Party's policies to ordinary people and rouse them to action. At Party meetings, Nguyễn Ái Quốc often pointed out:

"The revolutionary movement is like a tide, and reliable Party activists are like boulders, that hold down the newly-brought sand when the water recedes."

Often, explaining something to his colleagues, Nguyễn Ái Quốc would refer to the experience of the CPSU (B).

The political courses that had been started outside Chingsi continued at Pác Bó. Beyond the village outskirts was a craggy hill. On one of its slopes, a house was perched. In former times it used to combine the functions of a prayer-house, a community centre, and a town hall. Hidden behind the house was a deep cleft in the rock, which could accommodate several dozen people. It was there that the lectures were to proceed.

Veteran revolutionary Võ Nguyên Giáp recalls: "Phùng Chí Kiên, Vũ Anh, Phạm Văn Đồng and I worked out the training programme under Uncle's guidance. Each of us had to elaborate a programme: propaganda, organisation, training, or struggle. Uncle worked with great patience and care. He paid keen attention to the political content as well as to lucidity, conciseness and intelligibility of the material. As regards any work, any writing of ours, he asked questions and cross-questions, and paid particular attention to practical work. This style of training was of great benefit and guided me in my military work all through the

resistance war. It also brought home to me that only by meeting the aspirations of the masses could we arouse their spirit. It was thanks to that spirit, to the experience I got from that first course of training, that I was later successful, in my practical work in the liberated area."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc's colleagues often asked him about the Soviet Union. He himself, too, liked to illustrate his thoughts with examples from life in Russia. He told people, many of whom were illiterate, how the Russian nation had suffered under the tsar and how Lenin established a party of the working class, which rallied the people to fight for freedom, equality and happiness. Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, Nguyễn Ái Quốc would pause and then pronounce with great conviction, gesturing to emphasise his words:

"What the people of Russia have done, we can also do. We must learn from the Russian revolution."

It was no easy time for the Soviet Union - the Nazi armies were approaching Moscow. Many young Communists asked Nguyễn Ái Quốc if he thought the Soviet Union could withstand the onslaught.

"The Nazis are sure of a blitz victory over the Soviet Union. But that will never happen," he would answer. "Even in the 19th century, when Russia was suffocating under tsarist tyranny, the invincible Napoleon was crushed by the Russian people. Now Russia is a socialist state, has been for more than two decades already, the people have had a taste of the new life, a life free from exploitation, a life that is improving everyday. The Soviet people are well organised. They have a high level of political awareness, and have been brought up in the spirit of patriotism and loyalty to revolutionary ideals. They are led by the Communist Party. You can never bring such a people to its knees. I can assure you, the cradle of the world revolution will fight to the end. The Red Army will soon mount a counteroffensive and drive the Nazis back."

At this point he would cast a glance over his hushed audience, and then say:

"The day the Soviet people win the war should be the signal for our revolution. To bring that day closer, we must spare no effort today."

After these words, even the most sceptical listeners were fired by new hope, and the assignments that had seemed so trifling before, especially about work among the population, took on an altogether different complexion.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc kept reminding his colleagues of the priority importance of political agitation and ideological education of the masses. If you want a good crop, plough deep, he liked to say. To create revolutionary armed forces and lay the groundwork for victory in a nationwide armed uprising, you first had to have an army of propagandists, an army of political agitators. He would refer to the experience of the CPSU. The most striking example of effective and purposeful political work in the history of the Russian Revolution, he said, was the period between the summer months and October 1917, when the Bolshevik Party headed by Lenin managed to win over broad sections of the working people after securing the bolshevisation of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies.

He personally briefed and examined Party activists who were going to outlying areas of Cao Bằng Province and the neighbouring provinces of Bắc Cạn and Lạng Sơn to set up new guerilla bases there and promote the cause of the Vietnam.

"Imagine that I'm an illiterate rustic and you've come to my house to convert me to the Revolution," he would say with a mischievous smile.

"Let's see, what would you start with..."

Some of the agitators were illiterate themselves and, besides, were forbidden to carry any revolutionary printed matter, since there had been cases when the security police shot detainees on the spot after finding copies of Vietnam newspapers on them. For this reason, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had to write thirty poems, each dealing with a specific situation, to be memorised by his agitators: how to arouse government troops, how to influence women, old people, Buddhists, Catholics, and so on.

All those who returned to Pác Bó after a mission were debriefed by Nguyễn Ái Quốc personally: he wanted to know what and how they had told the local villagers, how the latter had reacted and what they had been

doubtful about. Then he would explain what mistakes had been made, if any. He tongue-lashed those who violated the rules of propaganda.

"If you've a Party activist," he would say, "you must yourself be the bearer of truly revolutionary morality. People must trust, respect, and love you. For them to trust you, you must be honest and sincere in everything you do. For them to respect you, you must share all their misfortunes. For them to love you, you must honour the elderly, respect the women, and treat children like a father. Last but not least, you must always respect local customs, no matter how strange they might appear.

As the saying goes, it's better no to pay your taxes to the king than to violate the customs of the village."

In some of the agitators' reports he heard a note of pessimism. What's the use, some would ask - no sooner do you put together the core of a local national salvation society than the Green Girdles round up all the newly-converted activists, take some away with their hands tied, and scare the rest. After such a raid, you'd better not appear in the village again - no one will want to speak to you."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc would explain:

"Among those who sympathise with the revolutionary cause, you can single out three categories. There are those who, once embarked on the path of struggle, remain faithful to it to the end of their days. Others seem at first to throw themselves passionately into the revolution, but then, after facing the police once or twice, withdraw, like a snail into its shell. Still others, on the contrary, are infuriated by police reprisals and become active revolutionaries. That is why we should not be afraid of reprisals. Like a sieve the separate the weak from the staunch and committed. It often happens that after a wave of reprisals, only three or four remain loyal to the cause, while the rest fall back. That doesn't matter - the main thing is to convince as many people as possible that the revolution is close. Then, even if they are afraid to contact us, their hearts will belong to the revolution. They are poor, they hate the feudal lords and colonialists, and they yearn to see their country liberated. As soon as the thunder of the revolution echoes, they will immediately join."

Nguyễn Ái Quốc attached just as much importance to the kind of language the agitators used. Ultra-revolutionary rhetoric coming from

newly-fledged Party activists made him wince. He would cut short such a zealous orator by saying:

"Comrade, go easy on the big words, avoid high-flown talk. If you want to be a real propagandist, you've got to learn to speak the language of the people - only then will the people listen to you. Start by talking to them about their most vital problems, about their parents and children, and whether they manage to make ends meet, and only then start talking about those who are to blame for their poverty and suffering."

People who showed off their knowledge of foreign words also came under sharp criticism. Nguyễn Ái Quốc would quote a Vietnamese proverb: "The ugly girl wants to become a beauty, and the ignorant man wants to sound scholarly." In those days Vietnamese revolutionaries borrowed the Chinese word *đoàn kết*, solidarity, which was, of course, unknown to ordinary villagers. Nguyễn Ái Quốc would suggest to those who overused the new-fangled word:

"Why not quote the well-known saying: one tree is a tree, three trees are a high mountain? Or else tell them of the chopsticks: it's easy to break one chopstick, but try breaking a bundle! People will then understand what solidarity is all about."

Those who were with Nguyễn Ái Quốc at Pác Bó recall how he won the hearts of local villagers. The very night he settled down in the Kốc Bó cave, he struck up a conversation with old Mai Ly. The latter spoke no Vietnamese, being a Nùng, and they communicated by writing Chinese characters with a twig in the sand. The old Nùng complained that the district authorities and local elder were making life intolerable. Nguyễn Ái Quốc argued that the main enemies were the colonialists, Nguyễn Ái Quốc argued that the main enemies were the colonialists, while the local authorities were no more than their lackeys. But Mai Ly was hard to convince. Nguyễn Ái Quốc thought for a moment, then wrote:

"Suppose our nation is a tree, the village elders and district authorities are nails, and the colonialists are a hammer. The hammer can drive the nails into the tree trunk. But if we throw the hammer away," he crossed out the character denoting the hammer and gestured with his hand, as if throwing away an imaginary object, "then the nails can do nothing."

The old Nùng fondled his luxuriant beard pensively. Then his wrinkled face lit up and he gave a hearty laugh.

"You're right," he wrote. "That's the way things are. Somehow, I'd never thought of it."

After the 8th Central Committee Plenum, the work of Party activists was mainly judged by the number of local people they managed to recruit for the Việtminh movement. As a result, the much more important job of replenishing the Party ranks receded to the background. At one of the Party cell meetings, Nguyễn Ái Quốc suggested that each Party member take upon himself to prepare at least one local resident for enrolment in the Party. He himself picked young Đại Lâm, the son of a long-time Nùng acquaintance, who had already done a lot to help the guerillas. After that meeting, Đại Lâm was often seen in the company of Nguyễn Ái Quốc. A few months later, he was accepted into the Party. Later, he would become a colonel in the Vietnamese People's Army.

Đại Lâm mentioned an episode that had impressed him. "I left my village and lived in a guerilla camp in the jungle. But my fellow-villagers managed to find me there anyway. They needed a shaman to make a sacrifice to the evil spirits. My father used to be quite skilled in the art and he would often take me along. Later, when he got too old for such things, I sometimes went instead of him to houses where somebody was ill. But after I became a revolutionary, I quit. Although my neighbours often tried to persuade me, I would tell them: "There aren't any spirits or devils. You should treat the sick with medication and wholesome food."

Some of those whom I refused to help, despaired. There was no one to drive the evil spirits out of their home. Rumours of this reached Bác Thu, and the next time we met, he asked: "Is it true that you don't exercise spirits any more?" I told him what I thought of spirits, devils and all that rot, proud at the thought that Bác Thu would praise me for having got rid of the old superstitions. Instead, he scolded me: "I'm pleased to hear that you're such a zealous advocate of revolutionary ideas, but don't you think you've divorcing yourself from your people? At present the people must, first of all, hate the feudal lords and imperialists. We must help them develop a revolutionary class

consciousness. Only later will we have the right to tell them - little by little - to give up their superstitions."

Through Nguyễn Ái Quốc's persistent efforts to impress upon his colleagues the need for a realistic approach to religious and age-old popular beliefs, the Vietnamese Communists won over large sections of the two major religious communities - the Buddhists and Catholics - including a large portion of the clergy. Frequently, Buddhist pagodas and Catholic churches provided refuge for Party activists fleeing from the police.

Sometimes, they were the venue of Party conferences and even plenary meetings of the Central Committee. The Party developed close ties with these large religious communities in the framework of the Việtminh and later the Fatherland Front of Vietnam and the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation.

5

During the months that Nguyễn Ái Quốc spent at Pác Bó he wrote prolifically, and translated.

Immediately after his arrival at Pác Bó, Nguyễn Ái Quốc insisted on the need of issuing a Party newspaper. That was not easy. For one thing, instead of a printing press they made do with an old lithographic stone and a box of India ink. Out of bamboo pulp they made a sort of rough paper, which had a light-green tinge. Finally, the first issue of *Independent Vietnam* came out, becoming the Việtminh's official organ. In a short time, it gained a wide circulation in the guerilla-controlled zone.

During his stay at Pác Bó, Nguyễn Ái Quốc devoted much attention to military science - he was convinced that in Vietnam a revolution could win only through a nationwide uprising. He translated into Vietnamese *The Methods of Warfare* by the medieval Chinese military leader, Sung Tsu Chi, and wrote several pamphlets on guerilla tactics and methods of training military commanders. Like the newspaper, these pamphlets were printed lithographically and circulated among the guerillas.

In Pác Bó, he also wrote two historical poems. Both were written the traditional Vietnamese lục bát metre, with lines of six and eight one-syllable words alternating, and a combination of internal and tailrhymes producing an especially expressive and melodious effect.



The first, named "The History of Our Country", which he had started to write when he was a student in Moscow, recounted the principal events in Vietnamese history, starting from the country's first mythical king, Hồng Bàng, and ending with the French invasion. The poem's message was that unity had always brought the Vietnamese people success and victory, whereas lack of unity brought failure and defeat. The victories won by the great martial leaders of old were due to their ability to rally and lead the mass of ordinary people. Of the country's national hero Quang Trung, he wrote:

*He had will power  
He had a mighty brain  
Besides, the people  
Gathered under his banner.*

The same leitmotif is seen in the poem's closing lines addressed to his fellow countrymen:

*Oh, heirs of the Dragon and Fairy,  
Lose no time, and unite.*

The other poem, "The History of Vietnam from 1847 to 1947," features a chronology of Vietnamese history during the nearly one hundred years of French colonial domination. Although it was written in early 1942, its last entry read: "1945, Independent Vietnam." Vũ Anh recalls in this connection: "Bác wrote at the end of his chronology that Vietnam would win independence in 1945. The date caused much controversy among our comrades. Some were genuinely distressed that they had to wait so long, while others believed 1945 was unrealistic. Bác, however, would only smile, and say: 'We shall see.'"

At the end of his prophetic poem, Nguyễn Ái Quốc wrote: "A nation that is so passionately patriotic must certainly be united and independent." Three years later, his prophecy came true. And although after that the Vietnamese people had to fight for almost three decades, the cause of unity and independence led to triumph.

## PRISONER

*With my health attacked by China's  
fickle weather,  
And my heart grieved by Vietnam's  
long suffering.  
Oh, to fall ill in prison, what a bitter trial!  
Enough to make you weep, but I prefer  
to sing.*

Hồ Chí Minh

### 1

With the country's occupation by Japan, the patriotic movement came up against new difficulties. The lines of communication between North and South were severed. The guerillas lost contact with the outside world, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc and his comrades often had no idea how the Second World War was progressing, especially the anti-Japanese resistance movement in China. In order to drive out the Japanese invaders and their French lackeys, the Vietminh, which in fact represented the interests of the entire Vietnamese nation, needed political and preferably also material support from the anti-Hitler coalition. The guerilla groups in the backwoods of Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn and Bắc Cạn provinces had almost no firearms. Also, it was essential to re-establish contact with the numerous Vietnamese emigre organisations in South China and draw them into the Vietminh.

In other words, the situation demanded that an authoritative representative of the Vietminh be sent to China. There was not much debate over who was to go. The only person who could competently represent the Vietminh in negotiations with any organisation and who would also know the complex situation in China, was Nguyễn Ái Quốc.

In late August 1942, he summoned Vũ Anh and asked him to make two chops - one of the Vietminh, and the other of the Vietnamese section of the International League Against Aggression.

He then wrote for himself a letter of recommendation from the two above organisations in Chinese and French, issued to Mr. So-and-So, a

Chinese emigre resident in Vietnam sent to China to establish contact with Chungking (the wartime seat of Chiang Kaishek's government).

In order to throw French and Japanese intelligence off the scent, he invented a new name for himself: Hồ Chí Minh. The period of revolutionary activity as Nguyễn Ái Quốc was now over. A new chapter was started. As Hồ Chí Minh he became known to the whole world as leader of the Vietnamese revolution and the Vietnamese Communists.

On August 29, accompanied by two guides, Hồ Chí Minh set out on his journey. To be on the safe side, they walked separately, but without losing sight of each other. Hồ Chí Minh brought up the rear, impersonating a weak-sighted Nùng probing his way with a staff. After crossing the border, they got in touch with a Chinese veteran Communist, who replaced the two Vietnamese guides. At the town of Tiên Dung, they put up for the night at the local inn. In the small hours of the morning, the police broke in and led them away.

For over a month, the Pác Bó headquarters knew nothing of Hồ Chí Minh's fate. Several comrades were sent to China to look for him. Finally, one of them returned with a copy of a Chinese provincial newspaper which he got from Hồ Chí Minh through a bribed prison warden. They applied an iodine solution to the paper, and found a message from Hồ Chí Minh written in rice-water. Later, such newspapers reached Pác Bó almost every week. The brief messages were usually accompanied by a short verse. From the casual hints that Hồ dropped, his comrades constructed a gruesome picture of torture and suffering.

At first, Hồ was held in the town jail of Nanning. A few days after his arrest, someone reported to the authorities that the new inmate was "conducting Bolshevik propaganda". The old man received ten cane strokes to his heels and was moved to another prison, then another, and another. Wumin, Wuchow, Lungchin, Liuchow, Kwilin, and Liuchow again - all in all Hồ had a taste of thirty prisons in thirteen districts of Kwangsi Province. It was a nightmare of miasmatic flea-infested underground cells, squalid sheds, and sombre army dungeons. The moving from prison to prison was done on foot, with a block of wood around his neck, under armed escort, along mountain trails and through

marshlands, in the scorching sun or in pouring rain. The ordeal lasted a little over thirteen months, in which his hair turned grey and he lost some of his teeth.

But he never lost heart, and as soon as the door of a new cell would slam shut behind him, he would sit down to write his poetic diary. Altogether in those thirteen months he wrote 114 quatrains, published after the Vietnamese revolution in one volume and known worldwide as *Hồ's Prison Diary*.

The jailer watched his every move and seized everything he wrote in his strange language. But Hồ found a way to lull their vigilance - he switched to the classical literary Chinese. Perhaps that is why *The Prison Diary* was not merely a set of quatrains - it was his thoughts encased in the armour of a foreign language, seeking a way out of the darkness; it was an inner fire that helped him to survive, conserve his energy, and then rejoin the revolutionary struggle. His courage and poetic talent combined to create a unique story in verse about a Communist jailed for his convictions, unbending, never losing hope, and firm in his belief that justice would ultimately triumph:

*Without the cold and bleakness of winter  
The warmth and splendour of spring could never be.  
Misfortunes have steeled and tempered me.  
And even more strengthened my resolve.*

Even in the grisliest of dungeons, where human dignity was completely trampled upon, Hồ Chí Minh retained his sense of humour:

*The State feeds me, I stop at State-owned palaces.  
Guards work in relays to keep me company.  
Passing by mounts and streams,  
I enjoy majestic views.  
It fills a man with pride to be so privileged.*

And his sufferings faded before the love of life and optimism that permeated every poetic miniature:

*My arms and legs are tightly bound.  
But in the hills birds sing and flowers blossom*

*Who can stop my pleasure in sweetness of scent and sound?  
In my long trudge I may feel a little less lonesome.*

The *Prison Diary* ranks among such outstanding creations of revolutionary literature as Julius Fucik's *Notes from the Gallows*. Vietnamese literary critics consider Hồ Chí Minh the father of Vietnamese revolutionary poetry. Hồ was both leader of the revolution and its bard. The purpose of revolutionary poetry, he wrote, was to rally and lead:

*Let steel resound and sparkle in my verse.  
The poet is a fighter leading fighters.*

The four hundred days in Chiang Kaishek's dungeons impressed themselves in Hô's memory as a continuous nightmare. Everywhere the same stifling cells, the same wooden bunks barely covered with straw, the same bowl of cooked millet and jug of muddy water, and the same beatings and humiliation. Yet there was one day in February 1943 that stood apart in his memory. At the Liuchow prison one of the wardens whose sympathy he had managed to win, smuggled in an issue of the local paper. Hô Chí Minh glanced at the headline and jumped with joy. "Red Army Routs Nazis at Stalingrad; 330,000 Germans put out of action," he read. At last! Now liberation was not too far away.

The event had to be celebrated. Hô extracted his last silver yuan from its hiding place, called the warden and asked him to buy some soybean rusks, a little bag of sweets, and some jasmin-scented tea.

Similar celebrations were held by Hồ Chí Minh's fellow martyrs in Vietnam, on Poulo Condor Island, the political prison in Saigon, the central prison in Tonkin, and dozens of others. The news of Germany's debacle at Stalingrad reached them all - there was no stopping it. More often than not it was the wardens themselves who brought word of it. Indeed, the echoes of the Battle of Stalingrad were so formidable that they were heard in faraway Vietnam.

In his weekly messages, Hô wrote he believed his arrest was probably initiated by the Kwangsi authorities, who thought him a Chinese traitor. But later it was discovered that the Chiang Kaishek

authorities had been tipped off by Trương Bội Công and company, who were afraid the appearance of such a Vietnamh envoy in China would undermine their own position among the Vietnamese emigrés.

Only the top Chiang Kaishek administration could secure Hồ Chí Minh's release. The Communist Party of Indochina mounted a campaign for his release among the Societies for the Salvation of Vietnam in the Việt Bắc zone and among Vietnamese emigres in South China. Hundreds of petitions were sent to Chungking. A special issue of Independent Vietnam was put out at Pác Bó calling upon the Chinese people "to help release one of the oldest patriots of Vietnam". The appeal was also sent to the Comintern, to TASS, and to a number of Chinese newspapers, democratic organisations, and political figures in China.

Once in mid-1943 a Party liaison, Comrade Cáp, returned to Pác Bó with the news that Hồ Chí Minh had died in prison. That is what he had been told by a Kuomintang official. It is hard to describe the grief of Hồ Chí Minh's comrades, and in fact of all the residents of Pác Bó. It was decided to hold a commemoration meeting, and Phạm Văn Đồng was asked to write an obituary. Following the old Vietnamese custom, Hồ Chí Minh's bamboo trunk was opened and his personal belongings distributed among his friends as keepsakes. A man was sent to China to find out the details of Hồ Chí Minh's death and to locate his grave.

For several weeks there was no news. Then, Pác Bó headquarters received another newspaper from China with the usual invisible message in the margin: "Best regards to my brothers at home. We are all right here," followed by the usual verse:

*The mountains embrace the clouds,  
The clouds hug the mountains,  
The river below shines like a spotless mirror  
On the slopes of the Western Range, my heart  
                                beats as I wander,  
Looking towards the Southern skies and thinking  
                                of old friends.*

His comrades did not know what to think. Cáp was summoned to headquarters and shown Hồ Chí Minh's message.

"Can you remember exactly what that Kuomintang man told you?" they demanded.

When Cáp reconstructed his conversation with the Chinese official, the misunderstanding became clear. The official had said: *chu lou* (he's already free.), whereas Cáp thought he heard *shi lou* (he's already dead). The first reaction was to punish Cáp, but soon they found themselves laughing.

For a long time it was unclear why the Chiang Kaishek administration finally released the Vietnamese revolutionary. Later, Vietnamese historians came to the conclusion that Hồ Chí Minh's release had been just another ruse in Chiang's Vietnam policy. In the early 1940s, when Japan had occupied Indochina, the hawks in Chiang's administration were planning to invade Vietnam on the pretext of assisting the Vietnamese to drive out the invaders.

2

Soon the idea of invading Vietnam crystallised in the form of a "Vietnamese campaign" operational plan. The first step in implementing it was to create a fifth column out of Vietnamese emigres living in China.

The greatest hopes were pinned on former members of the National Party of Vietnam crushed by the French, who had lived in China a long time and collaborated with the Kuomintang. The Kwangsi authorities received instructions from Chungking to organise loyal Vietnamese emigrés into a broadly-based quasi-revolutionary organisation which would later assist the Chinese invasion.

Such an organisation was created in Kwangsi Province in October 1942 under the pretentious name of Vietnam Revolutionary League. Its Central Committee was made up of men who had collaborated with the Kuomintang for many years, including the notorious Trương Bội Công, a general in the Kuomintang army. His chief rival was Vũ Hồng Khanh, leader of the National Party. Quite an odious figure was the 70-year-old Nguyễn Hải Thần, another member of the Central Committee. He had emigrated from Vietnam to China in 1912 and had long since forgotten his native language. For a time he had collaborated with Phan Bội Châu

and hence called himself his successor. In China, however, he became famous in quite another capacity - as a fortune-teller - which brought him considerable wealth.

From the very first day of its existence, the Revolutionary League was paralysed by a fierce struggle for power. Besides, the Yunnan section of the Vietminh sent a cable to Chiang Kaishek and Chang Fakui, Commander of the 4th Kwangsi Military District, saying it did not recognise the Revolutionary League since it was not represented in Vietnam and was headed by a Chinese general. Surprisingly, Chang Fakui responded favourably. He was interested in winning over the Vietminh which, he knew, enjoyed broad support in Vietnam. Setting the ground for a Chinese invasion, Chang Fakui sent his authorised representative to the Việt Bắc guerilla-controlled area. On his return, the latter reported:

"Over eighty per cent of the population in the provinces that I visited are solidly behind the Vietminh. If we want to succeed in Vietnam, we must at all costs secure Vietminh support."

Chiang Kaishek acted fast. It was clear that the Second World War was drawing to a close. After its victory at Stalingrad, the Soviet Army was driving the Nazis back to the border. The Americans, meanwhile, sank the Japanese fleet in the Southeast Pacific. An Anglo-American landing in Indochina was imminent. The Vietminh, with which Chiang Kaishek had not yet managed to find common ground, was growing stronger by the hour. Chiang Kaishek's plan of invading Vietnam hung in the balance.

Chiang Kaishek changed his tactics. He instructed Chang Fakui to promptly settle all problems within the Revolutionary League. In August 1943, a committee was set up at Liuow to prepare a conference of Vietnamese patriotic forces, including the Vietminh. These preparations coincided with Hồ Chí Minh's transfer from Kweilin prison to Liuchow prison. When Chang Fakui learned that a man believed to be an important Vietminh representative was being kept at the Liuchow prison, he immediately ordered his release. This was in September 1943, thirteen months after Hồ Chí Minh's arrest.

A released prisoner feels like a bird in the woods, says a Chinese proverb. Yet for a long time Hồ Chí Minh would feel the aftereffects of his 400-day ordeal: his eyesight began to fail and his legs refused to obey him. But again his willpower conquered. Every day he went on long walks, and after dark would look into the darkness in the hope of regaining his eyesight. Slowly he returned to normal.

At first, Hồ turned down the offer to join the preparatory committee afford to lose another day. There's urgent business to be done in Vietnam. I'm sure other Vietnam representatives will cope here."

On the next day, however, he got a letter from Chang Fakui again asking him to take part in preparing the ground for the conference.

The tone of the letter left no doubt that Chang Fakui regarded Hồ Chí Minh's cooperation as payment for his release. It was clear that he wanted Hồ Chí Minh's backing to further the plan of invading Vietnam.

Did the Kwangsi authorities and Chungking know that Hồ was actually Nguyễn Ái Quốc?

Veteran Vietnamese revolutionary Lê Tùng Sơn, who was in South China together with Hồ Chí Minh and was also included in the preparatory committee, thinks Chiang Kaishek's men knew very well who they were dealing with. One of the preparatory committee members, a certain Trần Bảo, who had lived in Canton in 1925-1927, knew Comrade Vương in person. Now, being a zealous servant of the Chiang Kaishek regime, it would be strange if he did not report the true identity of Hồ Chí Minh to his masters.

