Before the First Indochina War:
Redefining the Origin of Vietnam’s Civil War

Figure 1: "Việt Gian!!! [Race Traitor!!!]" A Việt Minh and non-communist Vietnamese soldier accuse one another in 1947. From a Vietnam Nationalist Party affiliated paper in Huế, Sống Mới, 16 June 1947.

The fifth death anniversary of the revolutionary Phan Bội Châu took place in October 1945. This was the height of the Vietnamese revolution, a moment that conventional histories trace back to Phan Bội Châu’s assertive nationalism. Its leaders - figures like Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Trương Chinh -- we are told were inspired by Phan Bội Châu and he saw in them his natural successors. At that moment narratives of the revolution and Vietnamese unity that have defined this era should all come together. Yet it's precisely here that they fall apart.

That moment in 1945 was bitter. Present for the anniversary were two of Phan Bội Châu's closest colleagues, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Võ Bá Hấp. As Võ Bá Hấp stared at the ancestral alter he blurted out: "It's a good thing this old man has already passed away. If not, now he also would find himself arrested for being a 'reactionary' [phản động]"
or a 'race traitor' [Việt gian]." Huỳnh Thúc Kháng replied, "They'd only have to bring out a copy of 'Pháp-Việt đề-hwę' [Franco-Vietnamese Collaboration] and the inquisition would have all the evidence it needed." Hue's two most important scholars agreed, had Vietnam's preeminent revolutionary not died five years earlier, had he lived to see the 1945 revolution, he may not have lived to see the end of it.\(^1\)

I want to start here at the end of Phan Bội Châu's life and the beginning of the First Indochina War, at a moment that does not fit conventional accounts of either. Today I'll first address why periodizations of the First Indochina War are oriented toward foreign states and how this obscures the predominant Vietnamese dimension of this political conflict. Then I'll pick up the story I began, using the very end of Phan Bội Châu's life as an entry-point to the origins of the First Indochina War in the 1920s and 30s. It's here, in late-colonial society, that we'll see the emergence of a low-scale civil war between Vietnamese reformers and revolutionaries and a 'Cold War' conflict between communist and nationalist organizations. It's here that we'll see the leaders who presided over the rival Việt Minh and the State of Vietnam governments quarrel for the first, but not the last time. By incorporating these two earlier decades, I think we can broaden our understanding of the next three, highlighting the internal sources of political conflict that led to a civil war in Vietnam between August 1945 and April 1975.

**PERIODIZATION & HISTORIANS OF THE INDOCHINA WARS**

Conversely, historians, be they party apparatchiks or western academics, have externalized the sources of conflict in Vietnam. Wars are attributed largely to the actions of the Chinese, the French, or the Americans, and the Vietnamese masses unite to expel each. Consequently, historical periodizations are synchronized with the actions of external states. This pattern is pronounced in a recent surge of studies on the First Indochina War, authored by western diplomatic historians. With fieldwork and interests that lie in Washington, Paris, and London, for many of these scholars Indochina remains less the subject of their study than the setting for great power politics or the moral failings of American diplomacy. The First Indochina War thus begins with French actions in late 1946 and the Cold War arrives with the actions of America circa 1950.

This periodization and framework aligns with that of the communist party in Vietnam today. Their official histories externalize these conflicts as between the Vietnamese people, united under the communist party's leadership, and foreign states. Their non-communist opponents, the Bảo Đại led State of Vietnam and its successor state South Vietnam, are portrayed as a small clique of puppets serving the "French colonialists" and "American imperialists." The regime's propagandist terms have found favor. Now some Western diplomatic historians call the First and Second Indochina Wars "The French War" and "The American War" in a clumsy attempt to privilege a

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\(^1\) "Ngày giờ cụ Phan ở Huế 1945," Cải Tạo n. 26, 6 November 1948.
Vietnamese perspective. It accomplishes just the opposite. This terminology and its implicit periodization only reinforces a narrative that externalizes the conflict and bounds it with the actions of foreign states. Yet the fighting between Vietnamese began before the arrival of France or America and concluded long after they left. Indeed, far more Vietnamese died fighting the Việt Minh than did Frenchmen. Yet these periodizations reflect a narrative where the Indochina War remains wholly imposed upon Vietnam and external to it.