It is almost certain, Lê Tùng Sơn writes, that the leaders of the Revolutionary League, as well as Chiang Kaishek, knew that Hồ Chí Minh was Nguyễn Ái Quốc. It was not surprising, therefore, that the administration was so cordial. They would have been poor politicians indeed if they had not attempted to use the authority of this famous Vietnamese revolutionary. Besides, the times had changed. The Kuomintang was fighting the Japanese in alliance with the Communist Party of China, and it was a known fact that in all countries overrun by Nazi Germany Communists were in the forefront of the resistance movement. In this context, why should not Chiang Kaishek cooperate

with Bolshevik Nguyễn Ái Quốc to drive the Japanese out of Indochina? In other words, Lê Tùng Sơn concludes, Hồ Chí Minh was released when the Chiang Kaishek administration learned he was one of the principal leaders of the Vietnamese liberation movement.

Hồ Chí Minh's participation in the preparatory committee changed the atmosphere. Previously, some members of the Revolutionary League were fiercely opposed to cooperation with the Communist Party of Indochina and the Vietnam. Now they were forced to shut up. Pretty soon, the committee agreed upon the list of parties to be invited to take part in the national conference: the Communist Party of Indochina, the Vietnam, the Revolutionary League (Việt Cách), the Nationalist Party (Việt Quốc), and the Đại Việt (Great Vietnam, a pro-Japanese bourgeois party). Some committee members were against inviting the Đại Việt because it was pro Japanese, but Hồ Chí Minh said it should not be ignored in order to win over the patriotic-minded intelligentsia of the Tự Lực Văn đoàn literary association connected with the Đại Việt. Hồ Chí Minh also suggested inviting organisations that were not, on the face of it, concerned with political issues, such as the Union of Buddhists, the Enlightenment Society, and the Society for the Promotion of the Quốc Ngữ alphabet. These organisations, he said, included a great many patriotic-minded people who could be of great use to the revolution.

Heated debate was sparked off by Hồ Chí Minh's and Lê Tùng Sơn's proposal that the national conference should include delegates from the Vietnam's constituent national salvation societies-ordinary workers, peasants, women, and young people. Trương Bội Công and his supporters were afraid that then the conference would be dominated by the Vietnam. There was also much argument about the timing of the conference. The Việt Cách thought it should be convened in three months, whereas Hồ Chí Minh and Lê Tùng Sơn said it should be in a year.

They knew that in three months the Vietnam would not be able to get all its representatives across the border into China, in which case Trương Bội Công and his people would monopolise the conference. No agreement was reached, and the session ended in a deadlock.

After weighing all the pros and cons, Hồ Chí Minh and Lê Tùng Sơn decided to resort to the arbitration of Chang Fakui. They sent him a letter detailing their plan: the preparatory committee should be transformed into a conference of foreign representatives; its participants should discuss the conditions for convening a national conference, which should be held in a year's time in a guerilla-controlled zone of Việt Bắc instead of China; Hồ Chí Minh would undertake to find a suitable venue; those wishing to take part in the conference on Vietnamese soil must send their applications to the preparatory committee in advance.

Chang Fakui had great respect for Hồ Chí Minh, calling him Delegate Hồ. Hồ Chí Minh appealed to him as a human being. Besides, Chang Fakui did not want to jeopardise the dialogue with the Viet Minh. A few days after getting the letter, Chang Fakui invited all members of the preparatory committee to a luncheon. At the end of a copious meal, when the guests were brought the traditional hot scented towels for their hands and faces, and their ornate porcelain bowls were steaming with fragrant green tea, Chang Fakui said:

"I believe it would be a mistake to think that if we just sit and wait, the conference that we are pinning so much hope on will take care of itself. At this rate, it will never get off the ground. So I asked Delegate Hồ for his suggestions on how to organise it. I have studied his proposals and think they constitute a revolutionary plan conceived in a spirit of equality and a desire to unite all the revolutionary parties and organizations of Vietnam. Here is what he suggests..."

When Chang Fakui finished reading the letter, Trương Bội Công had no choice but to thank Chang Fakui and Hồ Chí Minh. The others followed suit.

Finally came the day of the conference of foreign representatives of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. To avoid unwanted publicity and to be fully in control of the conference proceedings, Chang Fakui offered its participants the use of the premises of the military district headquarters. The conference was opened to the sounds of a rousing march played by a Chinese army band. The Chinese and their Việt Cách retainers tried to emphasize the special significance of the occasion.

And no wonder: the Chiang Kaishek regime was congratulating itself on having brought together representatives of all patriotic forces of Vietnam, many of whom were not on speaking terms before. The Chinese and especially the Việt Cách and Việt Quốc officials wore their Sunday best, officers strutting about bemedalled, and civilians sweating in their suits. Hồ Chí Minh looked out of place in his shabby old suit with a frayed collar and patched shoulders and knees. His look spoke plainer than words that the whole occasion was deeply repulsive to him, but that, for the sake of a tactical advantage, he was ready to go along with politicians who were not to his liking and who represented forces hostile to the revolution.

Hồ's manner was simple and businesslike. He spoke of the Vietminh, emphasising the part played by Communists in the nationwide effort to drive out the Japanese. Chang Fakui interrupted him several times with hearty applause, and the rest had to follow suit. Chang was obviously proud to show off Hồ Chí Minh as his brainchild: it had been he, Chang Fakui, who had the bright idea of releasing the Vietminh leader, and it was thanks to him that the Revolutionary League represented so broad a spectrum of political forces. Chang attended the conference to the end, until Hồ Chí Minh was made an alternate member of the Revolutionary League's Central Committee. Only then could Chang rest easy.

Chang immediately sent a cable to Chungking: "Conference concluded. Can Hồ Chí Minh return to Vietnam?" The reply permitting Hồ Chí Minh to go home was, in effect, the first official document confirming his release.

As he was packing his bag, Hồ Chí Minh told Lê Tùng Sơn:

"I think the conference has been a great success for us. It would have been a mistake to boycott it. True, we should have no illusions about Chiang Kaishek, but through China we can and must find a way of contacting the Allies and secure their support".

Another important outcome of the many-months-long epic with the preparatory committee and the conference, was that Hồ Chí Minh could return to his own country on the eve of the great upheaval, and resume his place at the helm of the revolution.

## REVOLUTION

1

Hồ Chí Minh's reunion with his friends and associates at Pác Bó in July 1944, was all the more joyous because the revolutionary movement had made considerable headway of late, and the outlook was bright. The Vietminh front had overspilled the Việt Bắc guerilla base and was gradually becoming nationwide. National salvation societies and Vietminh bases had already sprung up in many provinces of the Red River delta, in Central Vietnam, and even in Sài Gòn. A strategically important step was the setting up of "security zones" around Hanoi and then in Bắc Giang and Thái Nguyên provinces north of Hanoi, thus establishing a direct corridor between the guerilla-controlled zone and the capital which later enabled the Party's Central Committee to keep developments in Hanoi under control both before and during the armed uprising.

The growth of Vietminh influence was above all due to objective factors - the change of the tide in the Second World War following the Soviet Army's successes; the setbacks of the Japanese militarists in China and the Pacific; the sharp worsening of the economic situation in Vietnam as a result of the Japanese policy of mass requisitioning, and, finally, the escalation of the conflict between Japanese and French interests in Indochina and, as a consequence, the weakening of pro-French and pro-Japanese forces in Vietnamese political circles.

There were also tangible results from the Party's persistent campaign to secure as many allies as possible in the effort to bring down the Franco-Japanese occupation regime. This activity followed two basic lines. One objective was to broaden the Vietminh's social base, drawing into it more urban petty-bourgeois elements, well-to-do village strata, the national bourgeoisie, and patriotic-minded landowners.

The Communist Party established contact with prominent Vietnamese intellectuals and student leaders. This resulted in the setting up of the Democratic Party of Vietnam in June 1944. It was a revolutionary party of the national bourgeoisie, which immediately declared its desire to join the Vietminh. For the first time in Vietnamese

history a political party of the bourgeoisie fought for the country's independence within a united national front under the guidance of the Communist Party and the working class. The Communist Party had again scored a major success in applying the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism in the complex setting of Vietnam.

The Party also stepped up its agitation campaign among the royal armed forces. This resulted in the establishment of the Union of Servicemen for National Salvation, which later joined the Vietminh. In Hanoi alone, underground revolutionary cells were set up in the First Indochina Rifles Regiment, and the 4th Colonial Artillery Regiment. Vietnamese officers of the French General Staff formed a cell and another cell was set up at the Bạch Mai military airfield.

The Party published an important, well-timed programme document, "Principles of Cultural Policy", which called for the promotion of a national in form and democratic in content Vietnamese literature and art. This platform was joined by many of the country's progressive intellectuals, among them such outstanding writers as Nguyễn Đình Thi, Nam Cao, Nguyễn Hồng, Tô Hoài, and Nguyễn Tuân, who established a Cultural Association for National Salvation.

And finally, the Communist Party called for the establishment of an anti-Japanese democratic front, which would encompass foreign anti-fascists, including Frenchmen supporting General de Gaulle. This move was prompted by de Gaulle's promise given on December 8, 1943 (which he never kept, however), that after defeating Germany, France would grant independence to Indochina. In order to set up a working relationship with all those Frenchmen who opposed to Vichy regime and were prepared to back de Gaulle, the Vietminh in Hanoi held a secret meeting attended by Communists, left-wing Socialists, and de Gaullists in the Foreign Legion and the French military administration in Indochina. The Vietminh representative proposed joint action against the Japanese and Vichy forces and requested those de Gaullists who carried any weight with the colonial administration to help the Vietminh with food and arms, and to release political prisoners. However, the de Gaullists did not have the political foresight to establish an alliance with the Vietminh.



The moment Hồ Chí Minh reached Pắc Bó, he sensed the general elation there and especially the excitement of local Party activists. An extended conference of the inter-provincial Party Committee of the Cao Bằng- Lạng zone had been held the day before, and the following conclusion was drawn: "An examination of the international situation, the situation in the country, and the revolutionary movement in Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn and Lạng Sơn provinces shows that conditions are ripe there for an armed insurrection and guerilla warfare."

Hồ Chí Minh had arrived just in time for the second session, which was to decide the exact timing of the uprising. After sizing up the situation, he declared that the decision had been premature.

"In your plans to mount an offensive in three northern provinces," he explained, "you have taken into account only local conditions. You ignore the complex situation in the country as a whole and the fact that the enemy is still strong, whereas the revolutionary forces are scattered, lack organisation, and don't have enough trained personnel or weapons."

As if thinking aloud, he continued: "True, the peaceful stage of the revolution is over - yet the moment for nationwide insurrection is not yet ripe. Lenin used to say that insurrection is an art. Insurrection requires careful preparation - hasty action is out of place and dangerous."

He thought a moment, then continued: "Of course, if at the present stage we confine ourselves to political struggle alone, that wouldn't be enough to sustain the revolutionary movement. But it would be reckless to immediately proceed with an armed uprising while our enemy is strong enough to crush it. I'm sure the day will soon come when political struggle will have to give way to armed struggle. But at the present moment we still must give priority to political struggle. We must find new forms of revolutionary action that would best suit the present complicated situation."

In the days that followed, Hồ Chí Minh pondered over what course of action the Party and the Vietminh should take in a situation where conditions were ripe for an armed uprising, but the enemy was still a force to be reckoned with. He thought of the Vietnamese military leaders of the Middle Ages who responded to the invasions of Chinese

feudal lords by organising a levy en masse under the motto, "The Whole Nation Is Our Army". The experience of the CPSU(B), too suggested that a revolution, whether national-democratic or socialist, must rely for its strength on a people's army. During the first Russian revolution, Lenin wrote: "No power on earth will dare to encroach upon free Russia if the bulwark of her liberty is an armed people which has destroyed the military caste, which has made all soldiers citizens and all citizens capable of bearing arms, soldiers."<sup>(1)</sup>

In short, Hồ Chí Minh was sure that the only correct policy would be to create a people's liberation army. The experience of the Russian and Chinese revolutions confirmed this, and so did the Vietnamese people's own experience in repulsing foreign invaders. Much had already been done in this respect. Late in 1941, he remembered, the first armed detachment had been formed to protect Party headquarters and direct the training of self-defence units in the national salvation societies. Later other armed units appeared. In August 1943, two armed detachments of patriots, one from Cao Bằng and the other from Thái Nguyên, met in the middle of the "corridor" linking the two provinces, thus uniting two major revolutionary bases, which later helped to establish a large liberated area.

At the present stage, however, the Vietminh's armed units were not battleworthy, since they were short of weapons and military experts. In time all that, of course, would be remedied, but at present it was essential to rouse the masses out of their slumber, show them the capacity of the revolutionary forces, destroy their fear of the enemy, and instil confidence in their own unlimited possibilities. Frederick Engels once wrote of the Piedmontese who had risen in arms against the Austrian Empire:

"A Nation that wants to conquer its independence cannot restrict itself to the ordinary methods of warfare. Mass uprising, revolutionary war, guerilla detachments everywhere - that is the only means by which a small nation can overcome a large one, by which a less strong army can be put in a position to resist a stronger and better organised one."<sup>(2)</sup>

(1) V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, 1978, p 56.

(2) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p.171

Applied to Vietnamese conditions, this meant that the Party strategy "cannot restrict itself to the *ordinary* methods of warfare" or of preparing revolution. Hồ Chí Minh came to the conclusion that the only effective strategy would be a flexible combination of political and armed struggle, with one form prevailing over the other, depending on the situation.

Bearing this in mind, the Vietminh needed armed units that could, on the one hand, conduct political propaganda among the population and, on the other, mount bold sorties against the occupation forces, showing the nation the growing strength of the revolution and the possibility of complete victory.

On December 22, 1944, Hồ Chí Minh signed a directive forming a Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam. "The name of the Propaganda Brigade for Liberation," he wrote, "means that the political side is more important than the military. It is a propaganda unit..."

"A main-force unit will be created by selecting the most determined and eager members and cadres of the guerilla units... and concentrating a large part of the weapons available..."

"Our war of resistance being a war of the whole people, the whole people should be mobilised and armed; therefore, while concentrating forces to set up a first army unit, the local armed forces should be maintained so as to conduct concerted action and assist it in every field..."

"Concerning tactics, we must apply guerilla warfare; maintain secrecy, prompt action and initiative (now in the east, now in the west, arriving unexpectedly and departing without a trace)."

The First Propaganda Brigade headed by Võ Nguyên Giáp initially numbered only thirty-four men, armed with one light machine-gun, two pistols, and twenty-nine rifles, seventeen of which were old fashioned flintlocks. On the day before the men took their oath of allegiance, Võ Nguyên Giáp received a note from Hồ Chí Minh - just a few lines on a scrap of paper hidden in a pack of cigarettes: "Remember, your unit must concentrate more on political propaganda than on armed warfare. Your unit can be called an elder brother who, I am sure, will soon have many younger brothers. Although you are starting out as a small unit, you have a great future. You are the embryo of a Liberation Army, whose glorious victories will sweep the country from North to South."

Two days later the unit was to receive its baptism of fire. The thirty-four men made surprise attacks on the French outposts in Phaikhát and Nangan districts, capturing the garrisons, killing their commanders, and seizing large quantities of weapons. News of these first successes quickly spread among the population of the guerilla-controlled zone, causing a great wave of enthusiasm. A week later, Võ Nguyên Giáp's unit had already grown to the size of a company.

Hồ Chí Minh's directive on armed propaganda brigades became the basic Party line in military questions. The Marxist-Leninist principle of combining political and armed struggle in preparing a revolution, creatively applied by Hồ Chí Minh to the local conditions of Vietnam, was the corner-stone of Party policy in preparing the August Revolution and in the resistance war against French colonialists. The success of combining military, political and diplomatic effort was especially striking when the Communist forces fought to get the U.S. invaders out of South Vietnam.

2

The Second World War was drawing to a close, spelling disaster for the fascist aggressors. The clash between French and Japanese interests in Vietnam was becoming increasingly acute. Fears were voiced in Tokyo that in the event of an Anglo-American landing in Vietnam, the French colonial forces would stab the Japanese in the back. Such fears were not unfounded: according to Japanese intelligence reports, in June 1944 a messenger from General de Gaulle had been parachuted from a British plane near the Sino-Vietnamese border. He managed to reach Hanoi unnoticed and transmitted de Gaulle's instructions to General Mordant that the French forces in Indochina should be ready to hit the Japanese at the first opportunity, so as to re-establish French rule in the region before the Axis countries surrendered to the Allies. General Mordant officially retired from his post of Commander-in-Chief of the French forces, ostensibly because of old age, and started secret preparations for an anti-Japanese offensive. In late 1944 and early 1945, there were numerous cases of British and American planes airdropping troops, weapons and supplies in areas of Vietnam and Laos out of the reach of the Japanese.

Having learned of France's intentions and also spurred on by her own serious setbacks in the Pacific, Japan proceeded to prepare a large-scale operation to wipe out the French presence in Indochina. This had been all the easier since by early 1945, Tokyo was no longer bound by any obligations to the Vichy government, the latter having ceased to exist with the liberation of France. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese attacked French garrisons throughout Indochina. In less than two hours, the bulk of the French forces were destroyed or captured.

The surviving French troops fled to China through Vietminh-controlled areas. In Bắc Cạn Province, a propaganda unit of the Liberation Army contacted the commander of one of the French units and even negotiated setting up a Franco-Vietnamese Committee for Anti-Japanese Action. But the idea was doomed from the very outset - the French crossed the Chinese border a few days after the talks, leaving, however, a quantity of their weapons to the Vietnamese. The French forces were demoralised, the officers complained of the hardships of rural life, but most importantly, the former colonialists feared the Vietminh more than the Japanese, since the Vietminh's declared aim was to liberate Vietnam from any foreign domination. In refusing to co-operate with the Vietminh, the commander and his officers were following de Gaulle's instructions. In a policy-making speech at Brazzaville on February 8, 1945, the General mapped out France's intended strategy in Indochina: It was to be turned into a federation of five states - Laos, Cambodia, Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China, ruled by a French governor. Thus it was clear that French colonial policy - vis-à-vis Indochina and especially Vietnam remained virtually unchanged.

Vietnamese patriot Hồ Chí Minh had offered his friendship and cooperation to French patriot Charles de Gaulle. But the latter rejected the offer. These two great leaders turned out to be poles apart. For both men, national unity and national resurgence was the motive force of their political careers - yet they belonged to opposing camps. Whereas Hồ Chí Minh's patriotism was profoundly democratic, progressive, aimed at the future, de Gaulle's inevitably pushed him into the reactionary camp. It is hardly surprising that de Gaulle, an experienced politician and sophisticated diplomat, suddenly revealed such

shortsightedness in relation to Indochina which ultimately led to another long and bloody war in Vietnam, ending in France's humiliating defeat.

In the meantime, the Japanese propaganda machine was working full blast in a bid to secure Vietnamese popular support for the Japanese army. Japan's blitz takeover was presented as the liberation of Vietnam from French colonial rule. The next day after the coup, Radio Tokyo declared the colonial status of French Indochina null and void. That same evening, the Japanese proposed to Emperor Bảo Đại that he collaborate with them, and received his consent.

However, all this did not in the least change Vietnam's colonial status, since supreme power was now in the hands of the Japanese Commander-in-Chief, while Bảo Đại and his new Cabinet, headed by the historian Trần Trọng Kim, an agent of the Japanese secret police, were nothing but obedient servants. As early as March 30, Japanese Governor Minoda in Cochin China laid his cards on the table, declaring that Conchin China would henceforth not only be controlled, but actually governed, by the Japanese army. Indeed, in their official documents and in private conversations the new invaders referred to Indochina as Japan's overseas province.

Rhetoric about "Vietnam's newly found freedom" was accompanied by a torrent of propaganda in favour of an alliance with Japan. Throughout Vietnam, local compradores, reactionary landowners and various déclassé elements were encouraged to form numerous pro-Japanese parties and organisations, which called upon the people to join in the war for "the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" and recruited young Vietnamese for the Japanese army.

The Japanese high command made various overtures to the Vietminh and other patriotic organisations, who, however, had no illusions about the Japanese and understood very well that the takeover of March 9 was little more than replacing one colonial regime with another. In the Việt Bắc guerilla-controlled area, Japanese planes dropped leaflets and letters addressed to Vietminh leaders, offering them two options: either cooperation with Japan or death.

And finally, the Japanese Commander-in-Chief in Tonkin sent a message personally to Hồ Chí Minh, attempting to win him over by flattery. Addressed "to the esteemed Hồ Chí Minh, leader of the Vietminh, and our dear friend", it read: "We sincerely consider you a true patriot. The courage of your men is admirable. But you must recognise that by driving out the French we have helped your country to achieve independence.

"Furthermore, are we not neighbours? Are we not brothers within the same yellow race? Why can't we fight together for the glory of our two nations? Perhaps something stands between us? No, nothing stands between us. There is only misunderstanding, but that is easily remedied.

"We do not advise you to put your trust in America or China. They have honey on their lips, but poison in their hearts. We sincerely hope you will reconsider your policy and begin cooperating with us. We are ready to help you, and await your reply."

The Japanese never got a reply. The order issued by the Party's Central Committee and the Vietminh's General Committee was: "Answer the Japanese not with words, but with fire."

The attempts of the Japanese military to put on sheep's clothing did not fool anyone. It became more and more evident to ordinary Vietnamese that their country's "independence" was a fiction and that in fact Vietnam had been turned into a Japanese colony. The Vietnamese were outraged at the ways of the Japanese in their country. Requisitioning rice and other food for their troops, they soon exhausted the Vietnamese countryside, leaving the peasants with empty rice bowls. In many places, even seed rice was taken. To cover its chronic budget deficit, the Japanese command had the Bank of Indochina print enormous amounts of paper money. The Japanese occupation brought Vietnam widespread famine, epidemics, runaway inflation, mass unemployment, and economic devastation. In 1944-1945, some two million people died of hunger and disease in Bac Bo and northern Trung Bộ provinces. The situation in the country was becoming explosive, with the cities packed with hungry peasants fleeing from their ruined villages.

Amid the chaos, the Communist Party of Indochina showed itself to be the best organised and most efficient contingent of the patriotic

movement. On the day of the Japanese takeover, an extended meeting of the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee was held in the village of Đình Bảng, near Hanoi. Hồ Chí Minh, who was at Paqbo at the time, helped to prepare the meeting, although he was unable to attend it. The meeting produced a document entitled, "The Japanese-French Conflict and Our Plan of Action", which said that the Japanese invasion had brought about a profound political crisis, thus preparing the ground for a nationwide armed uprising and the takeover of political power by the people. The Japanese militarists were now the principal enemy of the nations of Indochina and it was against them that the people should turn all their fury. Yet one should also beware of the de Gaullists, who might attempt a comeback.

The meeting drew up instructions on setting up national salvation committees at plants, factories, mines, villages, army barracks, schools and colleges - wherever the Vietminh had a reliable base - to lead the people into battle as soon as the situation warranted. Simultaneously, the instructions said, a large -scale guerilla offensive should be mounted wherever conditions were ripe, so as to liberate district after district and establish revolutionary bases everywhere.

The resolution said that an allied landing in Indochina would, naturally, contribute to the success of the uprising, but that the Party and the revolutionary masses should not wait for such a landing, but rely on their own resources.

The Party Committee of the Cao-Bắc-Lạng district was among the first to launch a major guerilla offensive. The propaganda unit of the Liberation Army was ordered to descend from its base in the mountains and start an operation southward, in the direction of Hanoi. The move was successful from the outset. But April 1945, the revolutionary forces had gained control of a vast spanning several provinces north of Hanoi, dissolving the local Japanese-controlled government bodies and handing over power to the people's revolutionary committees.

Early in May, the revolutionary headquarters left Cao Bằng Province and trekked in the wake of the Liberation Army. Hồ Chí Minh took a

small fisherman's junk down the river and disembarked at the village of Tân Trào in Tuyên Quang Province.

The first few days he lived in the dinh, the "commune house", then moved to a shack that his comrades had built nearby, at the foot of the mountain. The dinh was surrounded by several age-old banyans. These tropical fig-trees with multiple trunks are typical for the Indochina jungle.

Their crowns formed an impenetrable roof over the shack, keeping it pleasantly cool. Behind the dinh was a wellspring with water so pure and transparent that local people called it Pearl Spring. Nearby flowed the serene river Dai, its banks covered with masses of wild sugar-cane.

Just as in Pác Bó, Hồ Chí Minh tried to blend in with the local people, but with little success. His appearance, the face of an intellectual, attracted attention, as did his habit of working late by the light of an oil-lamp, getting up with the birds, cleaning up in the house, watering his kitchengarden, gathering brushwood, and then waking up his companions - from these little details they concluded that he was a man of some authority.

Tân Trào old-timers still remember an amusing incident that happened soon after Hồ Chí Minh arrived there. One of the houses accommodated a small unit of the Liberation Army. Hồ Chí Minh dropped in and, seeing the place untidy, got after the commander. The latter, who did not know Hồ Chí Minh personally, did not take too kindly to the criticism.

"Who do you think you are? he snapped. "My superiors obviously know what I should do and when."

Unruffled, Hồ Chí Minh replied:

"Isn't it the bitter pill that cures? I'm an ordinary citizen, but I have a right to speak my mind. You're an army of the people, aren't you?"

The young officer had no answer for that. Next day he complained to a friend, who happened to be Hồ Chí Minh's bodyguard.

"An old man barged in yesterday and gave me a dressing-down for the way I keep the barracks."

His friend laughed.

"Oh you, it was Hồ Chí Minh," he said.

After Hồ Chí Minh and the Standing Bureau settled down at Tân Trào, the small village became the headquarters of the revolution, the heart of the New Vietnam. From here, Party liaison men communicated with guerilla bases throughout the country. Orders were issued to prepare for a nationwide uprising. Young patriots came from every corner of Vietnam to join the Vietminh. The roads and forest trails leading to Tân Trào became busier every day. It was as if people were going to an autumn fair.

The residents of Tân Trào, and in fact the whole liberated zone, began to feel how much the revolution was giving the common people with the introduction of universal suffrage, the election of a people's council, the opening of literacy courses, women getting equal rights with men, and the abolition of the onerous taxes. The population welcomed the advent of the new life: people joined the Liberation Army or volunteered as guides and porters of food for the Vietminh and the Party leaders.

On June 4, a conference of people's representatives of North Vietnam opened at Tân Trào on Hồ Chí Minh's initiative. He suggested that the six fully liberated provinces and parts of the two provinces bordering on the capital should be integrated and that this territory become the main base in the bid to overthrow the Japanese and the Bảo Đại puppet regime. The village of Tân Trào was chosen as the administrative centre of the liberated area, whose population exceeded one million.

Thus, only a few dozen miles away from the Japanese Commander-in-Chief's residence, a new, independent Vietnam was born under Vietminh control. The people's revolutionary committees that were set up in every town and village of the liberated area proceeded to put the Vietminh's political programme into practice. The Japanese tried several times to crush the people's revolutionary government in the liberated area, but failed.

Hồ Chí Minh was highly active, briefing his men, signing orders and instructions, conducting meetings, and looking into the preparations of

the armed uprising. His often repeated phrase was: "Now cadres decide everything." He demanded reliable communications with Central Committee members and Party activists in the plains, so as to coordinate their moves and be informed about developments in the capital and major cities. But despite his packed schedule, he found time to read political literature, write articles, and receive visitors. Delegates from faraway villages were seen more and more often - especially from ethnic minorities such as the Mường, Thổ, Nùng, Tày, and Mán, who wanted to know what was going on in the country and what their attitude should be. After talking to Hồ Chí Minh, they would cluck their tongues in admiration, and say:

"Looks like an ordinary peasant, but what a head he's got! With such men, the Vietnam is bound to win..."

At the height of all this activity, Hồ Chí Minh suddenly came down with malaria. "For several days he felt weak and feverish," Võ Nguyên Giáp recalled. "But he continued working. Every time I visited him and asked how he was, he would say: 'Carry on - I'm perfectly all right'.

"But he looked weak and haggard. Once I found him feverish and delirious, tossing and turning in bed. Medicines were extremely hard to come by. He had already taken a few quinine tablets, but they didn't seem to help. He was so weak he couldn't even sit up. But he called me to his side and mumbled: 'The time has come. It's now or never.'

"He spoke of things that worried him. At the time, I dared not even think those might be his last words. Only later, remembering that terrible night, I realised he must have felt his end was near and wanted us to know his last will. His only thought was for the revolution.

"He also spoke of the immediate tasks facing the Party: 'The revolution is on the upswing, but we must back it up ideologically. We need trustworthy Party cadres. There must be more guerilla bases.'

For several days, Hồ Chí Minh's condition was critical. His comrades were afraid for his life. Inhabitants of Tân Trào versed in folk medicine went deep into the jungle for medicinal herbs and roots for Hồ Chí Minh. One grey-bearded hunter caught a giant tortoise, mixed some of its blood with rice liquor, and had Hồ Chí Minh drink it. The fever subsided. Hồ was better and soon after recovered.

In early July, Hồ Chí Minh and the Standing Bureau decided to convene a Party conference or congress at Tân Trào, to be followed by a congress of Vietnam representatives which would set the date for a nationwide armed uprising. Messengers were sent to all parts of the country, and also to South China, to summon delegates. Yet the congress was greatly delayed: delegates were arriving much later than expected, with some of them arriving on foot by roundabout routes to avoid Japanese posts.

There was no time to lose, however. Fascism's crushing defeat was a painful blow for the Japanese. On August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and the Soviet Army mounted an offensive against the Kwangtung Army in Manchuria. On August 10, a joint session of the Japanese Cabinet and the Council of War attended by Emperor Hirohito opted for surrender. Japan sent messages to Stockholm and Berne confirming recognition of the Potsdam Agreements. The Japanese occupation authorities in Indochina were stunned. Thus, conditions were ripe in Vietnam for an all-out revolution, and the Party was quick to take advantage of the situation.

The Standing Bureau decided to open the National Party Conference at once, although some of the delegates were still en route. Hồ Chí Minh, despite his weakness after the bout of malaria, was actively involved in the preparations. On August 13, the conference was opened in Tân Trào under a shady banyan tree, which has since become a historical landmark.

At the height of the conference, a messenger brought news of Japan's unconditional surrender. This news was greeted by an outburst of applause, and cries of triumph. The moment marked the end of indecision and the beginning of action. There was only one way open now: a nationwide uprising, a takeover of power by the people, and - at long last - liberation from foreign tyranny.

The conference adopted the historic decision to launch a nationwide uprising, drive out the Japanese occupation forces, and proclaim the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. An Insurrection Committee was set up. Delegates from more remote areas were allowed to leave before the end of the conference so as to return and direct the uprising in their

localities. Messengers were sent to intercept delegates still on their way to Tân Trào and tell them the conference's decision and relay the order to return home.

Special importance at the conference was attached to swiftness of the takeover in the capital and the villages. The gist of the matter was that surrendering Japanese troops were being disarmed by Anglo-American troops all over Southeast Asia. And the French colonialists were planning to reinstate their colonial administration in Indochina. Therefore, the Vietnam patriots had to take over from the Japanese before the Allies moved in, and meet them as rightful masters of their country.

Following the Party Conference, a National Congress of People's Representatives was opened at Tân Trào on August 16, convened by the Vietminh's General Committee. Taking part were sixty representatives from all three parts of Vietnam - Bắc Kỳ, Trung Kỳ and Nam Kỳ - and from emigré organisations abroad. Hồ Chí Minh sat in the centre of the presiding party. Many of the delegates were seeing him for the first time and wondered who that dignified old man was with the emaciated face, greying beard and moustache, high forehead, and shining eyes. But when Hồ Chí Minh rose to address the Congress, whispers of "Why, it's Nguyễn Ái Quốc!" swept through the audience, followed by a burst of applause.

The Congress endorsed the Vietminh General Committee's decision to go ahead with the nationwide uprising and adopted a resolution On the Takeover of Power and Implementation of the Ten Basic Tasks of Vietminh's Political Programme. These tasks included: overthrowing the occupation government and founding a democratic republic, arming the entire nation, granting democratic rights to the population, carrying out democratic socio-economic reforms, and establishing friendly relations and cooperation with the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition and with all peoples fighting for national independence.

The Congress approved the future republic's national flag-a five-pointed gold star in the centre of a red banner - and formed an 11-man National Liberation Committee chaired by Hồ Chí Minh.

The newly-formed National Liberation Committee was sworn in right then and there, at the foot of the mountain. The delegates were

greeted by a symbolic deputation of the local commune: an old peasant, a woman representing an ethnic minority, and a small boy. After they delivered an emotional address and presented to the presidium token gifts from their commune, Ho Chi Minh suddenly turned to the audience and said:

"Comrades, do you know what this fine lad here does for a living?

Whereas in other countries children go to school and play all kinds of games, this nine-year-old tends buffalo every day and gathers brushwood. He has never held a book in his hands."

In the awed silence, Hồ Chí Minh's voice sounded stronger with every word:

"The aim of the National Liberation Committee and all the delegates is to win independence for our country - whatever the cost - so that our children would have enough to eat, would have enough to wear, and could go to school. That's the priority goal of our revolution. Let's never forget the oath that we've taken today and let's put it into practice in our everyday work."

The delegates held their breath. There were tears, too - tears of past suffering and tears of joy that the great changes would be happening at last.

Right after the congress, Hồ Chí Minh issued an appeal to the nation:

"Dear fellow-countrymen,

"Four years ago, I called on you to unite, for unity is strength and only strength will enable us to win back independence and freedom.

"At present, the Japanese army has collapsed. The National Salvation Movement has spread to the whole country. The League for the Independence of Vietnam has millions of members from all social strata: intellectuals, peasants, workers, businessmen, soldiers, and from all nationalities in the country: Việt, Thổ, Nùng, Mường, Mán and others.

"Recently, the Vietminh convened the Vietnam People's National Congress and appointed the National Liberation Committee to lead the entire nation in the resolute struggle for national independence...

"Dear fellow-countrymen!



"The decisive hour has struck for the destiny of our people. Let all of us stand up and rely on our own strength to free ourselves. Forward! Under the banner of the Vietminh, let us valiantly march forward!"

4

On August 16, the Liberation Army marched out of Tân Trào in the direction of the Red River delta and Hanoi, avoiding confrontation with fortified outposts of the Japanese. Everywhere in its wake power was taken over by the people. But several days before the Army reached Hanoi, events took place there that had a profound impact on the entire uprising.

The Bắc Kỳ Party Committee, having got news of Japan's surrender and acting on the Standing Bureau's instructions, took the decision to begin the uprising and seize power in the whole of North Vietnam and above all in Hanoi, where the Japanese Commander-in-Chief had his residence. It was important to foil attempts by the occupation authorities to hand over the reins to a puppet emperor government, occupy the capital's vital centres, win over sympathetic officials, and overwhelm pro-Japanese and other reactionary forces.

On August 16, as soon as the Japanese information agency Domei circulated in Hanoi the Japanese Emperor's rescript on Japan's surrender, the occupation authorities turned over power to Bảo Đại's governor, recalled its officials from the administration, and released the political detainees from the central prison.

In the morning of August 17, Hanoi's Imperial Palace became the venue of a gathering of the Tonkin Consultative Assembly, which was dominated by representatives of the pro-Japanese Đại Việt Party. The Assembly formed a national salvation committee and announced its decision to stage a mass demonstration of allegiance to Emperor Bảo Đại in the capital's central square in the afternoon. Yet no sooner had the agenda been announced than several young men representing the Democratic Party mounted the platform. One of them addressed the crowd, calling upon the people to rally round the Vietminh and fight for a truly independent Vietnam. A huge red flag with a five-pointed gold star rose above the crowd, followed by dozens of others. Bảo Đại's flag on the platform was torn down and replaced by the Vietminh flag.

The presidium was thrown into confusion and lost control of the meeting. The many-thousand crowd chanted: "Long live independent Vietnam!" and "Long live the Vietminh!"

"All day, on August 18, there were rallies and demonstrations under Vietminh slogans. Vietminh self-defence units set up posts in key locations of the city, stockpiled weapons and ammunition in the city's centre, established lines of communication, and prepared flags and banners.

Next morning at 10 a.m. a 100,000-strong rally was held in Theatre Square. Representatives of the city Party Committee and the Military Revolutionary Committee called on the people to throw down the Japanese occupation regime, establish a people's government, and proclaim the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At noon, the demonstrators arrived in force at the residence of the pro-Japanese governmental committee, disarmed the guards, entered the building, and sent the committee packing. Soon after, the insurgents occupied the barracks of the security troops and seized their arsenal. By nightfall the insurgents had gained control of virtually all the city's vital centres and arteries.

The revolutionary take-over in Hanoi paved the way for the revolution's rapid advance southward. On August 20, people's power was established in Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces. It was time to take over Huế, the residence of Emperor Bảo Đại and his puppet government. On August 21, the National Liberation Committee sent the Emperor a telegram proposing that he abdicate. Although the revolution had obviously won, Hồ Chí Minh and the Standing Bureau thought it tactically more advantageous to induce the Emperor to abdicate voluntarily - for that could cause a split among the enemies of the revolution - instead of unseating him by force.

On August 23, the people of Huế found their city spangled with red flags. Thousands took to the streets to demand transfer of power to the Vietminh. The insurgents occupied the building of the Trần Trọng Kim government.

The Emperor was in no hurry to reply to the abdication demand, though it was clear that the two-thousand-year-old monarchy had only hours left to live. As soon as Bảo Đại received the telegram, he asked

his aides to find out if National Liberation Committee Chairman Hồ Chí Minh and the legendary Nguyễn Ái Quốc were actually one and the same person. When next morning he was told it was one and the same person, he sighed dolefully:

"Then, I have no option but to abdicate."

On August 28, a delegation of the National Liberation Committee arrived at Huế to a rapturous welcome of the local people. On August 30, the abdication ceremony took place at the front gate of the Emperor's palace. The striped yellow flag of the monarchy was taken down and the red flag with the gold star was raised in its place. The Emperor, clad in his bedragoned yellow ceremonial robe, read his abdication statement.

His closing sentence drew cries of approval from the crowd:

"I prefer to become a citizen of a free country than to remain the Emperor of a country of slaves.

After that, Bảo Đại handed over to the people's representatives the symbols of royal power: the seal of solid gold weighing some twenty pounds and the sword of the dynasty with a handle of bright-green jade.

In the Orient, jade is believed to protect its owner against lightning. It had failed, however, to save the Emperor from the thunderstorm of revolution.

Things were not so easy for the revolution in Saigon, the country's third most important city, where pro-Japanese and other reactionary forces were still strong and where the Party organisation had been considerably weakened by repressions. On August 19, the Emperor's representative, Nguyễn Văn Sâm, arrived in Saigon and immediately started negotiations with the Japanese to secure the transfer of Japanese weapons to pro-Japanese parties and organisations in Vietnam. At the time, an armed force of several thousands belonging to the pro-Japanese religious sect Cao Đài was stationed in and around Saigon. There were also dozens of pro-Japanese groups in the city and its environs, which were in constant contact with the Japanese Command and were well supplied with weapons, food, and cash. The counter-revolutionary

forces pinned their hopes mainly on the United National Front, which had been established on August 14 and included, apart from numerous pro-Japanese parties, a strong Trotskyite group that called itself The Struggle, the Cao Đài sect and the Hoà Hảo sect.

On the side of the Communist Party of Indochina and the Vietminh were Saigon's proletarian organisations totalling 120,000 members, and also nearly 80,000 members of various youth organisations and soldiers from the disbanded Emperor's army. To win over organisations that were still vacillating, Vietminh representatives approached members of the United National Front and explained the political aims of the revolution.

As in Hanoi, the Vietminh decided to take advantage of a mass demonstration in support of governor Nguyễn Văn Sâm by the United National Front on August 25. The demonstrators carried the imperial yellow flag and posters for Vietnamese-Japanese friendship. Yet there was a sense of doom about the demonstration: news of the Vietminh's victories in Hanoi, Huế and other cities and of the Emperor's abdication, had paralysed its will. In this situation, the Vietminh proposed to all the patriotic organisations in Saigon to form a people's revolutionary committee. At 9 a.m. the newly-formed committee appeared before the demonstrators. The Vietminh had six seats out of nine in it, including that of the chairman. That was yet another victory for the August Revolution.

Bearing in mind the difficult situation in Saigon, the Party Central Committee sent a delegation of the Vietminh's General Committee under Hoàng Quốc Việt there on August 19. Here is how he remembers that trip: "We arrived in Saigon in the evening. The streets were flooded with light, which made the red flags look unnaturally bright. We were accommodated at Nam Bộ Palace, formerly the French governor's residence. We were tired from the journey and went to bed at once. But no sooner had we closed our eyes than someone knocked:

"A deputation has come to see you. They want to speak to you at once."

"The deputation consisted of representatives of a broad range of political parties and groups. They showered me with questions, one of which was:

"Who is Hồ Chí Minh? Is he really...?"

"Why, of course it's Nguyễn Ái Quốc," I answered. "Who else could our President be but the leader of the revolution who has dedicated all his life to his people's freedom and happiness?"

"A burst of applause and shouts of 'Long live the Provisional Government! Long live President Hồ Chí Minh!'"

"Bác Hồ's powerful authority, the universal prestige of our heroic red flag, which symbolised the blood of our fallen comrades, and the prestige of our Party and of the Vietminh had worked a miracle: the hearts of all those present suddenly began to beat in unison. It was this unity, unprecedented in strength and scope, that the nascent revolutionary government relied upon.

"That day I sent a cable to the North: 'We control twenty-one provinces. Campaign in Nam Bộ mainly as planned.'

"Hanoi cabled back: 'Declaration of independence September 2.'"

It took the Communist Party of Indochina, which at the time had some 5,000 members, a mere twelve days to score a nationwide victory, putting an end to over 80 years of colonial rule, as well as 2,000 years of monarchy.

Immediately after the victory in Hanoi, the Standing Bureau sent Lê Đức Thọ to the guerilla-controlled area to accompany Hồ Chí Minh to the capital. The most distinguished unit of the Liberation Army was ordered to escort him all the way from Tân Trào to Hanoi. The journey was a long one, partly down river and partly on foot. Some of the way, Hồ Chí Minh, who was still very weak after his bout of malaria, was carried in a litter

On August 26, Hồ Chí Minh and his retinue were met in the village of Gạ near Hanoi by the Insurrection Committee. Everyone noticed that Ho looked much better than he did at the Tân Trào Congress.

Having descended from the mountains, he looked like a typical delta peasant in his brown homespun outfit.

He embraced everyone.

Interrupting each other, the men started telling him about the uprisings in Hanoi, and other districts. Hồ's eyes sparkled as he listened, trying to control his excitement. Only when they said that the Standing Bureau considered it necessary to present the Provisional Government to the people as soon as possible, and that, as decided at the Tân Trào Congress, the National Liberation Committee would automatically become the government, Hồ Chí Minh said sheepishly:

"You mean - I'm already head of the government?"

5

Hanoi was decked out with hundreds of red flags and banners, and there was a general air of excitement. That was the first time Hồ Chí Minh had ever been to the capital. To get to Hanoi from his native Village of Lotuses, he had travelled across half the world for thirty years.

Just a few days before, Hanoi had presented a grisly sight. Emaciated corpses lay in the streets. They were taken out of town and buried in common graves. Fresh crowds of hungry peasants from nearby villages kept arriving. These live skeletons roamed the city streets like ghosts. Often, one would fall to the ground, never to rise again.

The famine was compounded by natural disaster. In August, the Red River burst its dams in several places, flooding six of the delta provinces, the bread-basket of North Vietnam. And as if this was not enough, cholera was taking a heavy toll.

Hanoi was in agony. Dubious individuals of every stripe emerged from their dark holes and marched through the streets, bawling pro-Japanese slogans. But the city was too busy to pay attention to them. Everywhere in the dark narrow lanes, on the shady boulevards, around the Lake of the Redeemed Sword - the black market reigned supreme. Literally everything was bought and sold. Burglars and bandits operated in broad daylight. Japanese policemen, who had replaced the French gendarmes, prowled the streets with long samurai swords at their sides. Not infrequently such a policeman would be seen beating up a pickpocket or thief.

The revolution came as a cleansing fire. In a matter of days, famine and violence were wiped out. The residents themselves started voluntarily establishing revolutionary order. Burglaries and muggings stopped. Even the crowd of beggars vanished.

Under cover of darkness, Hồ Chí Minh and his escort were taken to a secret address in a two-storey building, No.48 Hàng Ngang Street.

That was the oldest part of town, vividly described by Thạch Lam, one of the founders of the romantic school in Vietnamese literature. The neighbours had been told that relatives from the countryside would be coming for a visit. With their homespun peasant clothes and beards and moustaches, the "relatives" really did look like old men from the village.

Although the revolution had triumphed, the situation remained tense, so the precautions were not superfluous.

What happened the next morning had been dreaded and anticipated for a long time. The first units of Chiang Kaishek's troops appeared in Hanoi. Standing on the balcony, Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades watched the marching units. The Vietnamese Campaign had begun - with the blessing of Britain and the United States. Back in November 1943, on the eve of the Teheran Conference, Chiang Kaishek had told Roosevelt that he didn't think Indochina was ready for self-government and made it known that China could bring order to it in the event of Japan's defeat. At the Potsdam Conference, Britain and the U.S. decided that the Japanese in Vietnam would be disarmed by the British to the south of the 16th parallel and by the Chiang Kaishek forces to the north of it.

France was excluded from this operation. Vietnam's attitude was, of course, not taken into consideration.

However, the former masters of Indochina lost no time, either. No sooner had Chiang Kaishek's forces crossed the Vietnamese border than Hanoi's fashionable Metropole Hotel was occupied by French officers.

They arrived from China, Ceylon, Madagascar - wherever they happened to be when General de Gaulle issued his order to go to Indochina post-haste and start a French comeback.

Thus the situation demanded that the Party and National Liberation Committee act swiftly. No. 48 Hàng Ngang Street became the venue of

the Standing Bureau's first session in Hanoi. Chaired by Hồ Chí Minh, the session resolved that the Provisional Government should be proclaimed and sworn in as soon as possible, before Chiang Kaishek's forces took control of Hanoi. It was decided that the revolutionary committees in the northern provinces should be instructed to take advantage of the flood and to use the apparent absence of boats and ferries as an excuse to hold up the advance of Chiang Kaishek's main forces. It was also decided to summon to Hanoi the bulk of the Liberation Army, since the revolutionary armed forces stationed in the capital consisted of just a few small self-defence detachments and separate groups of Tonkin riflemen who had joined the revolution.

In the morning of August 26, the first two brigades of the Liberation Army arrived in Hanoi's suburbs. With a brass band in front of the troops crossed the two-kilometre-long Long Biên bridge across the Red River to the sounds of a revolutionary march. The men marched two abreast, carbines at the ready. In Hanoi, the columns were greeted by enthusiastic crowds. They marched straight to Theatre Square, where they held a parade watched by tens of thousands of residents.

The Provisional Government had experienced and reliable cadres, which were indispensable in setting up and protecting a revolutionary government.

On August 27, Hanoi's newspapers announced the formation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. It consisted of former National Liberation Committee members as decided by the Tân Trào Congress of people's representatives. Hồ Chí Minh was appointed chairman of the government and foreign minister. But the people immediately called him President.

At an NLC session, Hồ Chí Minh said the committee should publicise its policy of forming a broad-based national union and should call upon all patriotic parties and non-party members not in the Vietminh to take part in the new government. This measure, dictated by the need to expand the social and political base of the government, which the reactionary press had branded as Communist, was welcomed in political circles.

The committee asked Hồ Chí Minh to draw up the draft of a declaration on the victory of the revolution and the proclaiming of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Hồ Chí Minh worked on the text of the declaration the remainder of that day and the whole night in his dimly lit room in Hàng Ngang Street. The neighbours wondered what the old man was typing. None of them had any idea that they were witnessing the creation of a historic document.

When the draft was ready, Hồ Chí Minh called in the Standing Bureau members to learn their opinion of it. His face, still wan after the long illness, was radiant. As he himself later recalled, never before or after had he felt such strong emotions. He was to announce to his fellowcountrymen, and indeed to the whole world, that the goal the Vietnamese people had fought for over so many years, sacrificing their best sons and daughters, had finally been reached.

The Declaration of Independence expressed the will of millions of Vietnamese patriots, embodied the results of their 80-year struggle for national liberation and the victory of the August Revolution, which had brought the Vietnamese people freedom, independence, and national unity. According to Vietnamese historians, the Declaration of Independence embodied the most seminal thoughts from Hồ Chí Minh's writings, from Party documents, and from the diversity of manifestoes issued by various national personalities and outstanding revolutionaries. In a word, the Declaration is considered to be the most glorious page in Vietnamese history.

Amid all discussion of the draft, it suddenly occurred to someone that Hồ Chí Minh had nothing to wear before the nation the next day. His comrades started feverishly looking for some European suit that would match the occasion. Hồ Chí Minh chose a light-weight khaki semi-military suit, the kind he had got used to in Canton. From that day on, throughout the 24 years of his presidency, Hồ Chí Minh was always seen - at national celebrations, at receptions for high-ranking foreign officials, in his trips around Vietnam and to foreign countries - in the same modest outfit.

The morning of September 2 saw Hanoi dressed up in scarlet, the colour of the revolution. A veritable sea of flags, banners, paper lanterns, and flowers decked out the streets. The banners read in Vietnamese and French: Vietnam for the Vietnamese! No to French Colonialism!, Liberty or Death!, Long Live the Provisional Government!, Long Live President Hồ Chí Minh!, Welcome to the Allied Mission!

The streets were patrolled by self-defence units armed with lances and sabres and even ancient halberds and swords taken from temples. Thousands of peasants from nearby villages filled the streets. The peasant girls in bright national dress could be seen a long way off with their violet sashes and yellow turbans. Many held flowers. The demonstrators were joined by Buddhist monks and Catholic priests.

The September sun beat down on Hanoi's central square, which Hồ Chí Minh had proposed renaming Ba Đình Square in honour of the three villages in Thanh Hoá Province whose peasants had valiantly fought the colonialists in the last century. Over half a million residents assembled in the square and the adjoining streets to see and hear the country's new leaders. The name of Hồ Chí Minh had quickly become known to the whole nation. Here is how a Hanoi newspaper described the rally in Ba Đình Square:

"The people were waiting for the President. The people wanted to see the man who had changed his name hundreds of times, had had twelve different trades and professions, had been in prison many times, had been sentenced to death, and was presumed dead by his comrades. The people wanted to see not just the first president of the new republic, but a president who was so remarkable.

"Although he was not like the Emperor and would lack the traditional yellow robe and pearl-studded belt, many thought he would at least have impressive attire, a majestic manner, and dignified speech.

"But when the President appeared on the platform, we saw an ordinary man with a kind smile. He wore a weathered cork helmet, an ordinary ka-ki suit, and rubber sandals.

"When the President began reading the Declaration of Independence, his powerful voice reminded everyone of the guerilla camps in the faraway jungle:

"The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bảo Đại has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them, and have won independence for the Fatherland..."

"We, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all international obligations that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam, and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland.

"We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Teheran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.

"A people who have courageously opposed French domination for more than eighty years, a people who have fought side by side with the Allies against the fascists... such a people must be free and independent.

"For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country - and in fact it is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilise all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty."

"Applause engulfed the square. The President looked up from the text and said:

"Countrymen, can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"This simple question finally swept away anything that might still have stood between the President and the people. All were suddenly filled with love and admiration for the president. They saw that he was just like them, a warm and sincere human being, who had a boundless love for his nation. And thousands of voices replied to the President, 'Yes!'"

The victorious August Revolution of 1945, which formed the first worker-and-peasant state in Southeast Asia ushered in a new era for the

Vietnamese people. It peaked Vietnam's eighty years of struggle against colonialism, marking the beginning of the collapse of the colonial system in Southeast Asia. The August Revolution went down in history as a striking example of revolutionary fervour and creativity under the leadership of a Marxist-Leninist party. President Hồ Chí Minh later wrote:

"The triumph of the August Revolution in Vietnam once again confirmed the correctness of Marxist-Leninist theory on the national and colonial questions, the correctness of the path mapped out by the October Socialist Revolution of 1917. It proved that in order to be victorious the national revolution must:

- rely on a broad national, anti-imperialist front;
- resolve the peasant problem;
- possess a People's Army;
- enjoy fraternal support from the people and proletariat in other countries;
- follow the guidance of the working-class party.

"Not only the toiling classes and people of Vietnam but also the oppressed people in other countries may be proud that this is the first time in the revolutionary history of colonial and semi-colonial peoples in which a Party, only fifteen years of age, has led the revolution to success and seized power throughout the country.

"The victory of the August Revolution of 1945 was a victory for Leninism: the first national liberation revolution that ever swept a colony came out triumphant."