**PHAN BỘI CHÂU AND THE ORIGINS OF THE INDOCHINA WARS**

Instead, I propose we view the war as a process that emerged from within late-colonial society. This was the context, after all, informing Võ Bá Hạp and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng as they spoke about the conflict within their own society in 1945, among Vietnamese, one so severe that they feared it could claim their hero Phan Bội Châu. They were aware that from the late 1920s, Vietnamese began to engage in a fitful civil war pitting those supporting Franco-Vietnamese collaboration -- meaning to reform colonialism from within and in league with France -- and those pushing for an immediate overthrow of the colonial regime. There was, moreover, an ideological conflict within this radical bloc, a precursor to the Cold War, that pitted the Indochinese Communist Party against the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng. More specifically, I think Võ Bá Hạp and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng recalled one moment in this conflict, in the last year of Phan Bội Châu's life.

In 1939 two of the ICP's most important voices, Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trườn Chinh, were responsible for producing the Hanoi-based ICP paper *Notre Voix*. That spring, news spread among the ICP that Phan Bội Châu had sent a note to the outgoing French résident in Hanoi, Jean Châtel. Châtel began his career in Indochina helping suppress the Nghê-Tinh Soviets. Yet Phan Bội Châu wished him well and endorsed a program of "loyal Franco-Vietnamese collaboration." In response Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trườn Chinh launched a forceful counter-attack. "We have seen," they wrote in *Notre Voix*, "[Phan Bội Châu] publish the disjointed and unintelligible ideas of a witless child." To make him aware of "the consequences of his acts," they published and endorsed a guest column. It called for Phan Bội Châu to be brought before the court of public opinion. They noted that a foot-solder who had violated his duty may be forgiven. "But a chief who has betrayed his troops, that's an unpardonable crime! Yes, it's unpardonable!," they concluded hinting at the verdict and sentence they favored. The ICP would go on to claim that their take-down of Phan Bội Châu had won unreserved approval from Vietnam's leftist community. Indeed some ICP journals altered the tones of the old

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revolutionary's name in headlines to read "Châu The Traitor" [Phan Bội Châu]. The affair set off a public debate. Other commentators, who were decidedly not fellow travelers, retaliated. They accused *Notre Voix*'s editors of maligning and threatening Phan Bội Châu because he was a nationalist revolutionary and reformer, and not a communist adherent of the ICP.

This public display of hostility in 1939 was just one manifestation of a fracture that began two decades earlier between Vietnamese communists and nationalists. It can be traced to 1925, when Hồ Chí Minh arrived in southern China. In keeping with the Comintern United Front policy, Hồ Chí Minh began forming a broad-based Vietnamese organization under his command. However, doing so required subverting the Restoration Society of Phan Bội Châu and his longtime associate Nguyễn Hải Thần, who remained hostile to communism. The situation between these factions was growing tense when French security services arrested Phan Bội Châu in late June 1925.

Now sitting in Hanoi's infamous *Maison Centrale* prison in Hanoi, Phan Bội Châu wrote to the French Governor General explaining how glad he was to have escaped southern China. Phan Bội Châu outlined his disillusionment with the Soviet and Chinese communist model of revolution, which he found ill-suited to Vietnam, but was nevertheless gaining ground in China. A wave of student demonstrations erupted in protest of his imprisonment, prompting Resident Superior Pierre Pasquier to visit Phan Bội Châu in prison. Pasquier assured him that that he would be freed, his sentence commuted -- but what was it he wanted? Phan Bội Châu claimed that he sought to reform the protectorate, but warned Pasquier that, quote, "the political situation of Indochina is actually endangered by communism, which has taken over China." What he favored was a renewed and honest attempt at Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, a better alternative than looking to Japan or the Soviets for support. Three days later, he was freed, sent to live in Huế.