Hồ Chí Minh always emphasised the tremendous contribution of the October Socialist Revolution and of the Soviet Union to the triumph of the August Revolution in Vietnam: "The torch of Marxism- Leninism and the experience of the October Revolution in Russia has illuminated the road of revolution in Vietnam as well. The Vietnamese people will for ever be grateful to the Soviet Union which has defeated the fascists in Europe and in Asia and contributed in a decisive manner to the cause of the liberation of mankind from slavery and helped bring our August Revolution to victory."

## THE FIRST STEPS

*Hồ Chí Minh is the symbol of Communist  
wisdom in Asia*

Rodney Arismendi

1

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam came into the world in a critical situation. The already backward Vietnamese economy had been completely ruined by the Japanese. Famine and epidemics were taking a heavy toll. The young republic was threatened from abroad by numerous enemies. The Party's ability to retain power was a life-and-death matter for the Vietnamese revolution. Gold is tested by fire, a man's strength by adversity, says a Vietnamese proverb. It was in those difficult days that Hồ Chí Minh demonstrated the full extent of his talent as a leader. He needed great self-control and tactical flexibility to steer Vietnam past numerous rocks. His most reliable compass was Lenin's experience, in which he found answers to many questions. He often reminded his closest associates of Lenin's warning: it is not easy to take power, to retain it is still more difficult.

The next day after the proclaiming of the republic the ministers of the Provisional Revolutionary Government assembled for their first meeting in the palace in Tonkin. Its wrought-iron gates, which had never before admitted a commoner, were now opened wide to the people's elected representatives. When Hồ Chí Minh entered the reception hall, everyone present thought he would address the Cabinet: "comrades", citizens", or perhaps "gentlemen". Hồ Chí Minh smiled and said:

"Good morning, my dear friends!"

The President's unusual greeting immediately produced a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, showing perhaps more than anything else that new times had come.

Hồ Chí Minh's speech was brief and to the point:

"For eighty years, our nation lived under the French colonialists in slavery, exploitation, ignorance, deprived of the most basic human

rights. It is not surprising, therefore, that neither you nor I have much experience in running a country.

"But that should not dishearten us. We will work hard and we will learn. There will be mistakes, of course. But we will have enough courage to correct them. In the end, I am confident, we will succeed, because we are moved by love of our country and our people.

"Now, what are the most urgent problems facing our government?

First, the famine. It is the most shameful legacy left by the French and Japanese. More than two million Vietnamese have already died of hunger. How shall we save the rest? I suggest we mount a nationwide foodproduction drive. All arable land should be planted with vegetables, sweet potatoes, manioc, and maize. But since a new harvest can be taken in only in three or four months, we must immediately start collecting rice to aid the famine-stricken areas. Let all my countrymen - all I'll be the first to do so - give up a meal once every ten days. The saved rice will go to the poor.

"Second, illiteracy. One of the ways the French held our people in slavery was by keeping them ignorant. An ignorant nation is a weak nation. Yet it takes only three months to learn to read and write our native Vietnamese. I suggest launching a mass literacy campaign right now.

"Third, we should hold general elections as soon as possible so as to guarantee the people's democratic rights. All citizens should have the right to elect and be elected irrespective of property status, religion or ethnic background.

"Fourth, in trying to weaken our people, the colonialists taught them the use of alcohol and opium, and corrupted them with other vices. We must educate a new type of man who would be devoted to his country. I suggest an education campaign to make all our people hardworking, thrifty, honest and truthful, and to root out the disgraceful leftovers of colonialism.

"Fifth, I suggest abolishing the three most humiliating taxes: the poll tax, the market tax, and the river-crossing tax. Opium smoking should be banned.

"Sixth, we should proclaim freedom of religious worship."



In a matter of months, Hồ Chí Minh's programme brought the first tangible results. Millions responded to his call to defeat the famine. People ploughed up every free patch of land, planting vegetables even in parks and public gardens. Every family saved rice for victims of the famine. By the end of the year, the nation brought in a good harvest of sweet potatoes, maize, and soybeans, while the following spring and summer there was a bumper crop of rice. Hunger retreated.

A package of social and economic measures gave a boost to the economy. An eight-hour working day was introduced at factories, and workers were guaranteed their rights. The agrarian reform was temporarily removed from the agenda, since it would have aggravated class antagonisms in the countryside, undermining national unity, which Vietnam needed so badly in the face of the threat from its enemies abroad. Certain important measures were taken, however: land which had belonged to the French colonialists and Vietnamese collaborators was confiscated and distributed on a temporary basis among landless peasants. The ground rent for peasants was cut by 25 per cent.

The country's financial system was in a shambles. The revolution had inherited from the monarchy the ridiculous sum of one million paper piastres, which rampant inflation reduced into a heap of worthless paper. The French-owned Bank of Indochina (the revolution could do nothing against that stronghold of international big business) sabotaged the Provisional Government's instructions and did its best to throw Vietnam's finances into still worse disarray. The Chinese occupation authorities also contributed to the mess by paying for all transactions with their depreciated paper yuan despite the Vietnamese government's protests.

The DRV government started by issuing a decree on the establishment of an independence fund. Hồ Chí Minh asked the nation to contribute gold and other valuables to it. The whole nation responded. Married couples turned over their wedding rings, women gave up earrings and bracelets inherited from their grandmothers, monks brought articles of worship. Over a short period, population had donated 20,000,000 piastres and 370 kilograms of gold. This enabled the government to lay the foundations of an independent national

economy, issuing a new currency - the dong - first in Trung Bộ Province and later in the whole country.

The government issued a decree on compulsory free instruction in the Quốc Ngữ alphabet. The Public Education Board set up over 70,000 literacy courses in town and country.

People learned to read and write at home, at work, and while travelling. Young and old studied side by side. In one year, two and a half million people learned to read and write.

A new political structure was gradually taking shape. The old administrative machine was dismantled and the institution of mandarins abolished. A week after the DRV was proclaimed, the government announced that elections would be held to a National Assembly within several months. Newspapers published the draft Constitution and called upon the population to submit proposals. People's Committees were elected by a direct vote at commune, district and provincial level; these committees were the foundation of people's power and did much to consolidate national unity and the worker-peasant alliance.

Hồ Chí Minh personally went into every matter concerning the new administrative bodies, seeing to it that a healthy relationship should develop from the very outset between local government and the people. In a message to provincial, district and commune committees, he warned the people's representatives to beware of the ways of the old administration. "We must bear in mind," he wrote, "that all Government organs, from the central to the village level, are the people's servants, that is to say they must work in the public interest... We have now founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. But without happiness and freedom for the people, independence would be meaningless... We must love the people: they will love and respect us."

Hồ Chí Minh constantly returned to this topic at meetings of the Standing Bureau and in conversations with Party activists.

"Don't turn into bureaucrats," he warned them. "Otherwise you can lose the support of the people. Your words should always be translated into action. The best way to lead the people is to set a good example."

Every day, Hồ Chí Minh had to receive numerous visitors. Some of them were foreigners - arrogant Chiang Kaishek officers, who were constantly, demanding something, representatives of the U.S. and British missions, and foreign journalists. But most often they were people's deputations from all parts of Vietnam. The number of visitors was becoming so great that one minister suggested to the President that it should be restricted. Hồ Chí Minh disagreed.

"Our government has just been set up," he said. "so, naturally, our citizens have a lot of questions. Besides, such personal contact is an excellent opportunity to explain our policies to people. How can we afford to have people think that we are as inaccessible as the mandarins used to be?"

2

The threat of imperialist invasion continued to grow. By mid-September, Chiang Kaishek's occupation troops in North Vietnam numbered 200,000. Obviously, the purpose of such a big army was not confined to just disarming the surrendering Japanese troops. The Chiang Kaishek government had decided the time was ripe to annex Vietnam, and to start by installing a puppet regime to the north of the 16th parallel. A puppet government was to be made up of officials of the Revolutionary League and National Party. To help implement its policies in Vietnam, the Chiang Kaishek administration had secretly enlisted the services of hundreds of déclassé Vietnamese,

These mercenaries disarmed local Vietnamese self-defence units and disbanded People's Revolutionary Committees.

On September 11, Chinese Commander-in-Chief Lư Hán arrived in Hanoi. Next morning, the houses and lamp posts were covered with posters announcing new regulations. The Chiang Kaishek authorities pretended there was no government in Hanoi and that, therefore, they had to take over and restore order.

In South Vietnam, the situation was just as threatening. On September 6, the first British units entered Saigon. The British Command refused to recognise the Vietnamese authorities and demanded

that the Liberation Army should disarm. Soon after, French expeditionary units started arriving in British transport planes and vessels. Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, formerly a Catholic monk named Father Louis and now de Gaulle's close associate, was appointed France's High Commissioner for Indochina and Commander-in-Chief of all the French forces in the Far East.

In the early hours of September 23, the French launched an offensive in South Vietnam, first in Saigon and then in several other towns in the Mekong River delta. The city organisations of the Party and the Vietminh had managed to move out to rural areas and proceeded to set up guerilla bases. In Saigon, street battles went on for several days. On September 26, Saigon patriots heard Hồ Chí Minh's radio address from Hanoi:

"Dear southern compatriots! Our newly-won independence is jeopardised by the foreign invasion... 'I believe and our compatriots throughout the country believe in the staunch patriotism of the southerners. We should remember... 'I'd rather die as a free man than live as a slave...' The Government and our compatriots throughout the country will do their utmost to support the fighters and people who are making sacrifices in their struggle to maintain national independence... Victory will definitely be ours because we have the united nations behind us. We are sure to win the battle because our struggle is just..."

The Party's Central Committee decided to send revolutionary units to Nam Bộ. Following the Vietminh General Committee's appeal, people formed volunteer units throughout the country. Liberation Army units and many Party activists were sent south, to Nam Bộ.

The defence of Saigon suddenly acquired a new meaning. Someone called upon the fighters to "defend Hồ Chí Minh's city", and this phrase soon became a slogan that drew more and more volunteers into the Liberation Army. Gradually the people began to call Saigon Hồ Chí Minh City, and thirty years later this became its official name.

An extraordinary Party conference of the Nam Bộ organisation was convened in the guerilla-controlled area near the town of Mỹ Tho in the Mekong River delta, attended by Lê Duẩn, who had just returned from penal servitude, Tôn Đức Thắng, and Hoàng Quốc Việt. They

decided to set up a people's army with the help of rural democratic People's Committees and fight a large-scale war of resistance.

Early in October, Hanoi learned that a U.S. Air Force plane was heading for Gia Lâm airfield. On board were Chungking War Minister Hồ Anh Tấn and General McClure, commander of U.S. forces in China. Nothing was said of the purpose of their visit. Hồ Chí Minh ordered a mass demonstration in Hanoi to show the nation's resolve to defend the revolution. Nearly 300,000 Hanoi residents marched in orderly columns past the former residence of the French Governor-General, chanting: "Vietnam for the Vietnamese! Long live the Provisional Government! Long live the Vietminh! Long live President Hồ Chí Minh!"

Before flying to Hanoi, Minister Hồ Anh Tấn had been instructed in Chungking to get rid of the Communists in Hanoi and to arrest Hồ Chí Minh. After arriving in Vietnam, however, he saw that his 200,000 troops were not enough. He, therefore, ordered Lư Hán to continue with the policy of gradually replacing Vietminh representatives in the revolutionary administration with his own men.

Especially active among Lư Hán's men was Revolutionary League leader Nguyễn Hải Thần. He declared he had the backing of the Chinese army and that if the Vietminh did not take him and his accomplices into the Vietnamese government, he would stage a coup. This white-haired astrologer went around Hanoi in his limousine, two bodyguards with a machine gun on its top, and two others on the running boards with submachine guns.

Much more sophisticated were the leaders of the Nationalist Party. They started a newspaper with blatant anti-Vietnamese propaganda.

At the entrance to its editorial office in Quán Thánh Street, close to one of Hanoi's main Buddhist temples, a powerful loudspeaker spread lies about Hồ Chí Minh's government day and night. Nationalist Party agents murdered Vietminh activists, abducted government officials, and raided financial offices.

Party members demanded that the government crack down on Chiang Kaishek's fifth column. At a meeting in the Presidential Palace, one of Hồ Chí Minh's bodyguards stood up and said:

"How long are we to endure these bandits? Give us your orders, Comrade President, and we will wipe them out."

Hồ Chí Minh smiled and said:

"Imagine that this room was invaded by mice. What would you do? Would you throw stones at them, or would you try to catch them?"

"Well, it's stupid to throw stones in a room," the young man answered sheepishly.

"It's the same in politics. We should be cautious and think of the possible repercussions. Pull at a liana, and you may rouse the whole jungle."

After the revolution, Hồ Chí Minh was officially the President and also chairman of the Vietminh's General Committee. But the Party was not openly mentioned anywhere. On November 11, 1945, the Central Committee announced that the Party was being disbanded. In fact, however, it went underground. Such a move was necessary to consolidate people's power on a patriotic, national basis and deprive its enemies of their weapon of anti-communism. Although Party activists held many government posts, officially they were Vietminh representatives. It was important to conceal Party activists from enemy eyes in that difficult period and conserve forces for a possible underground struggle. Moreover, since the general public had been exposed to anti-communist propaganda for so many years, advertising the Party's leading role would alienate. Vietminh supporters among the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois elements in town and countryside. Finally, the Party had to take into account Vietnam's hostile surroundings.

The Vietnamese revolution was in a critical situation. At the time, it was unable to establish direct contact with the Soviet Union, while the people's revolution in China was still some four years away. At all costs, the Vietnamese Republic had to breach the imperialist-inspired political and diplomatic blockade. But how was that possible if the North of the country was occupied by Chiang Kaishek's troops and the South by a French expeditionary force?

The Western media contributed to the hostile atmosphere around Vietnam by spreading lies about its revolutionary government. Besides, it was no longer a secret for the West that Hồ Chí Minh was the new name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, head of the Communist Party of Indochina

and an old-time member of the Comintern. The imperialist West boycotted the Vietnamese government and all its moves. U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall wrote to the American Ambassador in Paris:

"Hô Chí Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by a philosophy and political organisation directed from and controlled by the Kremlin."

The Standing Bureau was aware that Vietnam could not fight all its enemies at once and, therefore, had to concentrate its war effort on one front. After lengthy discussion, the Party concluded that the French were the greatest threat. "Sooner or later," the Central Committee pointed out, "the French will strike a bargain with Chungking on Indochina's return to French rule if France promises to respect Chinese interests elsewhere."

Therefore, it was decided to launch an all-out war of resistance in the South against the French, while avoiding an open confrontation with Chiang Kaishek's forces in the North, and doing everything possible to placate them.

3

Elections to the DRV's National Assembly were drawing near. The Chiang Kaishek people and their stooges in the Revolutionary League and Nationalist Party realised that they stood little chance at elections, and resolved to wreck the election campaign. Late in December, General Hsiao Wen, Chiang Kaishek's political representative in North Vietnam, demanded that Hô Chí Minh reorganise the Provisional Government before the elections, replacing Communist ministers with men from the Revolutionary League and Nationalist Party, giving these parties 80 per cent of the seats in the future National Assembly, and also replacing the country's red flag with the gold star, which "looked too much like the Comintern's".

The leaders of the two pro-Chinese parties went even further, claiming the posts of President and Prime Minister and seven of the more important Cabinet portfolios, including that of internal affairs, defence, and economy.

Negotiations produced a compromise: the Provisional Government would become a coalition government consisting of the Vietminh, the Revolutionary League and the Nationalist Party; Nguyễn Hải Thần of the Revolutionary League would be Vice-President, while Nguyễn Tường Tam would be Foreign Minister; both parties would be guaranteed a substantial number of seats in the National Assembly; for their part, both parties would agree to hold national elections as soon as possible, combine all the country's armed forces in a single army, and cease the confrontation.

However, by far not everyone in the Communist Party and the Vietminh were happy with this arrangement. Many were especially outraged that a man who had forgotten his native tongue and had done a lot to undermine the revolution would be the country's Vice-President.

Some expressed their dismay to Hô Chí Minh. Tired, his eyes puffy from constant lack of sleep, Hô Chí Minh said:

"Manure is not very clean, is it? Yet if used as a fertiliser, it helps to get a good crop. So shouldn't one use it?"

In general, Hô Chí Minh had to spend much time and energy in cooling hotheads in the Party. Some young activists overrated the strength of the revolution and often violated Party instructions on placating the Chiang Kaishek people and used force against their provocations.

The resulting unnecessary armed clashes threatened to undermine the already precarious situation. Hô Chí Minh had to use all his experience, authority and flexibility to settle such conflicts. He would explain:

"Before filling up on herring, think of the thirst you will suffer... I beg you, keep your temper, don't respond to provocations. Patience is not necessarily obedience - it is also a form of struggle. We should be as flexible and cunning as King Ho Chian." (1)

1. In the 5th-3rd centuries B.C., China consisted of several warring kingdoms, King Ho Chian of the kingdom of Yue was defeated by the neighbouring U Kingdom, captured, and humiliated by the conquerors. He never lost his temper, however, but secretly plotted revenge. His patience helped him survive. When a chance presented itself, he escaped, rallied his forces, and defeated the U Kingdom.

In his dealings with Chinese generals, Hồ Chí Minh was greatly aided by the fact that he had lived in China long and had a good knowledge of the post-Sun Yatsen Kuomintang. The generals in charge of the divisions occupying Vietnam belonged to different Kuomintang factions and were squabbling constantly. Although they were all rabidly anti-communist, their attitude to Hồ Chí Minh's government differed.

It often happened that one general would spite the other by complying with certain Vietnamese requests. There were even those who for one reason or another threatened Chiang Kaishek's own position and the latter used the Vietnamese campaign as a pretext to keep them far away.

Hồ Chí Minh explained all these subtleties to his associates:

"This is Chiang Kaishek's time tested tactic - to force tigers out of their den. Relations are not so simple in the enemy camp, and we must take advantage of this."

The best relationship developed between Hồ Chí Minh and Lư Hán.

He was the only Chinese general who respectfully called Hồ Chí Minh, Chairman Hồ. The two men often discussed political matters over a cup of tea, and Hồ Chí Minh explained the goal and essence of the Vietnamese revolution. At times, he would use the opportunity to censure the anti-Vietnamese actions of the Chinese representatives.

Võ Nguyên Giáp, who was Minister of Defence in the Provisional Government, recalled: "For Uncle Hồ, revolutionary truth was concrete... Uncle Hồ had an extraordinary flair for detecting the thoughts and feelings of the enemy. With great shrewdness, he worked out a concrete treatment for each type and each individual.

"His own personality embodied the strength of our just cause... Even his enemies, men who were notoriously anticommunist, showed respect for him. They seemed to lose some of their aggressiveness when they were in his presence.

"Many foreigners have dwelt upon the extraordinary magnetic charm of President Hồ Chí Minh. Some think that it was due to his wide mental grasp, his keen intelligence, his exceptional will and energy.

Others attribute it to his modesty and simplicity, his optimism and confidence, his forthrightness and candour, his wisdom and kindness...

All that was true. But the dominating feature in President Hồ's personality was his selflessness, his desire, his only and utmost desire - to bring about the greatest happiness for his people and country. A life without the least concern for his private interests created the impression of extreme purity.

Inspired by an immense love for his fellow human beings, even when applying political tactics, Uncle Hồ always wanted to arouse a person's conscience, even when in some people there hardly any of it was left.

The political and moral strength of our people, together with the clever application of the Party's and President Hồ's line and tactics, paralysed the aggressive will of the Chiang militarists who had close to 200,000 troops under their command."

4

To defend the revolution, Hồ Chí Minh's government needed the people's mandate, that is, to be elected and supported by the people.

The *modus vivendi* reached with the leaders of the pro-Chinese parties finally cleared the way for general elections, and they were officially scheduled for January 6, 1946.

Long before the elections, the government was flooded with letters from plants, factories, rural communes and administrative committees begging Hồ Chí Minh not to stand for election in any one town or province, so that the whole nation could vote for him. Hồ Chí Minh had to write an open letter to his countrymen: "... I am an ordinary citizen of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and, therefore, have no right to go against the established electoral procedure. I am standing for election in Hanoi, so I cannot stand anywhere else. I thank all my countrymen for their love and commitment to me and ask them to do their civic duty at the coming elections."

In Nam Bộ and southern Trung Bộ provinces the elections were held to the accompaniment of rifle and gun fire. In French-occupied Saigon,

Mỹ Tho and other cities, ballot boxes were quietly carried from door to door. In the towns of Tanam and Khanhluu, French planes bombed polling stations.

Yet despite the peril, over 90 per cent of eligible voters came to the polls. Hồ Chí Minh got 98.6 per cent of the vote. Considering the unfavourable correlation of class forces and the energetic sabotage and propaganda campaign conducted by assorted pro-Chiang Kaishek, pro-Japanese, pro-French, and other reactionary elements, this was clearly an outstanding success.

The Vietminh front got the overwhelming majority of votes. Communists, who officially ran as independents, got 105 seats in the National Assembly. As agreed, approximately 70 seats went to the pro-Chinese parties and other nationalist bourgeois groupings. With the Vietminh's consent, the National Assembly included ex-Emperor Bảo Đại under his original name of Vĩnh Thụy, who had previously received honorary post of Adviser to the Provisional Government.

The Tet holiday that year was the first after the revolution. According to the Lunar Calendar, the turbulent Year of the Monkey was giving way to the Year of the Hen, with which the Vietnamese connected so many hopes. Hồ Chí Minh spoke on the radio. He concluded his address with a quatrain:

*When war will end in victory  
We'll raise a cup of wine.  
Though many near ones are gone,  
We'll celebrate this new and peaceful Tet.*

From that day on, the President's address to the nation with a Tet verse became a tradition.

Tet is Vietnam's best-liked holiday, and is usually celebrated in the family. As if by magic, Hanoi changed. In every home, joss sticks were lit in front of the family altar to celebrate national independence. Heralds of spring appeared on the windowsills: twigs of peach trees with purple flowers in bloom and dwarf tangerine bushes with tiny yellow fruit. Paper lanterns and flowers decorated the front doors.

Sayings with wishes of happiness and prosperity were inscribed on the walls. For the first time in history, people did not have to think of gifts for the local government official. After a meal in honour of the family's ancestors, they sat about and talked, but their conversation now centred on the revolution, the new-found independence, and the new life.

Like all other residents of Hanoi, Trần Duy Hưng, chairman of the capital's administrative committee, was spending that evening with his family. Suddenly there was a knock on the door, and Hồ Chí Minh appeared. He wanted to make a tour of the city and asked Trần Duy Hưng to accompany him.

The streets were deserted. The air was thick with the pungent smell of firecrackers. The car entered the old part of town. Hồ Chí Minh asked the driver to stop in the workers' quarter, the Wooden Sticks Lane, got out, knocked on the door of the nearest shanty, and entered. A large family was seated round a table. For a moment there was silence. Hồ Chí Minh greeted everyone. In the corner of the backyard, a black cauldron was steaming, in which rice pies wrapped in banana leaves were being cooked. Hồ Chí Minh wished everyone a prosperous year. At that moment, someone exclaimed: "It's the President!" For them it was like a wonderful dream: the nation's leader chatting with them like an equal.

Hồ Chí Minh visited several more workers' families, and closer to midnight, accompanied by his bodyguard, merged, unnoticed, with the festive crowd on the shore of the Lake of the Redeemed Sword. Firecrackers were bursting everywhere. A grey cap drawn over his forehead and a woollen scarf covering his mouth to avoid unwanted attention, Hồ Chí Minh followed a group of youngsters, who were picking spring leaves off the trees for luck, and, crossing the hunchbacked stone bridge, entered the Jade Pagoda in the middle of the lake. According to Vietnamese tradition, anyone who wants to be happy in the coming year must visit the ancient pagoda during Tet and light a stick of incense.

For so many years, Hồ Chí Minh had wanted to celebrate Tet in his native Vietnam. When that hour finally came, he made a point of celebrating it together with his people, on the shores of the Lake of the Redeemed Sword, as the people of Hanoi had done for centuries.

## BELEAGUERED

1

On March 2, 1946, the National Assembly opened its first session at the Grand Theatre in Hanoi. The day before, Hồ Chí Minh had been working late, chain-smoking as usual. Since he had become President, with all the responsibilities this implied, he had smoked two, even three packs daily. Now, too, driving down the Street of Necklaces past the Lake of the Redeemed Sword towards Theatre Square, he was smoking.

His tired face was calm, and only his bright eyes showed that his mind was at work. The President's eyes had been much talked about ever since he took office. Even in portraits they looked different from those of other people.

The National Assembly had delegated two deputies - the oldest of them, Ngô Tử Hạ, and the youngest, Nguyễn Đình Thi, who later became a celebrated writer - to meet the President at the state entrance to the theatre. Hồ Chí Minh smiled broadly as he bowed to the people in the hall and then mounted the platform of the presiding committee, accompanied by the members of the government.

The seat of the Vice-President was empty. Nguyễn Hải Thần had earlier announced that he would not be able to take part in the session because of illness. It was rumoured, however, not without irony, that he was afraid to take part in the debate for he was in poor command of his native tongue.

Also absent were many delegates from Nam Bộ who could not make their way to the North across the frontline.

Hồ Chí Minh came up to the microphone, visibly excited:

"This is the first forum of our people's true representatives in the history of Vietnam, the result of a long and hard struggle of many generations of Vietnamese, a struggle that has brought casualties and suffering. Our meeting is also the result of the cohesion of all of our fellow-countrymen, old and young, people of different religions and different nationalities. Acting in concert, our countrymen have built a firm monolith that can stand up to any dangers and any losses."

Hồ Chí Minh spoke of the government's proposal to expand the National Assembly by 70 people - representatives of the National Party and the Revolutionary League. The deputies welcomed this proposal. Thereupon, the representatives of those two parties entered and filled the empty seats. While the session had still been in preparation, some comrades voiced the idea of dividing the seats in the pit into two halves - the right and the left - and accommodating the new 70 deputies on the right side. But Hồ Chí Minh was strongly opposed to this senseless imitation of the Convent in the days of the French Revolution. In the face of the growing outside threat he sought to buttress national unity. The need to evade anything that might foment dissent and deepen the split between the Vietminh and the other organisations was stressed in all his speeches and newspaper articles. He also spoke about national unity from the rostrum of the first session of the National Assembly.

"Our National Assembly symbolises our national unity. All the political parties of our country have their representatives here. There are also many non-party people, representatives of women's organisations and of ethnic minorities. Therefore, I firmly believe that each deputy represents not merely some individual party or organisation, but the whole of our Vietnamese nation."

The National Assembly session was the first public meeting at which Hồ Chí Minh met the elected representatives of the people after the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It took place in the presence of numerous guests - journalists and representatives of public organisations. All of them could see Hồ Chí Minh's extraordinary popularity. His simple manners, his prepossessing smile, his persuasive manner of speaking, free from affectation and gesticulation, created an atmosphere of fraternity and unity. And that was not easy to achieve in such a mixed audience made up of people different political persuasions, including representatives of reactionary parties. The proposal of one of the deputies that the National Assembly should, on behalf of the nation, thank the Provisional Government for what it had done, and commend President Hồ Chí Minh as leader of the new Vietnam, was met with cheers.

The participants in the session unanimously adopted a proposal to appoint President Hồ Chí Minh head of government and appoint the



absent representative of the Revolutionary League, Nguyễn Hải Thần, his deputy. After Hồ Chí Minh was sworn in as President and Prime Minister, the National Assembly endorsed the list of members of the coalition government he had submitted for approval. The National Assembly adopted a special resolution on vesting the government with extensive powers in face of the complicated military and political situation. The executive functions of the supreme body of state in the period between the National Assembly sessions were to be discharged by a specially elected Standing Committee. All principal executive posts on the committee were filled by members of the Vietminh.

The first session of the National Assembly showed, as Hồ Chí Minh had predicted, that in spite of the considerable concessions to right-wing parties, the main commanding posts in the state apparatus were firmly under Vietminh control, and the key executive jobs were filled by Communists with years of experience.

2

The patient tactics of Hồ Chí Minh and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Indochina gradually reduced the threat coming from Chungking. Chiang Kaishek, who apparently had his hands full at home, was inclined to withdraw his troops from North Vietnam. At the same time, the military threat from the French colonialists was growing appreciably.

In an effort to pull out of the bothersome Indochina affair, Britain, which was increasingly under pressure from her French ally, delegated, late in January 1946, her "authority" in Indochina to France and withdrew her troops from South Vietnam.

The United States had by then also modified its position. After Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death, President Harry Truman announced his consent to the return of the French army and the French administration to Indochina. The Americans made it clear to Chiang Kaishek, who was fully dependent on them militarily, that he should let a French expeditionary corps replace the Chinese troops in North Vietnam, although the disarmament of the Japanese troops that had

surrendered in Indochina (the formal reason for the French occupation of that country) had long been completed.

On February 28, 1946, reports came from Chungking that the French and the Chinese had signed an agreement on the withdrawal of Chinese troops from Vietnam and their replacement by French troops before March 31, 1946. In compensation, the Chinese persuaded the French to relinquish their privileges in China under the unequal treaties, and regained control over the whole of Kwangchowan. They also secured free passage for goods to China through Vietnam, the use of the so-called free zone in Hải Phòng and extensive privileges for ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam.

The agreement between Chiang Kaishek and the French put the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in a very difficult position. Hồ Chí Minh and his associates realised that France had been given what seemed a legitimate pretext for aggression and would try to regain her colonial hold on all Vietnam. That the French would not hesitate to destroy the gains of the Vietnamese revolution (as proved by the events in Nam Bộ) was obvious. The young republic faced the choice of either going to war against a formidable enemy or negotiating a political compromise.

The charged atmosphere of those days, when the fate of the revolution hung in the balance, can be judged from one of the meetings of the Provisional Coalition Government. When Hồ Chí Minh urged achieving a compromise with France, there was a counter-proposal to ask for China's military support to prevent the French from returning to Vietnam. At the height of the debate, Hồ Chí Minh rose to speak:

"Can't you understand what would happen if the Chinese stayed?

You ignore our past history. Whenever the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French, on the other hand, can stay for only a short time. Eventually, they will have to leave."

But as the Vietminh referred to official talks with the French, the mere mention was jeered. Particularly vociferous were the Việt Cách and Việt Quốc, who posed as the only revolutionaries. Their newspapers and radio stirred up the masses with the ultra-revolutionary slogan, "Victory or death!" Their ulterior aim was clear: to foil a settlement with the French, prod the government to rash, ill-advised action, and pull

off a coup in Hanoi. But there were also opponents of negotiations inside the Vietminh and the Communist Party of Indochina. Carried away by emotions, some members of the Communist Party and of the Vietminh sincerely believed that any talks with the oppressors of the Vietnamese people would be a betrayal of the revolution.

In those days, Hồ Chí Minh wondered whether there was a workable alternative to a war with the French and, as usual, checked his thoughts with Lenin's. The situation in Vietnam was similar to that in Soviet Russia when Lenin and his associates had thought it advisable to sign a separate peace treaty with Germany. All counter-revolutionary forces—from the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries down to the most reactionary of reactionaries — were dead set against such a treaty.

And they had an ally in Trotsky and the so-called Left Communists. They opposed Lenin and demanded that the hostilities be carried on to a victorious end. This provocational policy was skilfully camouflaged with ultra-left rhetoric. Trotsky, who headed the Soviet delegation at Brest, declared, in breach of his directives, that he refused to sign the peace treaty on German terms. As a result, the German army mounted an offensive and seized a large chunk of the Soviet Republic. The peace terms that Germany proposed the second time were even more onerous. Yet Lenin insisted that they be accepted. Hồ Chí Minh remembered Lenin's words: "The peace terms are intolerably severe. Nevertheless history will come into its own. The future, in spite of all trials, is ours."<sup>(1)</sup>

Lenin's priceless experience enabled Hồ Chí Minh and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Indochina to find the best tactical line that would accord with the existing correlation of forces, namely, to make reasonable concessions to the enemy, achieve a compromise in order to save the people's power, and buy time for regrouping and preparing for a decisive battle against the colonialists.

On March 3, the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee adopted a directive that Hồ Chí Minh had worked out for members of the Party concerning the current political situation.

It said, among other things, that, while negotiating with France, it was necessary to secure French recognition of Vietnam's independence

and at the same time maintain good relations with the French. The main thing was to make sure that France would recognise the right of the Vietnamese people to self-determination. Also important was retaining national unity. In that case, the Vietnamese could agree to a temporary French occupation of the North in order to replace Chiang Kaishek's forces, provided the French stayed for a specified time. The directive stressed that "in the course of the negotiations with France, preparations for a war of resistance would not cease for an instant. On the contrary, they would be intensified. The negotiations with France must by no means affect the fighting spirit or weaken the morale of the nation."

On March 5, the Standing Bureau of the Central Committee approved the policy for seeking a compromise with the French. Already on the following day, a preliminary Vietnam-French agreement was signed in one of the handsome mansions in the formerly European district of Hanoi. The signing ceremony was attended by members of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and by French officers, representatives of Chiang Kaishek's General Staff, and personnel of the U.S. Legation and British Consulate, who crowded around Hồ Chí Minh as he affixed his signature to the text of the agreement and the additional protocol. To an outsider this ceremony may have symbolised a new, as yet weakened Vietnam surrounded by imperialist predators.

The preliminary agreement said the "French Government recognised the Republic of Vietnam as a free state that has its own parliament, its army, and fiscal system". For its part, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam agreed "to enter the Indochina Federation and French Union". As to the future of Nam Bộ, the agreement pointed out that the "French Government shall honour the decisions of a popular referendum".

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam agreed to the temporary entry of French troops into North Vietnam to replace the Chinese troops. The additional protocol stipulated that the Chinese would be replaced by mixed Franco-Vietnamese forces (10,000 troops from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and 15,000 from France) under French Command, and "with the participation of Vietnamese representatives".

<sup>(1)</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, 1977, p.52.

On behalf of France, Jean Sainteny, who shortly before had been appointed French Commissioner in Tonkin, concluded a preliminary agreement with Hồ Chí Minh and other representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In his book *Histoire d'une Paix Manquée* (The Story of a Lost Peace) he later wrote: "Already after my first few meetings with Hồ Chí Minh I was under the impression that this ascetic, whose face spoke of wisdom, energy, a keen intellect and perspicacity, was an outstanding personality, and that he would soon move into the forefront of Asian politics... His cultural endowments, his intellect and inexhaustible capacity for work, his dedication, won him unprecedented popularity among his people. Regrettably, France underestimated him and failed to understand his importance and that of the forces behind him."

The signing of an agreement with the French had a mixed response in Vietnam. Even inside the Party not everybody accepted its compulsive thrust. Particularly vicious were the reactionaries and leftists, who circulated all kinds of slanderous rumours. One of them was that Hồ Chí Minh was an agent of the French colonialists and that he had sold Vietnam's hard-won independence. To scotch these rumours, the government lost no time to tell the people of the real state of affairs. The campaign culminated in a mass rally in Theatre Square in Hanoi. One after another, leading members of the government and the Vietminh, mounted the rostrum to explain to tens of thousands of Hanoians why the government had to sign the preliminary agreement.

They said that Vietnam did not want to see any foreign troops on its territory. But, they stressed, the Anglo-American allies had changed the situation. The French troops, over 10,000 in all, would go to the North to replace the 200,000 Chinese there. And after that, as it was recorded in the agreement, the French troops would eventually have to leave Vietnam. Thanks to the heroic struggle of the people, the French government was compelled to recognise Vietnam a free state. This was an important advance compared with de Gaulle's autonomy. And now they could go further and win full independence. France had to agree to a national referendum on the unification of the three parts of the country and promised to recognise the results of the referendum. Nam Bộ would

eventually rejoin the rest of the country. All people of Vietnam had to close their ranks as the struggle was just beginning.

The meeting was addressed by President Hồ Chí Minh.

"Our country became free in August 1945, he said. "However, to this way not a single great power has recognised our independence. The negotiations with France have opened the road to our international recognition, towards strengthening the positions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the world arena. An agreement has been signed which is a major political victory. We have become a free nation. As put down in the agreement, the French troops will gradually be withdrawn from Vietnam. Our fellow countrymen must keep calm and disciplined, and must strengthen unity and cohesion."

He stopped for a second, and then continued in a clear voice:

"I, Hồ Chí Minh, have all my life been fighting together with my people for the independence of our homeland. And I would rather die than turn traitor to my cause."

The square was silent. But after Hồ finished his speech, many were moved to tears. The President's words sounded like an oath of loyalty to the nation. As he spoke, all the people raised their clenched fists and broke into loud cheers: "We shall firmly follow the instructions of the Government and President Hồ Chí Minh! Long live President Hồ Chí Minh!"

Two days after the signing of the preliminary agreement, Hồ Chí Minh received the commanders of Hanoi's self-defence units.

"The cease-fire agreement does not end the war", he said. "We have pledged to pursue a policy of good will towards the French troops, but this does not mean we must show signs of weakness and yield to pressure. On the contrary. We must be ready for combat in order to be on top of whatever new situation emerges."

Characterising the policy of the DRV Government in that complicated period, Hồ Chí Minh later wrote: "We needed peace to build our country, and therefore we made concessions. Although the French colonialists breached their promise and unleashed war, the nearly one year of respite gave us time to build up our basic forces."

In the seven months after the victory of the revolution, a great deal was done to strengthen the armed forces of the young republic. Prior to the August uprising, civil defence societies had sprung up primarily in the liberated zone, whereas now the process encompassed the whole country. Already by the end of 1945, self-defence units had been set up in almost all villages, rural and urban communities, at factories and mines. In one of his speeches, Hồ Chí Minh called these units the steel wall of the nation.

Members of civil defence societies underwent military training and studied hand-to-hand combat techniques. Firearms manufacturing became a nationwide drive. As in the old days, village blacksmiths switched from making ploughshares and sickles to casting swords and spearheads. Children collected scrap metal, while adults took copper flatware and even objects of religious worship to metal collection centres.

The regular army was rapidly growing, and its organisational structure now included battalions and regiments. Although it was operating virtually underground, the Party succeeded in taking control over the Armed Forces' build up. Two military schools were operating in Hanoi under Party guidance. One was for training regulars and the other for training self-defence units. Many of those who graduated from these schools became prominent military leaders.

In Hồ Chí Minh's words, by early 1946 "a new type of army had emerged from the midst of the people, an army that was supported by the people and fought for their interests." It was affectionately called Uncle Hồ's Army.

In the spring of 1946, Hồ Chí Minh attended the opening ceremony at a military school in the northwestern province of Sơn Tây. There for the first time he proclaimed the motto of the Liberation Army: "Loyalty to the motherland, loyalty to the people."

The revolution that Hồ Chí Minh and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Indochina steered through those stormy days could well be compared to a boat sailing down a mountain stream: having barely negotiated one narrow passage, more rumbling cataracts loomed ahead.

The Chiang Kaishek army, 200,000 strong, which had failed to oust the Hồ Chí Minh revolutionary government and plant a puppet regime of its own, was now leaving Vietnam. The young republic was thus relieved of a dangerous presence.

The republic was also rid of a tremendous material burden, for Chiang Kaishek's troops had harassed, marauded, and robbed the local population. Trainloads and truckloads of loot from Vietnam were being shipped to China by railway and along the highways. According to the DRV government, the Chinese had taken out 250 million piastres worth of plunder. Another 400 million piastres had been misappropriated through the Bank of Indochina.

No sooner had the Chiang Kaishek troops left Vietnam than another enemy appeared. The day after the signing of the preliminary agreement, French troops began disembarking in Hải Phòng. That first violation was followed by many others. The French provoked armed clashes with Vietnamese self-defence units. The DRV government was informed that General Leclerc, the Commander-in-Chief of the French expeditionary corps, had issued a secret order to ignore Vietnamese representatives and fortify the French positions in areas of deployment, eliminate the leaders of the local Annamite organisations, and lay the ground for a coup d'état.

Simultaneously, the colonialists were in a hurry to set up a government in occupied Nam Bộ as a first step towards restoring the old regime.

The French expeditionary corps seized the Tây Nguyên Plateau in Central Vietnam and set up a new autonomous state, called Mũi, formed of local mountain tribes. The French also captured the town of Đồng Đăng on the Chinese border and took control of the main railway of North Vietnam. As a result, the people's government was beleaguered on all sides.

The DRV government insisted on the earliest possible start of the second round of talks with France, as specified in the preliminary agreement. Late in March, the High Commissioner of France, Thierry d'Argenlieu, suggested to Hồ Chí Minh that the talks be conducted on board a French cruiser in the Gulf of Hạ Long, some 150 kilometres southeast of Hanoi. A hoary colonialist, d'Argenlieu hoped this would humiliate the Hồ Chí Minh government, and intimidate the Vietnamese with a show of force.

After weighing the pros and cons, considering the gravity of the situation, the Communist Party of Indochina Central Committee decided to accept d'Argenlieu's proposal so as to secure French consent to holding talks at government level in Paris, where Hồ Chí Minh and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Indochina hoped the colonialist hawks, such as d'Argenlieu and Leclerc, would not be able to influence the French government as much as they did now.

Hạ long, or Bay of the Submerged Dragon, is the most picturesque place in Vietnam. This is probably why people call it the eighth wonder of the world. The bay is particularly beautiful in the evening when the bright orange rays of the setting sun light up the calm bluish-green water washing the dented shoreline and the numerous craggy islets - about 5,000 in all. The fantastic beauty of the bay has given rise to many legends, some of them dating to the ancient past. One legend tells why the place is called the Submerged Dragon. Since time immemorial, the islands teemed with pirates and robbers who terrorised the common folk. When the celestial emperor found out about the sea-robbers he sent a dragon against them. After the dragon had killed the tyrants, he felt drowsy and plunged into the deep waters where he reposes to this day. If one takes a bird's eye view of the area, one sees that the meandering contours of the shoreline and the numerous little islands actually look like the jagged spine of a dragon.

At 10 a.m. on March 24, a *Catalina* amphibious plane touched down upon the surface of the bay alongside the cruiser *Emile Berlin*. Admiral d'Argenlieu and Leclerc greeted the DRV President by the gangplank of the ship. A gun salute was fired. The cruiser weighed anchor and sailed out to sea. After breakfast in the stateroom and an exchange of toasts d'Argenlieu invited Hồ Chí Minh to the captain's bridge to review a parade of warships. The President, a straw hat on his head, stood leaning on his bamboo cane. The cruiser raised anchor, and the warships, with the covers removed from their guns, sailed by. The crewmen lined deck and greeted Hồ Chí Minh with friendly cheers.

The talks with the French added up to an empty formality. D'Argenlieu declined to discuss Cochin China. The two sides gave opposite interpretations of the preliminary agreement. For the French the status of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state was a

mere form of colonial autonomy. At the same time, the French regarded the Indochina Federation as the same old general governorship, which was just another word for colony.

The French delegation held on to this posture at the talks with the Vietnamese in the small town of Đà Lạt, which opened on April 17, 1946.

General Salan, who accompanied Hồ Chí Minh on his flight back to Hanoi, asked the President about his impressions.

"If the admiral thinks I was cowed by the might of his fleet, he is wrong," Hồ Chí Minh replied coldly. "Your dreadnoughts will never be able to sail up our rivers."

4

The signing of the preliminary agreement with the French, which was a forced compromise, showed how fierce the struggle was between the young republic and the imperialists, and between the people's government headed by the Communist Party of Indochina and the internal reactionaries, who leaned for support on their foreign patrons. With the departure of the Chinese and the mounting pressure of the French, some of the nationalist parties and groups modified their attitude, which raised hopes that they would take part in the national struggle.

Meanwhile, the relations between the DRV government and the French representatives in Indochina continued to deteriorate. French servicemen were more and more often involved in hostile provocations. The talks in Đà Lạt ran into a deadlock. Hồ Chí Minh insisted that the talks be moved to Paris without delay. In his view the entire negotiating process should be taken outside Indochina where it was prejudiced by diehards like d'Argenlieu. The Vietnam problem as he saw it, should be in the limelight of French political and public life. He also hoped to establish close contacts with the French democratic movement headed by the French Communist Party. Even if the talks failed, he thought, they would still be useful, because the Vietnamese delegation would be able to explain to the French public the goals of the DRV government and in this way win new friends.

Of course, there were many reasons against the choice of Paris as venue of the talks, which promised to be long and tedious. It would

mean that many DRV leaders would be out of the country for a long time at that crucial period. Some of the members of the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee feared for Hồ Chí Minh's safety. After weighing all pros and cons, they proposed that the talks be continued in France. On April 26, a DRV delegation headed by Phạm Văn Đồng left for Paris. And at the end of May, Hồ Chí Minh was formally invited to France as the guest of the French government.

Thousands of people in Hanoi and the adjacent areas assembled outside the University building early in the morning on May 30 to give him a send-off. One of the many posters read: "Vietnam -one and indivisible, and Nam Bộ is its part."

Addressing the meeting, Hồ Chí Minh said: "I have devoted my whole life to the struggle for the good of my country and for the happiness of my people. It is for this goal that I was hiding in the mountains, languishing in jail, and braving dangers and privations. I am giving all of myself to make this struggle a success. And now, thanks to the unity of the people, we have won political power in the country and I have been entrusted with my present high post. Today, following the decision of the government, I must, by the will of the people, set out on a long journey of thousands of miles. I will go, together with the other members of the delegation, to France... I assure you that we will do our best to live up to the trust of the people."

The next day, Hồ Chí Minh got up before dawn to write an address to his fellow-countrymen in Nam Bộ. "The news of my going to France with a delegation for official negotiations has caused concern to our people, especially in Nam Bộ. What does the future hold for Nam Bộ? Please, don't worry... You in Nam Bộ are citizens of Vietnam. Rivers may dry up, mountains may erode, but this truth will never change. I advise you to be united. The five fingers are of unequal length but they are united in the hand. The millions of our fellow-countrymen are not all alike; but they are descended from the same ancestors... Broad unity will bring us a bright future."

Hồ Chí Minh flew in the company of the French General Salan. When the plane touched down at Cairo Airport for refuelling, Hồ Chí Minh received unexpected news: a puppet government had been set up in Saigon to head the so-called Republic of Cochinchina. This is how

the French had interpreted the article in the preliminary agreement about the recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free and independent state. Hồ Chí Minh did not try to conceal his indignation from Salan. He said:

"This is an act of duplicity on the part of the French. I would not advise you to turn Cochinchina into another Alsace and Lorraine. That could start a hundred-year war."

While in Cairo, where his plane waited for three days, he received a telegram from Paris. It read: "Dear Mr. President. We request you to stop over in Biarritz pending formal invitation to Paris after the formation of a new French government."

Hồ Chí Minh spent ten days in Biarritz, a picturesque resort town on the western coast of France, not far from the Spanish border. It looked as if deliberate procrastination was part of the French plan. The French imperialists did not want to hear of an independent and free Vietnam.

On July 6, a new round of Franco-Vietnamese talks began in Fontainebleau. The place was decorated with the French tri-colour and the gold-starred red flags of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The negotiations revealed a wide difference of views. Acting in accordance with the preliminary agreement, the Vietnamese delegation sought recognition of the independence of Vietnam and restoration of its unity within the framework of the French Union. It also sought endorsement by France of the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in internal and foreign policy matters. The delegation regarded the Indochina Federation only as a form of coordinating the interests of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and as a form of maintaining their economic and cultural ties. Finally, the delegation was firmly opposed to any attempts to pry Nam Bộ away from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At one of the plenary meetings, Dương Bạch Mai, a member of the Vietnamese delegation, said:

"As long as attempts are made to pry Cochinchina away from Vietnam, no agreement between France and Vietnam will be possible. Everything depends entirely on the Cochinchina question: Franco-Vietnamese friendship, peace in Vietnam, and the future of our relations. It is necessary to settle this problem as soon as possible."

Meanwhile the French side continued to insist on conditions which in effect meant a split of Vietnam and the loss of its sovereignty in such vital areas as finance, the armed forces, and foreign policy. It amounted to an implicit renunciation by Vietnam of its independence, and to its transformation into a new type of colony. What all that would lead to could well be judged from the "autonomous republic" that the French had created in South Vietnam, whose puppet cabinet was headed by d'Argenlieu and whose Consultative Assembly was run by the French.

Hồ Chí Minh was not officially a member of the Vietnamese delegation, and thus did not take part in the proceedings at Fontainebleau. But he was active in other ways. He was frequently visited at his hotel near Monceau Park by representatives of French mass organisations, the leading figures of the three main political parties represented in the National Assembly, and by his old friends - Marcel Cachin, Maurice Thorez, Jacques Duclos, Francois Billoux, the writers Louis Aragon, Ilya Ehrenburg, Anna Seghers, Elsa Triolet, Jean-Richard Bloch, and Pierre Emmanuel.

While trying to wrest the much needed recognition of Vietnam's independence from the French, Hồ Chí Minh, at the same time, relied on the strength of the French working class, the French Communists. In those days, the French Cabinet included five representatives of the Communist Party, and its General Secretary Maurice Thorez was Deputy Prime Minister. Shortly before the Cabinet meeting at which the Vietnam question was to be discussed, Hồ Chí Minh sent Maurice Thorez a letter, still kept in the house of his wife, Jeannette Vermeersch. It reads:

"Dear comrades, tomorrow, Wednesday, the Cabinet will discuss Indochina. The future of Vietnam largely depends on the outcome. So, I am asking you to invite all the Communist ministers.

"Yesterday, I met with the Minister for Colonial Affairs and told him that it was necessary to secure a positive solution of two key issues, namely, the independence of Vietnam and the future of Cochin China. The gentleman replied that we should submit concrete proposals which would facilitate the Cabinet's consent to the word independence. I am enclosing the text of the proposals that we passed on to the Minister for Colonial Affairs last night..."

The French Communists did all they could to make the Cabinet heed the opinion of the Vietnamese delegation. But the odds were against them. In the autumn of 1946, those in the government who favoured a tougher policy came out on top, signalling a shift to the right on the French political scene. In the general election held on June 2, 1946, the French Communist Party and the Socialist Party lost their majority in the Constituent Assembly and Constitutional Commission. As a result, the government came under the control of Georges Bidault, leader of a clerical party called the People's Republican Movement.

The Vietnamese delegation had only one option: to propose that all decisions on key issues should be postponed and that a document suiting both sides be signed. On September 14, President Hồ Chí Minh and Marius Moutet, the French Overseas Affairs Minister, signed an interim Vietnamese-French *Modus Vivendi* Convention.

The *Modus Vivendi* Convention provided for a resumption of talks not later than January 1947. The two governments undertook to set free prisoners-of-war and political prisoners, and to halt hostilities both in Cochin China and the south of Annam. The question of a referendum in Cochin China (Nam Bộ), which was expected to lay the groundwork for the future of the southern part of the country, was deliberately couched in nebulous terms. The French were apprehensive: after the cease-fire three-quarters of Nam Bộ's territory was still controlled by the patriotic forces, and more than a thousand villages (out of the 1,250) were under DRV administration.

Upon his return, Hồ Chí Minh delivered an address to the nation about the results of the almost three months' talks in Fontainebleau. Vietnam, he said, had gained another respite from war and that was a major result; the new Vietnam national flag had, for the first time, been seen in France; the attention of the French government and people, and indeed the world public, had been drawn to the events in Vietnam; at the same time the key problems, such as the independence and unity of the country, were still unresolved and a long struggle lay ahead.

Analysing the main reason for the failure of the talks in Fontainebleau, Jacques Duclos wrote in his *Memoirs*: "The French participants in the talks thought that the government of President Hồ Chí Minh was not strong enough and, reckoning on the support of its



opponents, did nothing towards the success of the talks. Our rulers just did not like it that the Hanoi government was headed by such an authoritative Communist leader as Hồ Chí Minh... The Fountainebleau conference failed because the French government pursued a clearly colonialist policy. I remember how disappointed President Hồ Chí Minh was whom I had met on several occasions."

5

The failure of that round of the Franco-Vietnamese talks and the separatist policy that the French and their hirelings pursued in South Vietnam raised the question of what would happen to Nam Bộ. The reactionary press accused the DRV government of having betrayed the country. In his address to the nation Hồ Chí Minh reaffirmed the government's position on the future of Nam Bộ. "The North, Centre and South are part of Vietnam," he wrote. "We have the same ancestors, we are of the same family, we are all brothers and sisters. No one can divide the children of the same family... No one can divide Vietnam. So long as the Fatherland is not unified and our compatriots are suffering, I can neither eat with appetite, nor sleep in peace. I solemnly promise you that with your determination and that of the entire people, our beloved South will come back to the bosom of our Fatherland."

Already at the first meeting of the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee, Hồ Chí Minh proposed calling another session of the National Assembly. It was to draft a Constitution and discuss other matters that had accumulated over the previous stormy six months. The session opened at the Grand Theatre on November 28. There were markedly fewer deputies this time: out of the seventy seats reserved earlier for representatives of the pro-Chinese parties, about half were empty. Their occupants had left with Chiang Kaishek's troops - including Vice-President Nguyễn Hải Thần, foreign minister Nguyễn Tường Tam, and Vice-Chairman of the Military Committee, Vũ Hồng Khanh.

One of the deputies made an official inquiry about the government's attitude to the vice-president and the ministers who had fled the country.

"It is true that today, when our country is going through difficult times, these gentlemen are no longer with us," replied Hồ Chí Minh.

"The people entrusted them with high posts, but these gentlemen abandoned them and left. You may wonder if they did that with a clear conscience. These men have no sense of duty; they either do not want or are unable to carry the burden of state affairs. All we can say is that we shall continue, as of old, to carry this burden ourselves."

The Assembly applauded. Hồ Chí Minh raised his hand, and continued:

"However, if they consider themselves our brothers, if they muster enough strength and courage to respond to the call of conscience, to the call of their fellow countrymen and their homeland, and decide to return, we shall be glad to receive them."

At the first session of the National Assembly, the Việt cách and Việt Quốc deputies had said the flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam should be changed, for it looked too much like the flag of the Comintern and was therefore contrary to the national spirit of the Vietnamese. Similar demands were heard at the second session. Replying, Hồ Chí Minh said:

"It is true, some members of the government had earlier suggested that the colour of the national flag be changed, and we actually meant to submit this question to the Standing Committee of the National Assembly. However, much has changed since that day. Our red flag with a gold star symbolises the blood of thousands of Vietnamese fighting in Nam Bộ and in the Trung Bộ south. It has been seen in Europe and returned to Asia and was saluted with reverence everywhere."

His eyes flashed, there were metallic notes in his voice - a very unusual thing for this otherwise most mild and gentle person: "And today, no one but the twenty-five million Vietnamese has the right to alter this flag."

The hard-won respite was shortlived. By the autumn of 1946, the advocates of a military solution in Vietnam got the upper hand in France.

While the Frontainebleau negotiations were still underway, a French expeditionary corps was secretly preparing to occupy all the northern provinces. On November 23, the French Military Command in the North presented an ultimatum to the Vietnamese authorities in Hải Phòng to leave the limits of the port and the adjacent area within two hours.

Upon expiry of this period, the French shelled Hải Phòng, killing thousands of people.

After a routine meeting of the Governmental Council, Hồ Chí Minh asked Võ Nguyên Giáp to stay on for an eye-to-eye talk.

"If the enemy starts a war in the North, too, how long, do you think, we'll hold out in Hanoi?" he asked.

"I think for not more than a month."

"And what about the other cities?"

"Possibly longer."

"And what about the rural areas?"

"Those, we'll keep under our control."

Hồ Chí Minh reflected for a few minutes, then said:

"Let's go back to Tân Trào."

On Hồ Chí Minh's instructions, Nguyễn Lương Bằng went to Việt Bắc to set up emergency quarters for the government and the party leadership. A drive was started to set up guerilla bases in the mountains and the jungle, with workshops, munitions dumps and food stores being moved there from the cities.

On December 19, the French troops launched a sudden attack on key areas in Hanoi - damaging the power station, some factories, and the government buildings. The next day they captured the government's residence, ripped down the flag of the Republic and raised the French flag.

The high-sounding promises of recognising the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state, the peace agreements and conventions that the French government had concluded with Vietnam, were all perfidiously scrapped. That was an outright act of aggression.

Late at night, on December 20, when fighting was still going on in the streets of Hanoi, the Voice of Vietnam radio station broadcast Hồ Chí Minh's historic address to the nation.

"Impelled by love of peace, we have made concessions. But the more concessions we made, the more the French colonialists took advantage of them to trample on our rights and reconquer our country.

Can we allow this? No! It is better to sacrifice our lives than lose our country and sink back into slavery. Fellow countrymen, arise! Let him who has a rifle use his rifle, let him who has a sword use his sword! And let those who have no sword take up pickaxes and staves! Everyone must rise against the colonialists and save the country. Even though we have to endure hardships, victory will be ours if we are ready to make sacrifices. Forward to victory! Long live an independent, unified Vietnam!"

## THE WAR OF RESISTANCE

### 1

The war of resistance against French colonial rule began on December 20, 1946, and went on for almost nine years. And Hồ Chí Minh, as Comrade Phạm Văn Đồng wrote in his book years later, "became the heart and soul of that great people's war, our struggle for freedom. His image was borne in their hearts by soldiers at the front, by guerillas deep in the rear, by workers at arms repair shops, by peasants working the fields."

The defenders of Hanoi inscribed the first fine chapter into the chronicle of that war. The French had hoped to gain control of the capital in twenty-four hours; it was not until two months later that they actually did so. On December 19, the day after the French delivered their ultimatum, Hanoi's self-defence force assembled in the City Hall. The soldiers took an oath to fight to the death, and declared that they only awaited orders from the government.

From the start, the French saw they were dealing with an enemy whose shortage of weapons and combat training was fully made up for by heroism and readiness for self-sacrifice. The siege of Bakbofu Palace lasted several days. Two national guard platoons held off a besieging French force that had tanks and armoured vehicles. Shells smashed the wall around the palace. But the French legionnaires did not risk an all-out assault until quite some time later. The Vietnamese fought to the last man, killing more than a hundred enemy soldiers.

On January 6, when the fighting was at its height, all Vietnamese forces in the city were combined into what came to be known as the "capital regiment". The regiment consisted of a national guard battalion and two self-defence battalions. Seventy per cent of its personnel were workers. The 2,500 young soldiers had only 1,500 serviceable rifles. Yet they fought staunchly for every street and house, holding back the enemy's advance.

The heroic example of the Hanoi defenders was emulated by the people of other cities. The defenders of Huế held out to the end of February. Similar fortitude was shown by self-defence units organised by the cooperative of rickshaw men. The residents of Nam Định, the centre of the textile industry, kept the enemy at bay for three months.

The heroic resistance at Hanoi, Huế and Nam Định won time for evacuating everything that could be evacuated to bases of resistance in the mountains and the jungle. By March 1947, when the government issued orders to abandon Hanoi, many thousands of tons of industrial equipment, raw materials and machinery had been taken out to the guerilla controlled zone. The workers organised raider squads which made their way into the French-occupied cities at night, where among the ruins of factories they collected machinery and spare parts and took them into the jungle. Volunteer divers salvaged machines, generators and metal parts from Japanese vessels sunk in the Bay of Tongkin during the Second World War. All this went, sometimes at the price of people's lives, to jungle workshops manufacturing weapons and goods the liberated areas could not do without.

The French colonialists had hoped that with superior weapons and numbers they would soon rout and destroy the poorly armed and inexperienced Vietnamese army, capture the leaders of the country and "solve" the Vietnam problem once and for all. However, their blitzkrieg plan was foiled in the first few weeks. And although, by the middle of 1947, the invaders had captured large parts of the provinces of Nam Bộ and Trung Bộ, and some areas in the north of the country (a strip along the Chinese border, the cities of Hanoi, Hải Phòng, Nam Định and other major centres), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam fought on.

At the start of the war, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam moved to the province of Hà Đông, a short distance south-west of the capital. However, by the spring of 1947, when the enemy had captured all the principal cities and it was clear that the war would be long and arduous, the headquarters, headed by Hồ Chí Minh, returned to Việt Bắc, where the guerillas had their old bases.

In spite of his age (he was 60) and his far from robust health, Hồ Chí Minh was a model of stamina and courage and seemed to bear the hardships of guerilla life with ease. A member of his bodyguard recalls:

"When the President arrived in the guerilla zone his escort was a mere eight men who were responsible for his safety, for communications and food supplies. We built a long bamboo hut and divided it into two parts. The smaller part was for Bác Hồ, while the other served as our quarters, the dining-room, and conference hall. As bodyguards we were constantly ready to repel an enemy attack, to spot enemy spies, and also protect the residence against wild animals. Comrade Hoàng Hữu Nam (then Deputy Minister for Internal Affairs) once brought us a sheep dog.

But it was soon carried off by a tiger.

Our life was not easy. The daily ration consisted of unpolished rice and wild plants sprinkled with vegetable oil. Whenever we got meat, we chopped it up, and mixed it with large quantities of salt and chili powder. That way it could be kept for an emergency. Bác Hồ called it Vietnamh preserves."

It was clear that at this early stage of the war the colonialists were in a superior military position. To counter the enemy's blitzkrieg plan, Hồ Chí Minh and the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee worked out a strategy of their own - to launch a protracted people's war of resistance with elements of guerilla warfare. Hồ Chí Minh said that the main idea, as in any guerilla war, was not to hold on to territory, but to keep intact the organs of revolutionary government, the armed forces of the people, and the main bases of resistance. Only this, he said, would ward off the initial enemy onslaught and pave the way for

a counter-offensive. To those who did not understand the need for a protracted war, Hồ Chí Minh explained:

"We have no right to overestimate our strength and to throw ourselves into an attack against the enemy. Today we can well be compared to a raw youth and our enemy to an evil old man. When we reach the age of twenty, and our enemy grows very old and feeble, then, taking advantage of an opportune moment, we shall deliver the death blow... There is many a glorious page in the heroic history of our nation. Today, for instance, we should draw on the fighting experience of Triệu Quang Phục."

In the middle of the 6th century A.D., Hồ went on to say, Vietnam rose up against the oppressive rule of Chinese feudal warlords in a revolt led by Lý Bí and "supported by the courageous men of all the districts". In three months' fighting, the invaders were driven out. An independent Vietnamese state, Vạn Xuân (a Thousand Springs) was established. However, the rulers of the Celestial Empire did not leave Vietnam in peace. Fresh Chinese troops invaded the country, and Lý Bí was defeated. But that was not the end. Triệu Quang Phục took what remained of his army into the Dạ Trạch fortress and wore the enemy down in a drawn-out struggle. He sent small groups on night sorties to wear down the enemy, and soon after mounted a counter-offensive, defeating the enemy, and regaining the country's independence. Now, hundreds of years later, Hồ Chí Minh concluded his tale, his countrymen should again make use of that strategy.

Three types of troops existed: a regular army, local troops, and a people's militia. These military and paramilitary formations acted in close cooperation. The well-trained regular troops were the backbone of regional army detachments and guerilla units operating independently. The guerillas were wearing down the French, and forced them to disperse their forces. This enabled the regular army to prepare and carry out major operations.

By the middle of 1947 the DRV armed forces were over 100,000 strong. Auxiliary and self-defence units numbered several hundred thousand combatants. The resistance was steadily gaining strength and assuming nation-wide proportions. Probably the most telling proof of

the confidence of the Vietnamese people in victory and of the growing authority of the Communist Party as their organising force, was that its membership grew. It had 20,000 members in 1946, and as many as 50,000 in 1947.

Hồ Chí Minh always wanted to see the party perform its role honourably as the true political vanguard of the people in the struggle for national salvation. He showed concern for the expansion and strengthening of its ranks. "Now that our nation is at the crossroads - to die or to live, to perish or to exist - each comrade and the whole organisation must devote all their heart and strength to turn the entire people in one direction aiming at one goal. To drive out, the French colonialists and bring unity and independence to the country," wrote Hồ Chí Minh in his Letter to Comrades in North Vietnam in March 1947.

He called upon all party members to be circumspect, restrained, resolute, resourceful and disciplined, to learn to endure difficulties, to be modest, and to always remember Lenin's behest: "Learn, learn, and learn again". Hồ Chí Minh held that the moral make-up of Communists must combine humanism, justice, courage and honesty. He wrote in a pamphlet, *Let's Improve Our Style of Work*, in the autumn of 1947: "Revolutionaries must have good moral qualities, without which they would not be able to lead the people, however talented they may be."

There was still another point of principle that Hồ Chí Minh called attention to: "The party must be remodelled along military lines. It must stay united both in the sphere of ideology and in practical work. The party is in the vanguard. If, when on the offensive, its members act each in his own way, if the trumpet plays one tune and the drum another, there will be no chance to succeed."

The pamphlets that Hồ Chí Minh wrote during the war helped a great deal to promote the leadership role and militancy of the party as the organiser of all victories of the revolution in Vietnam.

The government of the DRV stirred the masses to action against the invaders, and at the same time redoubled efforts to settle the Franco-Vietnamese conflict by political means. Even during the tragic hours after the French ultimatum in Hanoi on December 19, 1946, Hồ

Chí Minh still tried to save the peace. He sent the then French Prime Minister Leon Blum message after message, urging a cease-fire, withdrawal of French troops back to positions they had occupied prior to December 19, and resumption of the talks. Blum, however, was silent. Later, he said the telegrams had come too late. He could not possibly have thought of a lame excuse. He had certainly had enough time to bring the high-handed general d'Argenlieu and his zealous supporters back to their senses.

The real attitude of the French rulers to the DRV peace proposals came to light in the course of the so-called peace mission of Professor Paul Mus in May 1947. At the request of the Communist deputies in the National Assembly, the French government instructed the new French High Commissioner in Indochina, Emile Bollaert, to "contact all political and intellectual forces in Vietnam". Bollaert sent Professor Paul Mus to Việt Bắc to meet Hồ Chí Minh. Professor Mus, a former director of the Extrême Orient College in Indochina, delivered what was virtually an ultimatum: disarmament of the Vietnamese army, free movement of French armed forces throughout Vietnam, extradition of all French and other foreign soldiers who sided with the Vietnamese Resistance movement, and release of French-born prisoners and Vietnamese who had collaborated with the French.

Hồ Chí Minh invited Paul Mus for talks. He said: "If I accepted these terms, I would disgrace myself in the eyes of my people. What would you do in my place?"

"I would refuse such terms."

"Go, tell this to M. Bollaert and come back with something more acceptable. I shall always be glad to receive you".

Why Bollaert resorted to the farce became clear in a few days. Upon Paul Mus's return to Hanoi, Bollaert informed the French government: "I tried to come to terms with the Vietnamese, and failed. Bảo Đại is now our only hope."

In August 1945, when abdicating, Bảo Đại had said: "Better to be a citizen of a free country than the emperor of a country of slaves."

However, in April 1946, he went against his people. Before French troops entered Hanoi, he left for Chungking on board an American aircraft. When the war broke out, Hồ Chí Minh sent his representative to Hong Kong, where Bảo Đại was residing, to try to persuade him to return and join the Resistance. He refused. The "night club emperor", as the Vietnamese called him, had far-reaching plans. He saw the French aggression as an opportunity to regain the throne that the revolution had "taken away from him". This suited the colonialists; Bảo Đại was the one figure they hoped could rally against the Hồ Chí Minh government various rival nationalists and pro-Western groups of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and landowners.

Set on turning Vietnam into a vassal state headed by ex-monarch Bảo Đại, the French entered into negotiations with him. These dragged out for almost two years, because Washington joined in the game in a bid to have its own man in Vietnam; Bảo Đại seemed to fit the bill. For his part, Bảo Đại endeavoured to win over the bourgeoisie and landowners, and insisted that Paris recognise, in words at least, the independence of Vietnam. Not until March 1949 did President Vincent Auriol of France agree on the recognition of "the independence of Vietnam within the framework of the French Union." The independence was no more than a scrap of paper, because Vietnam was denied the right to have its own foreign policy. The Bảo Đại-Auriol agreement in effect turned Vietnam into a new type of French colony.

Another thing the colonialists had in mind when they staged the farce with the Paul Mus mission was to have a credible excuse for starting all-out military operations against Việt Bắc where the Vietnamese had most of their forces. On October 7, 1947, the French airlifted three combat groups to the area; altogether, 12,000 men of the expeditionary corps took part. The French sent two columns up the Red and Transparent rivers, while several infantry units were to by-pass Việt Bắc, operating from the border town of Lạng Sơn. The aim was to rout the main Resistance forces and capture the government led by Hồ Chí Minh.

The government was in session when a liaison officer rushed in with word of a French airborne landing. Hồ Chí Minh, who was chairing the meeting, said: "It had to happen sooner or later. Let's get on with our work."

He jotted down an appeal to soldiers, guerillas and compatriots in Việt Bắc, the cradle of the national independence struggle.

The Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee decided to move the seat of the government to a still more remote area without delay. In the dead of night, with the tropical rain coming down in sheets, Hồ Chí Minh and his eight companions, carrying heavy loads on bamboo poles across their shoulders, set out on a long and dangerous journey. Two days later they reached their destination. Soon, news came of the victories of the Liberation Army. Then word arrived that only hours after the group had left its former residence, the enemy dropped a large landing party there.

The French expected to take the Resistance forces by surprise. But the Vietnamese launched a counter-attack and delivered several powerful blows. The colonialists also suffered severe setbacks on the Transparent River on October 24 and November 10.

By the end of 1947, sustaining heavy losses, the French were driven out of many parts of Việt Bắc, and withdrew south towards Hanoi.

The failure of the Việt Bắc offensive spelled the end of the French blitzkrieg plan. It was clear that the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam could repulse the enemy, with both regular troops and guerillas operating deep in the rear of the French expeditionary corps.

After its Việt Bắc defeat the French Command went on the defensive. This put them at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the Vietnamese army.

The first Vietnamese victories were the result of growing international solidarity, and notably the support of Vietnam's chief ally, the Soviet Union.

The struggle of the peoples of Indochina for national liberation always enjoyed Soviet sympathy and support. Back in the 1920s and 30s, the Soviet Communists at their Party congresses voiced their solidarity with the revolutionary movement in colonial countries, including Indochina, causing much irritation in the capitals of the imperialist powers. During the Second World War, the Soviet Union, though thousands of kilometres away from Indochina, sought to influence the course of events there in favour of the forces of national liberation.

When in 1945 the imperialists began manoeuvring over the decisions of the Potsdam Conference, and entrusted the responsibility for disarming Japanese troops in Indochina first to Chiang Kaishek and later to the French, the Soviet Union objected. It pointed out that the Vietnamese had been fighting for their freedom and independence, and that this was recognised at the conferences in Teheran, Yalta and San Francisco. The Soviet Government also stressed that any occupation troops temporarily brought into Indochina should not intervene in the region's internal affairs.

The Soviet Union denounced the "dirty war" of the French colonialists. In January 1950, in its reply to Hồ Chí Minh's message that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was prepared to establish diplomatic relations with all nations on the basis of equality and mutual respect, the Soviet Union, together with the other Socialist countries, extended its diplomatic recognition at once.

Besides its moral and political impact, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and the DRV also had great practical significance: it boosted the prestige of the DRV government and added to the isolation of Bảo Đại's regime. "The very idea of the Bảo Đại puppet government is hollow," wrote *Pravda* at the time. "It represents nobody but a handful of reactionaries."

Hồ Chí Minh and his associates were happy to establish direct relations with the Soviet Union. This breached the imperialist blockade of the previous five years. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam has thus become an integral part of the international democratic community. It now had fraternal relations with the Soviet Union, with which Hồ Chí Minh and other Vietnamese Communists had been linked for many years. Commenting on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the socialist countries, Hồ Chí Minh wrote: "The war of resistance waged these last few years has won Vietnam the greatest victory in her history: the two biggest nations in the world, the Soviet Union and People's China, and the new democracies have recognised the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a country standing on an equal footing in the great family of democratic countries of the world... Surely these political successes will pave the way for future military victories."

Hồ Chí Minh's words were prophetic. In September of the same year the Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee decided upon a sweeping military campaign in the area of the Vietnamese-Chinese border to get the French invaders out. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was in dire need not only of political support, but also of material assistance from the Soviet Union and the people's democracies.

When preparations began for this operation, Hồ Chí Minh voiced a desire to personally verify the combat readiness of the Vietnamese troops and to take part in the offensive.

The battle zone was many kilometres away from the government residence in Việt Bắc. And yet Hồ Chí Minh, though in his sixties, set out on the long trip across mountains and jungle. With a few of his bodyguards, a doctor and two assistants, he walked all the way to the Chinese border. From there the small party turned towards Cao Bằng, and from Cao Bằng back to the government residence. Altogether, it covered over 400 kilometres.

To avoid enemy aircraft (which circled over the guerilla zone all the time) they moved mostly at night. In thick jungle they slept at night, starting out at daybreak so they could have a rest at noon beside a spring in the shade of a tree or at the foot of a hill. They cooked rice and corned beef, and slept right there on the ground, or on moss covered stones.

The group avoided large communities and unwelcome encounters, spending nights either in a pagoda or in a communal house somewhere on the edge of a village. Sometimes, they came upon an abandoned bamboo hut in the jungle: a kind of roadside inn, except that it had no host. In the daytime the mountain people brought bananas, manioc, sugar cane, and sweet potatoes, and hung all that on the walls. If a wayfarer came by, he ate as much as he wanted, and left the money for it in a hollow cane suspended for the purpose at the entrance. The innkeeper came from time to time to replenish the supply of food and to collect the proceeds.

The guide led his group along animal trails through untrodden places. On a clear day the travellers walked briskly and were in high spirits.

On rainy days, however, the paths were so slippery that after a hundred steps or so their legs buckled from tension and fatigue, and the bamboo poles with their heavy load bent them to the ground. After the rain, the leafage was literally plastered with leeches. They were hard to pry away once they stuck to the skin. This had to be done carefully not to cause profuse bleeding.

Those who were not used to walking were soon exhausted and a short halt had to be called. On one such halt Hồ Chí Minh said:

"We are properly fagged out, because we did not talk along the way. Keep closer to me, and we'll recite our great poets from memory."

The poetry occupied the travellers' minds, and they forgot their fatigue, walking briskly mile after mile.

When the group arrived at Road 4 leading to the frontier zone, they sighted a jeep sent from headquarters. Tired and spattered with orange-red mud, the travellers heaved a sigh of relief.

But Hồ Chí Minh said all vehicles should be used to carry munitions and food to battle zones. "I'll walk," he added.

At 6 a.m. on September 16, 1950, a battle started in the vicinity of Đồng Đăng, near the Chinese border, that was destined to turn the tide of the war. Hồ Chí Minh and the military chiefs were at the observation post on top of a mountain which commanded an excellent view of the enemy positions around Đồng Đăng.

The battle raged for twenty days. The main French force in the area was routed. Another large force sent to its rescue was encircled. Some Vietnamese commanders wanted to let the battle-weary troops rest a day or so before the final attack. When Hồ Chí Minh learned about it, he said:

"It is true the soldiers are weary, but the enemy is wearier still more. This is the best time to finish him off."

He sat down at his typewriter and typed an appeal to the men and officers: "There has been no other occasion for our troops to fight several



days in a row. This is a severe test. Scorning fatigue, hunger and cold, you have trounced picked enemy units. Try a little harder, my brothers, and you'll finish off the enemy. I embrace you all. Forward to victory!"

The Vietnamese troops did the impossible. At night they stormed the enemy positions and by 5 a.m. had won the battle

For the first time in five years, 8,000 men were taken prisoner. They were housed in bamboo barracks. Hồ Chí Minh visited a POW camp and spoke to the prisoners, among whom were white and black mercenaries from the French colonies in Africa, and also soldiers of Bảo Đại's puppet army. Dressed in a black peasant jacket, and wearing a cork helmet on his head, Hồ Chí Minh looked no different than a local resident.

The camp commander presented him as a local sage. Hồ Chí Minh wanted to chat with a French army doctor. At first, the doctor showed no interest in the visitor, though he was surprised at the old man's fluent French. Hồ Chí Minh said the Vietnamese wanted no war, that for more than four years blood was being shed for nothing on both sides, and that a handful of French capitalists was to blame for it: they sought to profit from the grief and suffering of millions of working people. As the conversation proceeded, the French doctor's eyes grew kinder. He was visibly moved. And when Hồ Chí Minh saw him shivering from the cold and draped his peasant jacket over the Frenchman's shoulders, the latter could not suppress his tears.

By the end of October 1950, the northern area adjacent to the Chinese border had been liberated. The troops of the people's government regained control of Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Lào Cai, Thái Nguyên and Hòa Bình. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam now had direct connections with countries of the socialist community. And, besides, the French plan of creating autonomous puppet states in the mountain areas of North Vietnam was foiled.

Over the years, the Vietnamese Communist Party that operated as part of the Vietminh Front became a powerful mass organisation, the force that organised the defeat of the invading French and the building

of a new state. The Party leadership had to secure a tighter grip on affairs in order to bring the war to a victorious end. The Standing Bureau of the Party's Central Committee convened the Second Congress at a guerilla base in Việt Bắc in February 1951.

The policy report was by Hồ Chí Minh. It was an in-depth analysis of the twenty-odd years of the Party's existence. He pointed out that the revolution in Việt Nam would go from victory to victory, because it was led by a strong Party, which relied on Marxism-Leninism and enjoyed the affection, trust and support of the entire nation.

Hồ Chí Minh criticised those who lacked faith and optimism, who doubted that the Resistance would win, who called the struggle of the Vietnamese against the colonialists "a war of the locust against the elephant."

"This is so if we look at the material side only," Hồ Chí Minh said.

"For we had nothing but bamboo sticks to oppose airplanes and cannon. But taking guidance in Marxism-Leninism, we look not only at the present, but also at the future. We have strong faith in the spirit and strength of the masses. We therefore tell those who waver and who are pessimistic that 'today the locust fights the elephant, but tomorrow the elephant will be disembowelled'."

At the same time, Hồ Chí Minh warned the party and the people against premature action and against over-confidence. The victories of the 1950s in the northern part of the country made some party people think that henceforward they would have an easy time. They called for a nation-wide counter-offensive immediately, and were surprised that the Central Committee insisted on thorough preparations before mounting it. Hồ Chí Minh said:

"Once the preparations are completed, we will mount a general counter-offensive. The more complete the preparations, the quicker will come the hour of the offensive and the more favourably it will unfold. We must not be rash and impatient."

The time came for the Party to define the stage of the revolution in Vietnam.

Speaking on the Vietnamese Revolution at the 2nd Party Congress on behalf of the Central Committee, Trường Chinh said Vietnam was in the midst of a national, people's democratic revolution -a transitional

phase on the road to a socialist revolution. "Under the leadership of the working class, this revolution, whose main driving force is the working people, will not only accomplish its anti-imperialist and anti-feudal tasks, but will also greatly stimulate the entire system of people's democracy, sow the seeds of socialism, and create a new society. The revolution will accomplish the bourgeois-democratic tasks and will grow into a socialist revolution..."

Hồ Chí Minh's political report and the report of Trường Chinh were the nucleus of the Party Programme adopted at the Congress. "The main task of the Vietnam revolution," the Party Programme emphasised, "is to oust the imperialist aggressors, to achieve true independence and unity of the nation, to eliminate the survivals of feudal and semifeudal relations, to give land to its tillers, to build up the system of people's democracy, and to lay the foundations of socialism."

The 2nd Congress resolved to change the name of the Communist Party of Indochina to the Vietnam Workers' Party, and to legalise it in all areas controlled by the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Hồ Chí Minh was unanimously elected Chairman of the Vietnam Workers' Party Central Committee.

This marked a new stage in the national liberation revolution in Indochina. Soon, another two parties emerged on the basis of the former Communist Party of Indochina: the People's Party of Lào (now the Lào People's Revolutionary Party) and the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (now the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea).

The division of the Communist Party of Indochina into three independent parties may be traced to the new historical situation in Indochina. The Indochina Union formed by colonialists was no more. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia became separate and independent states. The national liberation revolutions there were at different stages of development, which, quite naturally, meant that the Communists of these countries had different tasks to accomplish.

The resolution of the 2nd Congress of the Vietnam Workers' Party contained this passage: "Considering the new conditions in Indochina and elsewhere in the world, a new party will be launched in Vietnam: the Vietnam Workers' Party with its own political programme and rules

that will take into account the conditions in Vietnam; in Cambodia and Laos revolutionary organisations will also be set up to suit the conditions there."

The people of the three countries of Indochina continued the struggle against their common enemy, the French colonialists, whom they could defeat only by acting together and by strengthening their solidarity.

A month after the Party Congress, in March 1951, patriotic organisations of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia held a joint conference. They decided to tighten their alliance in the fight against the colonialists. The patriotic forces of the three countries of Indochina countered the imperialist divide and rule policy with militant unity and political cooperation based on common interests and ideals.

After the Congress, the leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party became increasingly convinced that the Party's social policy in the liberated areas was tailing behind the needs of the day. In 1945, the Party had announced a partial suspension of its socio-economic policy, notably the agrarian reform. This was justified, because many feudal lords and landowners and the bourgeoisie could be won for the revolution. Later the situation changed. The Resistance was headed by the party of the working class, with the United National Front drawing support from workers and peasants from its first day. The war of resistance precipitated rapid social polarisation. It produced genuine revolutionaries and patriots, but it also brought to the surface a scum of traitors and reactionaries. Millions of working people, whose ideological and political level was rising more rapidly than had been the case during the peaceful period of the revolution, put their hopes for social equality, for the elimination of exploitation and oppression, more and more openly on national liberation. The wider the Resistance, the more manpower and material resources it claimed.

The need to carry out fundamental socio-economic transformations, and especially agrarian reform, was dictated also by the fact that the main contribution to the armed struggle against the aggressor was made by the peasants, who were the overwhelming majority of the population. Ninety per cent of the men and officers in the armed forces came from the peasantry.

And finally, the early 1950s saw greater activity on the part of various reactionary political organisations that feudal lords and big landowners put together with the help of the French colonialists and agents of the U.S. intelligence, which even at that time was reaching into Indochina. This disturbing fact pointed to the need for bringing down the big landowners, and ending the feudal system as soon as possible to ensure social progress.

With all these considerations in view, the 2nd Congress of the Vietnam Workers' Party set the priority of "eliminating the remaining feudal and semi-feudal elements and turning the land over to those who till it".

On December 1, 1953, the National Assembly launched an agrarian reform. All the land and other property of traitors and collaborationists was to be confiscated. Landowners who had taken part in the Resistance, and those who had not committed crimes against the people, were to sell land and agricultural implements to the state. The confiscated land and property, and also land which had been bought by the state, was then to be turned over to poor peasants and farm labourers.

The involvement of the broad masses in the struggle against survivals of feudalism and the implementation of the slogan, "Land to those who till it", gave a new, powerful impetus to the Resistance. Thousands of peasants volunteered to the People's Army, tens of thousands gave all their energy to supplying the troops with food and ammunition on the battlefield or to building roads through the jungle and in the mountains - under constant bombing and shelling. How timely the Party's agrarian policy was became even more evident a few months later, when what was to be a decisive battle was fought in a sparsely populated mountain area in the north-western part of the DRV.

4

In November 1953 the newly appointed French commander, General Navarre, concentrated picked units of the Expeditionary Corps and Foreign Legion in the north-western part of Bac Bo, so as to thrust deep into the rear of the Vietnamese army, to surround and destroy its main forces. The Party decided to take up the challenge and give battle to the colonialists near the village of Điện Biên Phủ.

As the Vietnamese prepared for this decisive battle, a group of foreign journalists arrived in Việt Bắc. They asked Hồ Chí Minh what was going on outside Điện Biên Phủ.

"This is Điện Biên Phủ," said Hồ Chí Minh, pointing to his upturned cork helmet. "And these are the mountains." He passed his strong thin fingers along the outer edge of the helmet. "Here's where we are now. And down there," he let his hand drop into the bottom of the upturned helmet, "is the valley of Điện Biên Phủ. That is where the French have their positions. They will never be able to scramble out. They might hold on a long time, but they will never scramble out."

Inside Hồ Chí Minh's helmet were the crack army units the French had mustered all over Indochina: paratroopers of the Expeditionary Corps, and the German units of the Foreign Legion- 16,000 in all.

The celebrated battle of Điện Biên Phủ was a model of heroism on the part of the Vietnamese, can also a product of the superb strategy of its commanders. To transport heavy artillery to the site of the battle, they had to build more than 300 kilometres of road across mountain passes. This they did in total secrecy in spite of the enemy's round-the-clock air patrols. Using no explosives, which might have revealed their whereabouts, the Vietnamese hewed a road through the rocky hills for heavy lorries. After dark, they literally worked by touch without light. And shortly before daybreak they carefully camouflaged what they had done the night before. Soldiers carried 105-mm guns uphill by hand in pitch darkness. To prevent the heavy weapons from tumbling, they tied them to trees with ropes which often smouldered from the friction and snapped. Soldiers flung themselves under the wheels of gun-carriages and, at risk to their lives, checked their downward fall.

At night, right under the enemy's nose, the Vietnamese dug more than 200 kilometres of deep trenches and underground tunnels leading to the French fortifications. But this the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ found out only after the battle started. They also hewed gun emplacements in hard rock. Incidentally, the French did not see any of these emplacements until the fighting stopped. Thousands of peasants - men, women and old folk- helped soldiers in their titanic job.

On March 13, the Vietnamese mounted a massive offensive. Their artillery rained shells upon Điện Biên Phủ as soldiers closed in on the beleaguered fortress.

To take the stigma off the "dirty war", the colonialists gave women's names to French strongholds in Indochina. On the first day of the offensive, the Vietnamese seized a stronghold called Beatrice and on the next day another stronghold, Gabrielle. And two days later, the French left Anna-Marie outpost.

The French were surprised at the way the battle was fought. They heavily relied on artillery and air support. But the Vietnamese now also had artillery which they hid in makeshift shelters dug out in mountain slopes, and in this way inflicted heavy casualties upon the enemy. About 20 French aircraft were destroyed by Vietnamese guns right on the runway. Their accurate fire considerably limited the operation of the French airforce. At Điện Biên Phủ the Vietnamese, for the first time, used the Soviet rocket mortars popularly known as Katyushas that had inflicted heavy losses upon the Nazis in the Second World War. The foreign legionnaires, including many Germans who had fought in the Hitlerite army against the Soviet Union, screamed, "This is what we saw at Stalingrad!" They flung down their weapons and cowered in the trenches.

As the fighting continued, the Vietnamese dug their trenches closer and closer to the French fortifications, reducing the distance for a decisive attack. Finally the trenches were quite close to the French bunkers and, like giant pincers, took each dug out and every gun emplacement in their iron grip. On May 7, after 55 days of incessant fighting Điện Biên Phủ fell.

The garrison commander, de Castri, who had shortly before been promoted general, surrendered. A red flag with a gold star was hoisted on a bamboo pole over the general's command post proclaiming the historic victory of the Vietnamese patriots.

5

When the Vietnamese troops were only yet preparing to strike at Điện Biên Phủ, Hồ Chí Minh said in an interview to a Swedish journalist that the Vietnamese people wanted peace. "The war in

Vietnam was launched by the French Government. The Vietnamese people were obliged to take up arms and have heroically struggled for nearly eight years now against the aggressors to safeguard their independence and their right to live in freedom and peace. If the French colonialists continue their aggressive war, the Vietnamese people are determined to carry on their patriotic resistance until final victory. If the French government has drawn a lesson from the war it has been waging these last years and wants to negotiate an armistice in Vietnam and solve the Vietnam problem by peaceful means, the people and government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam are ready to meet this desire."

This opened the way for a settlement. Upon Soviet initiative an international conference opened in Geneva with the participation of Vietnamese representatives. The spectacular victory of the People's Army at Điện Biên Phủ determined the outcome of the Geneva conference and dashed the colonialists' hope to perpetuate their domination in Vietnam.

The Geneva Agreements were signed on July 20, 1954, putting an end to the war. They guaranteed Vietnam peace, national independence and territorial integrity. Vietnam was temporarily divided into two parts in order to restore peace and regroup the belligerents. The demarcation line passed along the 17th parallel. The participants in the conference did not regard it as a political frontier, but as a temporary dividing line. The agreements also provided for holding in July 1956 a democratic general election in the entire territory of Vietnam with a view to unifying the country.

The peaceful settlement was a great victory for the Vietnamese people, for all progressive and peace forces in the world. Here is Hồ Chí Minh's comment: "For the first time in history, a small and weak colonised country defeated a mighty colonial power... It was a glorious victory of our people, and concurrently a victory of the forces of peace, democracy and socialism in the world. Once again Marxism-Leninism illuminated the path for the working class and the people, and led them to triumph in the struggle to save their country and safeguard the revolutionary gains."

On July 22, 1954, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam held its last session in the guerilla zone. The Geneva cease-fire had not yet taken effect, and enemy aircraft were still flying over Việt Bắc. This is why the government held the session in a deep trench at the foot of a mountain. Exactly at the appointed hour a horseman astride a beautiful black stallion appeared in the distance. He dismounted and walked smiling towards the gathering. It was President Hồ Chí Minh.

He climbed a makeshift rostrum and looked at his associates. Their faces, like his own, radiated joy. So much blood had been shed, and so much effort spent. Now all that was over. Hồ Chí Minh was jubilant. He said the army and the people had done their job honourably. But the next move was just as important: to reunite the country, and secure national independence, democracy and peace. He spoke of sad things, too.

He said, for example, that it would be hard for residents in the South to see the People's Army leaving for the North. The south was the first to have risen up in struggle. The population of Nam Bộ had suffered more than anybody else. It was painful for Southerners to stay behind, even temporarily, under a reactionary regime. But the South and North would fight on for reunification, for early general elections.

The new situation in which economic reconstruction was at the top of the list, was no less of a responsibility than the war, said the President.

The Party's most important task was to preserve its unity, and the unity of the people, and to consolidate the united national front.

Among the foreign journalists invited to Việt Bắc long before the rumblings of the war had ceased was Soviet cameraman Roman Karmen, who had once shot a film about the fighting in Vietnam. Here is what he wrote about his meeting with Hồ Chí Minh in those days:

"A narrow path cut through the impenetrable jungle was known only to the guides. The air was laden with the aroma of bamboo thickets, palm trees and plantains. Amidst these thickets stood the bamboo shelter of Hồ Chí Minh, which looked like thousands of similar peasant huts: 'earthen floor, the roof made of palm leaves, and no proper walls. All around was forest, chirping birds, huge banana leaves rustling, and softly creaking bamboo trees. 'The presidential palace,' said Hồ Chí

Minh wryly. Stacks of fresh newspapers and magazines on the desk, a typewriter. And instead of the bed a mat on the floor.

"I am used to it," said Hồ Chí Minh. "For one thing, I can take off any moment. I have developed this style over the years of revolutionary struggle and underground work. It takes me five minutes to get up and leave."

"The conversation was in Russian. We asked him:

"Did you find it hard to learn Russian?"

"A revolutionary must know the language of Lenin."

"How many hours a day do you work?"

"I rise with the birds, and I go to sleep when the stars appear in the sky."

"Later, we discovered that this was not quite so. Many times I saw Hồ Chí Minh, cane in hand, the legs of his pants and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, stroll by the light of a bamboo torch held by his companion and bodyguard, along a narrow jungle path. The President was on his way to some distant village in the mountains or coming back from a conference.

"I asked Hồ Chí Minh if I could take a picture of his forest residence. He consented.

"I photographed him walking around the rice-fields, climbing up an almost sheer mountain path or wading across a stream. I knew there might not be another such opportunity. I had only a few hours left of the 'jungle period' that had lasted a full eight years. I have filmed Hồ Chí Minh and his ever-present cane, walking thousands of miles about his native country, indomitable at sixty-four. And what I have filmed is history, history in the making."

Seven and a half years before, the legendary Hanoi regiment was leaving the capital. Now came the day of their return.

On October 10, 1954, Hanoi gave it a rousing welcome. The celebrated 308th division moved in with its motorised troops and artillery.

The sun-lit streets and squares of Hanoi filled with people in holiday attire. Thousands of flags decorated houses and streamers glorified President Hồ Chí Minh, the Party and the People's Army. People had made the streamers, flags and portraits behind shuttered windows and at risk to their lives before the colonial armies had withdrawn.

The Hanoi regiment entered the city from the west.

When they crossed the city limits, the soldiers were showered with flowers. Hanoi saluted its liberators with cheers, songs and applause.

## BATTLE AGAIN

*The people of Vietnam, the home country of the most modest and the most consistent Marxist-Leninist of our time, the never-to-be-forgotten and most beloved Hồ Chí Minh- this heroic people impressed us with their patriotic ardour and revolutionary deeds.*

Fidel Castro

1

The Geneva agreements enabled the Vietnamese to achieve their goals by peaceful political means. They also enabled them to restore the Democratic Republic of Vietnam within its old frontiers as proclaimed on September 2, 1945. But this time their aspirations, notably their desire for unity, were thwarted by another enemy, U.S. imperialism, much more formidable than the French.

The U.S. imperialists sought to keep up neocolonialist oppression in the southern part of the country, temporarily separated from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, suppress the progressive, democratic forces there by setting up a puppet regime, and in this way prevent the further spread of the revolutionary liberation movement in Indochina.

Washington was well aware that strict observance of the Geneva Agreements, and primarily the holding of general elections within the specified time limits, could result in the unification of Vietnam under the Vietnam Workers' Party largely due to the influence of the Communists and particularly President Hồ Chí Minh both in the North and South.

In his memoirs, the then U.S. President Eisenhower wrote of his government's Vietnam policy: "I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs, who did not agree

that had the elections been held... 80 per cent of the population would have voted for Hồ Chí Minh."

State Secretary Dulles thought so too. In a telegram dated July 7, 1954, that is, before the Geneva Agreements had been signed, he instructed his diplomats as follows: since it was undoubtedly true that elections might eventually mean unification of Vietnam under Hồ Chí Minh, this made it all the more important they should only be held as long after the cease-fire agreement as possible.

Long before the signing of the Geneva Agreements, the United States began undermining any peaceful settlement of the Vietnam problem. To start with, Washington found a person the United States could rely upon in its military intervention in South Vietnam: it was Ngô Đình Diệm, graduate of a Jesuit college in the United States, who was connected with the CIA since 1948. A fortnight before the Geneva Agreements were signed, undercover CIA agents succeeded in having him appointed prime minister in Bảo Đại's government.

In the first few months after the cease-fire, Washington augmented its military, diplomatic and economic personnel in South Vietnam. American missions and advisers filled the places vacated by the French, and soon took over the government functions of the Saigon regime.

Nominally, Bảo Đại, who lived in France, continued to be head of South Vietnam. But this did not quite suit the ruling element in the United States nurturing plans to make South Vietnam an American colony of a new type. To get rid of Bảo Đại, the US advisers helped Ngô Đình Diệm hold a referendum. The voters had little choice: either say "yes" to the monarchy and the hateful Bảo Đại or to the republic and Ngô Đình Diệm. The outcome of the rigged referendum was a foregone conclusion.

On October 26, 1955, Ngô Đình Diệm put himself at the head of the so-called Republic of Vietnam in Sài Gòn. The newly formed republic was promptly recognised by the United States and Britain, and a little later by France.

With the blessings of his overseas sponsors, Ngô Đình Diệm proceeded to perpetuate the division of Vietnam. Police terror swept across Vietnam south of the 17th parallel. Former participants in the

Resistance movement - Communists, democrats, neutralists, and all those who supported the Geneva Agreements -were flung into jail or shot without trial. Concentration camps sprang up all over the country. Ngô Đình Diệm ignored the many proposals of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for holding general elections under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreements.

The narrow stream called Bến Hải, the temporary line of demarcation, was, with heavy prodding from the U.S. imperialists and their stooges in South Vietnam, turned into a fortified barrier, as if North and South were separated by an ocean. This demarcation line also slashed across the hearts of millions of people separated from their relatives and friends. The North and South began developing in different directions.

When peace was restored in North Vietnam, the government completed the agrarian reform, and abolished large-scale landownership acting on the land to the tiller slogan. The first steps were taken to set up agricultural cooperatives.

In 1958-1960 the working people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam carried out a three-year economic development plan. North Vietnam embarked upon broad socio-economic change, signalling the beginning of a socialist revolution.

In September 1960, the Vietnam Workers' Party held its 3rd congress. For the first time after thirty years of heroic struggle, it could convene in the open, at Hanoi.

In his opening speech, Hồ Chí Minh described the 3rd Congress as "the Congress of socialist construction in the North and of struggle for peaceful national unification".

The Resolution of the Congress pointed out that "in the present stage, the Vietnamese revolution has two strategic tasks:

"Firstly, to carry out the socialist revolution in the North.

"Secondly, to liberate the South from the rule of the American imperialists and their henchmen, achieve national reunification and complete independence and freedom throughout the country.

"These two strategic tasks are closely related to each other and impel each other forward".

The delegates again elected Hồ Chí Minh Chairman of the Party's Central Committee.

Over the years of peaceful construction, Hồ Chí Minh gave priority to the economic development of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He toured the country, met local Party officials, workers and peasants, addressed conferences and meetings, and rallied people for rebuilding the country on socialist lines and reuniting it. "The North is the foundation, the root of the fighting forces of our people," Hồ Chí Minh said. "Only when the foundation is firm can the house be stable. Only when the roots are strong can the tree flourish. We must strive to consolidate the North in every aspect, enabling the North to be firm and strong and move forward."

The heroic effort of the Vietnamese and the generous assistance of the fraternal socialist countries enabled backward, agrarian North Vietnam to move ahead economically. The successful fulfilment of the First Five-Year Plan (1961-1965) laid the material and technical foundation of a socialist society. North Vietnam now had an iron-and-steel and non-ferrous metals industry, engineering, and a power industry. Cooperatives and large state-run establishments, which now predominated in North Vietnam, changed the countryside beyond recognition. The North, which had earlier suffered chronic food shortages, now surpassed South Vietnam, always regarded the country's rice bowl, in agricultural output. In ten years of peaceful development North Vietnam accomplished a cultural revolution, and practically did away with the blight of illiteracy.

Hồ Chí Minh promoted the role of the Party in socialist construction.

He urged the Vietnamese to combine national interests and their internationalist duty. He pointed out that the Party and people must rally in defence of the socialist community, help strengthen the unity of the world Communist and working-class movement on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism, and back the peoples' drive for national independence, democracy, socialism and peace.



Hồ Chí Minh was happy to be able to write in those days: "Socialist construction in our country and our being part of the socialist world community are a realisation of Lenin's idea that a backward colonial country can advance to socialism by-passing the stage of capitalist development. The successes of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in all fields are ensured, on the one hand, by the self-sacrifice, heroism and creative activity of its people, who are carrying out Lenin's instructions on industrialisation and collectivisation, and, on the other hand, by the disinterested, fraternal assistance of the Soviet-led socialist camp."

2

As they built a socialist society, the working people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam never forgot about the suffering of their fellow-countrymen in the South, where freedom fighters were battling imperialists and their puppets, who had blocked the Geneva Agreements.

Thoughts of South Vietnam, which the imperialists wanted to wrest away from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and turn into a colony, preoccupied Hồ Chí Minh and his associates. The peaceful unification of the country was at the centre of the activities of the Vietnam Workers' Party. What Hồ Chí Minh had said in 1946 - "Today Vietnam is our common country... Rivers can dry up, mountains can wear away, but our solidarity will never decrease" - inspired millions of Vietnamese in the struggle against their latest enemy.

In December 1960, the patriotic forces of South Vietnam set up the National Front for Liberation to head the armed struggle for independence and freedom.

To save the Saigon puppet regime, the Americans mounted a military intervention. They landed their troops in South Vietnam, and unleashed an undeclared air-war against North Vietnam. The Vietnamese again had to take up arms to defend their freedom. The second national war of resistance began against the imperialist aggression.

As a TASS correspondent, I witnessed this heroic struggle at first hand. The stark reality of the first days of the war still stands before

my eyes. The government again appealed to the people, who had only just won a long-awaited peace: "All citizens must come to the defence of their homeland!"

Day and night soldiers marched in the streets of Hanoi.

Their columns filed past, making way for lorries pulling battle-ready AA-guns.

The newspapers wrote that in the first days of the war, about a million people had volunteered for the People's Army. The whole nation was poised to defend its independence and sovereignty, the right to peace and happiness.

And again, as in the years of the first Resistance, the heart and soul of the struggle was President Hồ Chí Minh. In April 1965, he was appointed Chairman of the Supreme Defence Council set up by decision of the National Assembly. In his National Assembly speech Hồ Chí Minh set forth the goals that the Vietnamese were determined to fight for to the last drop of blood.

"The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam once again solemnly declares that its unswerving stand is resolutely to defend Vietnam's independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. Vietnam is one country, the Vietnamese are one nation, nobody is allowed to infringe this sacred right. The US imperialists must respect the Geneva Agreements, withdraw from South Vietnam and immediately stop their attacks on North Vietnam. That is the only way to settle the war in Vietnam, to implement the 1954 Geneva Agreements, to safeguard peace in Indochina and Southeast Asia. There is no other solution.

Such is the answer of our people and government to the US imperialists."

Vietnam was not alone in its struggle against the world's most powerful imperialist nation. The Soviet Union, the forces of peace, democracy and socialism throughout the world, came to its aid. When the imperialist aggressors made their first bombing raids on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Soviet government declared that it would do all it could to ensure Vietnam's security and to strengthen its defence capability. In record short time, the Vietnam People's Army

was equipped with modern Soviet armaments: anti-aircraft missiles, artillery, fighter planes, and other equipment. The Soviet Union sent military experts to assemble and adjust the weaponry and teach the Vietnamese how to use it. In a short time, many thousands of Vietnamese learned to combat the enemy airforce. Many young Vietnamese took a crash course in flying at Soviet military schools and were then dispatched to the newly formed air squadrons.

With the generous assistance of the Soviet Union and other fraternal socialist countries, the Vietnamese Communists under Hồ Chí Minh's guidance quickly turned North Vietnam into an impregnable fortress which the aircraft and ships of the aggressor vainly tried to take by storm. American generals regarded this highly effective air-defence system as the strongest ever recorded in military history.

In the course of the second war of resistance, Hồ Chí Minh and his associates made creative use of Marxism-Leninism and successfully put into effect the strategy of revolutionary war. They succeeded in combining various forms of struggle - armed, political and diplomatic - and thereby contributed to revolutionary practice.

While repelling fierce U.S. attacks, North Vietnam supported the national liberation struggle in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

It had close links with South Vietnam, and with Laos and Cambodia via the celebrated Hồ Chí Minh Trail, which ran along the Lao border.

Back in the years of preparation for the August Revolution and the struggle against the French colonialists, Vietnamese revolutionaries used this trail to maintain communications between the Party organisations of Bắc Bộ and Nam Bộ bypassing cordons of the colonial police. After the second war of resistance broke out, the Hồ Chí Minh Trail (called so by Western journalists because Hồ Chí Minh had become the symbol of heroic resistance) was turned into a communication line skilfully concealed from enemy pilots by a thick canopy of tropical trees. Moving south day and night were columns of lorries carrying volunteers, munitions, food and medical supplies. By the same road, but in the opposite direction, went lorries carrying the sick and wounded, and children of the fighting patriots.

The new enemy was much stronger than any that Vietnam had ever fought, and the scale of the fighting was by far the greatest. However, Hồ Chí Minh was confident of the ultimate victory. And he instilled optimism in the hearts of all patriots.

Particularly memorable was July 17, 1966, when Hồ Chí Minh made his traditional radio address on the anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Agreements. Shortly before, the aggressors had again escalated the air war, sending 50 fighter-bombers to raid Hanoi's suburbs. The air was still filled with the smoke of explosions. It was a time when the people in the capital craved to hear the voice of their President. The whole country gathered round loudspeakers in the streets. Transistor radios were switched on in the guerilla hideouts in the jungle, and behind shuttered windows of resistance fighters in the enemy-occupied cities of the South. Hồ Chí Minh said:

"The war may last five, ten twenty or more years; Hanoi, Haiphong and other cities and enterprises may be destroyed; but the Vietnamese people will not be intimidated! Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. Once victory is won, our people will rebuild their country and make it even more prosperous and beautiful."

Hồ Chí Minh's words, "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom!" became the motto of the people's liberation struggle, and inspired their faith in ultimate victory.

It was a patriotic war, a war for the salvation of the homeland. The Vietnamese were defending their independence, freedom, and the very foundations of their life. Calling upon their countrymen to rise like one man in the struggle against the enemy, the Party and President Hồ Chí Minh appealed primarily to their patriotic sentiments and pride, and love of their country.

Hồ Chí Minh never identified the imperialist aggressors with the U.S. people, and warned others against it. In an interview to a U.S. magazine he said he never identified Americans, most of whom wanted justice, with their successive governments, which had committed no few crimes against the Vietnamese. Those who were trying to deprive the Vietnamese of their independence and freedom, he said, had forgotten the Declaration of Independence, which said that all men were created

equal, and were endowed with the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Repulsing the U.S. aggression, the Vietnamese relied primarily upon themselves, their own material resources and revolutionary drive. They also relied on the solidarity of friends all over the world. Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnam Workers' Party developed an effective strategy of combining all-round national efforts with international support. The leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam pointed out that victory in the long struggle against the imperialist aggressors was inseparable from the massive assistance received from the Soviet Union, the other socialist countries, and from progressives all over the world.

The Vietnamese were fighting against heavy odds. In 1965, socialist China, Vietnam's northern neighbour, was switched out of the picture by the so-called cultural revolution. For several years, that country was under the heels of "the cruellest kind of military-feudal dictatorship", as it was described in later documents of the Communist Party of China.

The United States imperialists took advantage of the events in China to further escalate the aggressive war against Vietnam.

A consistent internationalist, Hồ Chí Minh took very close to heart the excesses of the "cultural revolution" which proved tragic for the Chinese people and for the cause of socialism in general. He condemned the ugly forms of the Mao Zedong personality cult. In an article about revolutionary morals and the struggle against individualism, written shortly before his death, Hồ Chí Minh pointed out that if the malady of individualism struck a party leader it would inevitably affect the Party and the whole nation, and damage the cause of socialism. The Vietnamese Communists interpreted Hồ Chí Minh's words as unambiguous criticism of Mao Zedong's personality cult and the excesses of the "cultural revolution" in China.

3

After the first enemy air-raids on Hanoi, the City Administrative Committee stepped up the evacuation to rural areas of kindergartens, schools, industrial establishments and offices that had begun somewhat

earlier. I remember the whispered rumours that Hồ Chí Minh would not leave the city and stay in his wooden house on stilts in his the palace grounds. The thought of this gave people an added charge of confidence.

Over the many long years of struggle, Hồ Chí Minh had grown used to a spartan life style. Upon his return to Hanoi after eight years of guerilla fighting, and a long life in caves and bamboo huts, he asked that a modest wooden house be built for him on the grounds of the presidential palace. In this modest abode he lived and worked in those grim days.

His desk stood on the bank of a miniature pond grown over with giant water lilies. Overhanging the desk was the shady canopy of a tree he had planted himself. After working hours, he watered the flowers and fed the fish in the pond - this was his favourite pastime. If there was an air alert Hồ Chí Minh, like all the other residents of the presidential palace, put on a crash helmet and went down into the bomb shelter.

Braving danger, he often drove out of Hanoi to air defence units, and talked to pilots. In Vietnam, people are wont to ask one another about one's health. And people were particularly concerned about the health of their President. Laughing, he replied:

"Bring down more U.S. aircraft, and I'll be in the best of health."

He was visiting a military unit on the day reports had come from Moscow that a spacecraft with a lunar vehicle had landed on the Moon. Hồ Chí Minh asked the soldiers if they had heard about it, and added:

"Ours is an epoch of science and technology. To beat the American aggressors, it is not enough to follow the correct line of the Party and to be a hero. It is also necessary to know science and technology. As soldiers, you must study the science and technology of the fraternal socialist countries in order to be on top of the situation."

Hồ Chí Minh suffered greatly when he heard about the savage acts committed by the imperialists and their underlings in the South. And he always rejoiced at every new victory of the Vietnamese patriots in the South. In the last few years of his life, knowing he did not have much time left, he was haunted by the thought that he had not yet accomplished his task. He wanted to see the day when the South and North would reunite. In 1963, when the National Assembly decided to

award him the Gold Star, he thanked the deputies and requested their permission not to accept this top decoration while the country was still divided and patriots were still shedding their blood in the South.

"I beg the Assembly to agree to this: we shall wait until the South is completely liberated and the country peacefully reunified. When the North and South will have reunited into one family, then the National Assembly will allow our Southern compatriots to hand me this high decoration."

Reminiscing about those days, Lê Văn Lương, a veteran of the Communist Party, said: "When our South was engaged in a bitter struggle against the United States, Bác Hồ thought of visiting the South in order to meet friends and countrymen, and asked that such a visit be arranged for him. Realising that Bác Hồ's health was failing and that he was well advanced in years, the comrades in the Political Bureau replied that the most important thing at the time was to win as soon as possible, after which he would be invited to the South. To this he said: "I want to go there now." For a long time, Bác Hồ kept coming back to this question and asking about the preparations for his trip. Seeing that he was determined to go, those responsible for such trips had to tell him that the road to the South was very hard and they feared he would not cope. Hồ replied that if he could not go by car, he was willing to go on foot. In fact, he added, he'd prefer to go on foot.

In the last few years of his life, Hồ Chí Minh continued to go for long walks, climbing mountains, and sometimes scaling steep slopes. The doctors tried to stop him, then gave up. He wanted to see for himself if he still had strength enough to visit the South.

He wanted to talk to comrades from the South who came to Hanoi. Many Party workers and freedom fighters from the South, and especially women and children, met with Hồ Chí Minh. He questioned his guests about things in the South, and was glad to have those meetings.

Early in 1969, Hồ Chí Minh and Phạm Văn Đồng, played host to one of the many visiting groups of South Vietnamese patriots. Replying to his greetings, the only woman in that group said:

"Esteemed Uncle Hồ, your children and grandchildren in the South remember your behest to rout the American aggressors. And we shall

never waver, no matter how long we have to fight." Then she stopped, confused, and ended unexpectedly: "The only thing that is worrying us is your advanced age."

Hồ Chí Minh smiled. Even at nearly eighty, he had not lost his sense of humour. Turning to Phạm Văn Đồng, he asked:

"How old shall I be this year?"

"Seventy-nine."

"So, I still have 21 years before I turn a hundred. I remembered I called upon my countrymen to fight for five, ten, even twenty years, if necessary. Even if it takes us twenty years, I will have a whole year in reserve to visit my dear countrymen in the South..."

4

Over the years that I worked in Vietnam I repeatedly saw and heard Hồ Chí Minh. When he mounted the rostrum to address a public meeting his face was radiant and smiling. He raised his hand asking for silence, and began his speech with his customary:

"And now to adjourn our meeting marking our victories in the war against the U.S. aggressors, for the liberation of the South, let us sing our favourite, 'We Stand United'. Three, four..." And he broke into the song that he had sung in his guerilla days in the jungles, his voice still sounding loud and clear.

He was striking in appearance. His "special features" were his pointed white goatee worn by old men in Vietnam, and his kind expressive eyes, always youthful, always alive and sparkling. He had a light gait, quick movements, and youthful ardour. He showed genuine interest in what people were saying. His uncommon friendliness created an easy and cordial atmosphere. Like all those who had the privilege to meet him, I was struck by his simplicity of manner combined with the iron will and boundless courage of a revolutionary fighter.

Hồ Chí Minh was truly the Leninist type of revolutionary, who not only adopted but indeed put into practice Lenin's great ideas, and who, by force of his personal qualities and personal example, demonstrated

the strength and soundness of communist ideas. When asked by a correspondent what three of political virtues he would like to have, the outstanding Chilean Salvador Allende replied, "Hô Chí Minh's integrity of character, his humaneness, and majestic modesty."

Right up to the end of his days, Hô Chí Minh retained these qualities. He was as simple and modest as Lenin. Here is what Lê Văn Lương wrote in his reminiscences:

"In 1969, the Political Bureau passed a resolution to organise a celebration of four important dates: the 40th anniversary of the Party, the 25th anniversary of the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the centenary of Lenin's birth and the 80th birthday anniversary of Hô Chí Minh. Hô was ill at the time. A bit earlier, to spare his strength, the Political Bureau had proposed that he preside at discussions of only the most important Party and state affairs. The Political Bureau should deal with other matters in his absence, and then report the results. The discussion of the four anniversaries belonged to the second group of questions. When Ho heard about it, he said:

"I agree only with three-quarters of this decision... To commemorate Lenin's centenary is right. But I don't think my birthday should be given prominence."

Many people who were close to Hô Chí Minh spoke of a specific trait of his character. In documents that he was given to edit he invariably crossed out negative turns of speech and replaced them with positive ones. For instance, the phrase "Without socialism the peoples cannot achieve full liberation" he changed to "Only socialism can bring people full liberation..." This was not a purely linguistic approach. It represented his pattern of thinking, that of an outstanding leader. He always singled out the positive side of any event or process opening the way to the future.

Hô Chí Minh attached tremendous importance to the political education of all members of the Party, the Party cadres, and indeed all working people. He thought it highly important to make them ardent patriots and revolutionaries. In an address to the youth, he said: "In any matter think first of all not about yourself, but about your

countrymen, about the whole nation... Be in the front ranks when things are tough, and stay behind when it comes to rewarding your efforts."

For all Vietnamese Communists, and for all Vietnamese people, he served as a model of how to serve the interests of the nation, of how to promote the public good, how to organise competition, to support everything that was progressive, to encourage criticism and self-criticism, how to tighten discipline, to arouse the enthusiasm of the masses, to rally the people for the struggle against the enemy.

One of the most remarkable features of Hô Chí Minh's character was his love for children. He had never had a family of his own, and gave all of his unspent fatherly feelings to the millions of Vietnamese children. He could often be seen amidst children at schools, at Young Pioneer clubs, at agricultural cooperatives.

I remember Hô Chí Minh in the time of peace attending receptions at the Soviet Embassy, after which he gathered the children of Soviet diplomats, treated them to sweets and asked them about their life in Vietnam. The children liked good old Uncle Hô.

Right up to his last days, Hô Chí Minh remained loyal to the principles of proletarian internationalism. Like all outstanding fighters for communism, he proved by his own example that those who are moved by love of their own country and people, would never betray the ideals of internationalist fraternity; that only a consistent internationalist is a genuine patriot.

Hô Chí Minh did a lot to promote Vietnam's fraternal relations with the socialist countries, with the international communist movement, and the national liberation forces.

A great friend of the Soviet people, he had a great admiration for Lenin and the Great October Socialist Revolution. In newspaper articles, speeches at Party congresses and conferences, and at public meetings he propagated the achievements of the Soviet Union, which he called "the bulwark of the revolutionary movement and the struggle for world peace", the most powerful bastion of progress, democracy and peace", and "living evidence of the superiority of the socialist system over the capitalist". He said: "In the face of imperialists who seek to

prolong their tottering system detested by all peoples, we, revolutionaries of all countries, must at all times strengthen our unity with the USSR and the Communist Party of the USSR."

He always saw the Soviet Union as the closest and most dependable friend of fighting Vietnam. Hồ Chí Minh was sure the Vietnamese would never forget that they largely owed their victories to the massive assistance of the Soviet Union.

Hồ Chí Minh paid several visits to the USSR after the Vietnam Revolution, both as President and Party leader. In 1955, as soon as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam embarked upon economic reconstruction, he headed a government delegation to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. In the course of that visit the two countries signed their first cooperation agreements, and consolidated the fraternal friendship and solidarity between the two countries.

In the 1920s, Hồ Chí Minh dreamed of meeting Lenin and visiting his Kremlin office. Thirty years later, he was shown around Lenin's flat and office which had shortly before been turned into a museum. His inscription in the visitors' book read: "Lenin is a great teacher of the proletarian revolution. A man of high moral integrity, he teaches all of us how to work hard, how to be thrifty, morally pure and honest. Lenin's behests will live forever."

Before boarding his home-bound plane, Hồ Chí Minh made a short and moving speech in Russian:

"We are returning home, taking with us the fraternal love and friendship of the Soviet people. And although Vietnam and the Soviet Union are thousands of kilometres distant from each other, our hearts will always beat in unison."

One of his last major printed works was an article in *Pravda* about the 50th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. Each line was permeated with fraternal feeling. "At the height of their anti-U.S. resistance for national salvation, determined to defeat the U.S. aggressors and successfully build socialism in their land, the Vietnamese people, grateful and confident, turn their thoughts to the

Soviet Union, the home of the great Lenin and the glorious October Revolution," Hồ Chí Minh wrote.

"We Vietnamese have a saying, when you drink water, think of the spring. The more they recall the days of humiliation under foreign rule and the revolutionary struggle marked by sacrifices and hardships and also by glorious victories, the more the working class, the people of Vietnam, are grateful to Lenin and the October Revolution..."

"Following the path charted by the great Lenin, the path of the October Revolution, the Vietnamese people have won great victories. That is why their attachment and gratitude to the Soviet people are most profound."

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, all Soviet people, always hold Hồ Chí Minh in high esteem. Soviet people have always regarded Hồ Chí Minh as an outstanding revolutionary and an eminent leader of the international Communist and national liberation movement, a staunch Marxist-Leninist, and consistent fighter for socialism, and a devoted friend of the Soviet people.

## HIS NAME AND DEEDS WILL LIVE FOREVER

1

In the evening of September 1, 1969, the residents of Hanoi filled the Palace of Congresses to mark Independence Day. However, none of them looked festive. For the first time, the central seat of the presiding committee, usually filled by Hồ Chí Minh, was vacant.

Although no official word had come from the presidential chancellery, the city knew that the President was gravely ill.

Two days later, Hồ Chí Minh died.

It is said that when he opened his eyes for the last time shortly before his death, he asked: "How are things in the South? Will there be holiday fireworks in Hanoi on September 2?"

Hồ Chí Minh had a will and testament to the Party and the people. It was full of revolutionary optimism, and with faith in the prosperous future of Vietnam.

"The war of resistance against the U.S. aggression may drag on. Our people may yet have to face new sacrifices of life and property. Whatever happens, we must keep firm our resolve to fight the U.S. aggressors till total victory.

*Our mountains will always be, our rivers  
will always be, our people will always be;  
The American invaders defeated, we will rebuild  
our land ten times more beautiful.*

"No matter what difficulties and hardships lie ahead, our people are sure of total victory. The U.S. imperialists will have to go. The South and North will be reunified."

Hồ Chí Minh wanted to be sure that after his death the Vietnam Workers' Party would continue to be the vanguard of the people.

He wrote in his testament"

"Unity is an extremely precious tradition of our Party and people. All comrades, from the Central Committee down to the cell, must cherish the Party's unity and singleness of mind like the apple of their eye.

"Ours is a Party in power. Each Party member, each cadre must be deeply imbued with revolutionary morality, and show industry, thrift, integrity, uprightness, total dedication to the public interest and complete selflessness. Our Party should preserve absolute purity and prove worthy of its role as the leader and most loyal servant of the people."

All progressives in the world mourned Hồ Chí Minh's death. More than 22,000 telegrams and letters of condolence poured in from 121 countries - from heads of government and state, from leaders of Communist and Workers' Parties and the national liberation movements, from democratic public organisations, from veterans of the world revolutionary movement, and from well-known public figures.

The message, sent jointly by the Central Committee of the CPSU, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the Council of

Ministers of the USSR to the leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, reads: "The great son of the heroic Vietnamese people, the outstanding leader of the international Communist and national liberation movement, and a great friend of the Soviet Union has died.

"Comrade Hồ Chí Minh has given all his remarkable life, and all his talent of a revolutionary to the cause of the struggle for a happy future of his people, for the triumph of Marxism-Leninism. It is hard to overestimate his contribution to the creation on the principles of Marxism-Leninism of the Vietnam Workers' Party. The Party is the acknowledged leader of the Vietnamese people in their struggle for liberation and socialism. He stood at the helm of the August Revolution, in the crucible of which the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the first socialist state in Southeast Asia, was born. Inspired by Comrade Hồ Chí Minh, the Vietnamese people have dealt a shattering blow to the imperialist aggressors and have initiated a determined struggle against the U.S. invaders and their allies, for the liberation of South Vietnam.

"The seething energy of Comrade Hồ Chí Minh, his iron will, his indomitable courage, coupled with simplicity and humaneness, have earned him profound love and respect in Vietnam, in the Soviet Union, with the Communists and progressive men and women all over the world.

"The Communists of the Soviet Union, all Soviet people, value the tireless efforts of Comrade Hồ Chí Minh to promote fraternal friendship between the Vietnam Workers' Party and the CPSU, between the peoples of the Soviet Union and Vietnam. We in the Soviet Union will forever cherish his memory as a staunch Marxist-Leninist, a loyal friend of our Party and our country."

The funeral ceremony in Hanoi on September 9, 1969, grew into a demonstration of the love and respect of the Vietnamese for their leader and teacher, and of loyalty to the ideals of communism.

"Our people, our party lost their great leader and teacher," said Lê Duẩn, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party. "The international Communist movement, the national liberation movement and all progressive mankind have lost an outstanding fighter, a staunch and dear comrade-in-arms... As we say



good-bye to Comrade Hồ Chí Minh, we swear: to hold aloft the banner of national independence, the banner of our struggle for victory over the U.S. aggressor, to free the South, to protect the North, to reunite the country and in this way translate his dream into reality. As we say good-bye to Comrade Hồ Chí Minh, we swear: to give all of our strength to the struggle for the realisation of the noble socialist and Communist ideals which he has bequeathed to the working class and to our people so as to make our country prosperous and our people happy."

At its special meeting on November 29, 1969, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party adopted a decision to embalm Hồ Chí Minh's body and build a mausoleum in historical Ba Đình Square.

That was a truly national building project. People came here from far-off provinces, from cities and rural communities, from factories, government offices and from the armed forces. Those were the best workers from all over the land. A few years later, a mausoleum rose over the spot where, one morning in September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh had read out the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming the birth of a free and independent Vietnam.

Vietnam is very rich in multi-coloured decorative rock - marble and granite, and the semi-precious stone jasper. The architects made wide use of the marble from Đà Nẵng. The gold stars, hammer and sickle on the banner in the mausoleum's hall of mourning were made of the orange marble of Thanh Hóa province. The banner itself was decorated with the very rare bright-red jasper, also from Thanh Hóa. The crimson inscription on the front-piece and the red stripes on either side of the entrance were inlaid with the famous Trùng Khánh jasper from the province of Cao Lãnh where Hồ Chí Minh had spent many years of his life with the guerillas fighting against foreign invaders.

Flanking the mausoleum are the brightest plants that grow in Vietnam. The rare tree called *te* was brought here from a place where, according to legend, the Hùng Vương kings reigned four thousand years ago. The tree's tall trunk, straight as an arrow, is thrust upwards, towards the blue of the sky. The *te* tree symbolises the straight and glorious path that Hồ Chí Minh traversed. The square is bisected by an

alley of fan palms with long shapely feathery leaves. These palms are mostly known by their popular name *vạn tuế* or "ten thousand years", because of their very long life, and also because their leaves are always bright green in any weather. Growing next to the mausoleum is a shady banyan tree. The peach tree with rosy petals was brought from the province of Sơn La, the oil-bearing tree from Nam Bộ, the licorice tree from Trung Bộ.

The opening ceremony at the mausoleum was held on August 29, 1975, with a Soviet Party and Government delegation taking part.

2

Hồ Chí Minh did not live to see South Vietnam completely liberated and reunited with the rest of the country on socialist principles. But he had always believed that this would come. He ended his testament with the words: "My ultimate wish is that our entire Party and people, closely joining their efforts, will build a peaceful, reunified, independent, democratic and prosperous Vietnam and make a worthy contribution to the world revolution."

These words of Hồ Chí Minh's are a guide to action for his Party comrades, and also for the South Vietnamese, for the whole heroic nation.

On April 30, 1975, the Red Flag with a gold star was hoisted over Saigon, which had for so many years been the capital of the neocolonialist, anti-popular regime. This act concluded the long struggle for the liberation of the southern part of Vietnam. The national liberation revolution had finally won throughout the country.

Hồ Chí Minh's immortal image inspired the People's Army in its last attack on Saigon. Văn Tiến Dũng, who took part in that operation recalls:

"The command headquarters was at the Lộc Ninh base deep inside the forest. We did not sleep all night and heard the incessant rumble of tanks and heavy guns as they moved through the jungle, the loud 'hellos' of numerous army telephone operators, telephone conversations of army staffers, political commanders, service corps officials.

Bác Hồ's whole life, dedicated as it was to the revolutionary cause, was passing right in front of our eyes. We also recalled that Saigon had long since been named after him. And this is when all the members of

our command unanimously decided to send a telegram to the Political Bureau requesting that the last attack on Saigon be codenamed 'Operation Hồ Chí Minh'.

"At 7 p.m. on April 14, 1975, we received a telegram from the Political Bureau. It contained the following message: "We agree with your proposal to call the operation to free Saigon after Hồ Chí Minh'.

"On July 2, 1976, the National Assembly of United Vietnam met for the first session after the general elections, and proclaimed the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The great cause to which Comrade Hồ Chí Minh dedicated all his life - the creation of a single socialist Vietnam - had finally been achieved."

The Vietnamese people, the peoples of the countries of the socialist community, the world Communist and national liberation movement hold sacred the memory of Hồ Chí Minh. His name has been given to one of the largest cities in Southeast Asia, former Saigon. His name has been given, too, to the Young Communist League and the Young Pioneers' Organisation in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Memorial museums were set up in places where Hồ Chí Minh had lived and worked. His name was given to one of the squares in Moscow and to an institute of higher learning in Irkutsk, to the streets in the capitals of the German Democratic Republic, Mozambique and some other countries. A Soviet ship that makes frequent calls at Vietnamese ports also bears his name.

But the most majestic monument to Hồ Chí Minh are the historic victories scored by the peoples of Indochina: the reunification of Vietnam on socialist principles, the victory of the national-democratic revolution in Laos which embarked upon the socialist road, and the victory of the people's revolution in Kampuchea which put an end to the brutal Pol Pot regime.

These victories have consolidated the revolutionary alliance, and traditional ties between the peoples of the three fraternal countries of Indochina. Enemies have tried at different times to wreck the alliance, but in vain.

Millions of Vietnamese cherish the memory of Uncle Hồ and carry in their thoughts his behest: "There is nothing more precious than independence and freedom!"

The feelings of the Vietnamese Communists and all people of Vietnam were summed up in the Political Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam to the 4th Party Congress held in Hanoi on December 14-20, 1976. It reads in part: "At this glorious moment we are thinking with great emotion about our very dear Bác Hồ whom we sadly miss at this historic congress. All of our Party, all of our people, and the army are proud that they have honourably carried out Hồ Chí Minh's testament. His most cherished thoughts have become a reality.

The American imperialists have been driven from our country never to return. Our country has become independent and united, and is moving on towards socialism. The people of the South and the North have united into one family. As a token of the deep respect and affection in which the people of our country hold President Hồ Chí Minh, the Congress salutes him in their name and voices their boundless gratitude for devoting all his life to the cause of the country's national liberation and reunification, to the cause of the Party and the nation, for glorifying our country and leaving us and the future generations his immortal legacy."

## MILESTONES IN HỒ CHÍ MINH'S LIFE

**1890, May 19**

Nguyễn Sinh Cung (Hồ Chí Minh) was born in the village of Hoàng Trù, Nghệ An Province, Vietnam, into the family of a village schoolteacher.

**1905-1910**

He attended National College in Huế, the old imperial capital of Vietnam.

**1911-1917**

A cook's helper on board a French liner, a seasonal worker in Harlem, New York; a garbage collector, stoker and cook's helper in London, an employee at a Paris photographic studio.

**1918**

Joined the Socialist Party of France.

**1919, January**

Under the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc he forwards to an international conference in Paris "List of Claims of the Annamese People", the first political manifesto of the national liberation revolution of Vietnam.

**1920, July**

After reading the "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and the Colonial Questions", the first work of Lenin's he had ever read, Hồ Chí Minh became firmly committed to the Communist International.

**1920, December**

Attended the Tours Congress of the French Socialists where he joined the majority in voting for the creation of the French Communist Party, and became the first Communist in the history of Vietnam.

**1924, June**

Took part in the 5th World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow as a representative of Indochina.

**1925, June**

Led the initiative to set up the Association of the Revolutionary Youth of Vietnam, which anteceded the Communist Party of Vietnam.

**1930, February 3**

Chaired a unity conference of Vietnamese Communists at Kowloon (Hongkong), at which the Communist Party of Vietnam (later the Communist Party of Indochina, then the Vietnam Workers' Party, and finally the Communist Party of Vietnam) was formed.

**1935, July-August**

Participated in the 7th World Congress of the Comintern which approved the decision of the Executive Committee of the Communist International to admit the Communist Party of Indochina.

**1941, February 8**

After thirty years of wandering he returned to Vietnam by secretly crossing the border near the village of Pác Bó in Cao Bằng Province.

**1944-1945**

Directed preparations for a general armed uprising. On December 22, 1944, signed a directive about the

creation of an "armed detachment for political agitation" which laid the foundation for the future Vietnam People's Army. On August 16, 1945, directed the Congress of People's Representatives at Tân Trào, which decided upon the date of the general armed uprising; was elected Chairman of the National Liberation Committee.

**1945, September 2**

On behalf of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam he read out on Ba Đình Square in Hanoi the Declaration of Independence that proclaimed the birth of the first workers' and peasants' state in Southeast Asia.

**1946, March 2**

At its first session, the National Assembly elected him President and appointed him Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (he held the post until 1955).

**1946, December 20**

In a radio address he called upon the Vietnamese to wage a war of resistance against the French colonialists.

**1950, September**

In command of the operation to clear the northern provinces of the enemy. Victory enabled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to establish direct relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

**1951, February**

Addressed the 2nd Congress of the Communist Party of Indochina, which decided to change its name to the Vietnam Workers' Party. In his speech, Hồ Chí Minh called upon the Party and the people to

muster all available resources to bring the war of resistance to a victorious end. Was elected Chairman of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party.

**1954, July 22**

Addressed a message to the people in connection with the signing of the Geneva Agreements and the restoration of peace in Indochina.

**1955, June**

Paid a visit to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries at the head of a Party and Government delegation.

**1960, September**

Directed the 3rd Congress of the Vietnam Workers' Party which formulated the two strategic tasks of the new phase of the Vietnamese Revolution: the building of a socialist society in the North and the liberation of the South from the imperialists and their hirelings, peaceful reunification of the country.

Was re-elected Chairman of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party.

**1965, April**

Was appointed Chairman of the Supreme Defence Council. At a session of the National Assembly he appealed to the people: "Everybody rise to the struggle for the salvation of the country, against the US imperialist aggressors!"

**1969, September 2**

Died of a heart attack at his home in Hanoi.

On November 29, 1969, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party adopted a decision to embalm Hồ Chí Minh's body and perpetuate his memory.

Since August 29, 1975, Hồ Chí Minh has lain in the mausoleum in Ba Đình Square in Hanoi.

**Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới**  
**46 Trần Hưng Đạo, Hà Nội, Việt Nam**  
**Tel : 0084-4-8253841**  
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**HỒ CHÍ MINH**

**E. Cô-bê-lép**

**Chịu trách nhiệm xuất bản**

**MAI LÝ QUẢNG**

**Biên tập: Lý Kim Hải**

**Sửa bản in: Phan Quang Trung**

**Trình bày, vẽ bìa: Ngô Xuân Khởi**

In 300 bản, khổ 14x21,5cm, tại Xưởng in Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới. Giấy chấp nhận đăng ký kế hoạch xuất bản số: 53-1162/CXB, cấp ngày 19/12/97. In xong và nộp lưu chiểu quý II năm 2000.