There Phan Bội Châu penned an open letter advocating national development through 'Franco-Vietnamese collaboration'. Members of radical youth groups like *Jeune Annam*, or *Young Annam*, frantically sent telegrams to newspaper offices, suspecting that the letter was a French ruse. But there could be no mistake. Soon Phan Bội Châu was making visits to the famous National Academy school. He encouraged students to study hard and attested that the French educational system was the world's finest. Radical

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3 "Lettre ouverte a M. Phan-bôi-Châu," *Notre Voix* n. 11, 26 March 1939; "Réponse aux 'défenseurs de M. Phan-bôi-Châu'" *Notre Voix* n. 16, 30 April 1939; On other papers, see the memoir of Trần Huy Liệu's lover: Thu Tâm (Phạm Thị Bạch), *Những ngày xa xăm ấy: Hội kỳ* [Bygone Times: A Memoir] (Garden Grove: Thảo ký, 1996), 61-62.


5 "Compte-rendu de l'entrevue qu'a eu M. le Résident Supérieur Pasquier avec M. Phan Boi Chau dans la prison de Hanoi, le 21 Décembre 1925," box 900, folder 2649, Agence de la France d'outre-mer (AGEFOM), ANOM.
newspaper columnists questioned whether Phan Bội Châu had betrayed his country. Some students, like Trần Huy Liệu and Bùi Công Trí, who would take leadership roles in the Việt Minh state, rebuked Phan Bội Châu and bluntly told him to shut his mouth. When Hồ Chí Minh learned of Phan Bội Châu's speeches, he instructed subordinates to, quote, "write him a letter of censure and, at the appropriate time, use violent means against him." These leftist organizations which would soon merge into the ICP had already begun criticizing Phan Bội Châu's ideas and accusing him of moral corruption. And Hồ Chí Minh's sister, Bạch Liên, walked about the boulevards of Huế openly insulting Phan Bội Châu. Pardoned by the French, the old revolutionary found himself increasingly condemned by leftist Vietnamese.7

**THE 'COLD WAR' IN 1920s VIETNAM**

That animosity increased with the emergence of the Vietnam Nationalist Party in the late 1920s. The Nationalist Party was then in a tense ideological rivalry with the ICP. Each attempted to supplant the other's influence domestically, and among Vietnamese communities in China and France. While the ICP had labeled Phan Bội Châu a "révolutionnaire démodé," an obsolete and outmoded personality, the nationalists still looked to him for inspiration.8 In Huế, Phan Bội Châu had been meeting with some Nationalist Party leaders before their 1930 Yên Bái uprising. He was also close to the former communist Nguyễn Thé Truyện, who was now captivated by Chiang Kai-shek and the republican ideals of Sun Yat-sen. He too was counseling the Vietnam Nationalist Party leadership. It was at this time that rumors began to circulate that the communists had betrayed Phan Bội Châu years ago, or that the ICP had informed on Nationalist Party, enabling the French police to target its members. The ICP suspected Nguyễn Thé Truyện was spreading these stories. Writing from the Soviet Union, Hồ Tùng Mậu ordered cadres to investigate Nguyễn Thé Truyện and rebut the rumors.9

But those rumors travel far. They found an audience among Vietnamese students and workers in France. There this same conflict between the ICP and Nationalist Party was underway. While the communist organizer Nguyễn Văn Tạo had attempted to win new recruits by fraudulently claiming the Yên Bái uprising was the work of the ICP, now

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7 Nguyễn Ái Quốc quoted in Larcher, "Les réformes coloniales," 413; On critiques, see Hoàng Dức Thi's memoir in: *Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, Contribution à l'histoire des mouvements de l'Indochine Française: Vol. 1* (Saigon: Direction des Affaires Politiques et de la Sûreté Générale, 1933), 38; Note "Phan-Boi-Chau," by Jean-Charles D'Elloy, undated, box 900, folder 2649, AGEGOM, ANOM.

8 Note n. 7243-SG, Governor General, 21 December 1930, 351, SPCE, ANOM.

9 Letter, (n. 10), Hồ Tùng Mậu to Đỗ Ngọc Du, 14 November 1929, III-129, SLOTFOM, ANOM; Sûreté Générale, "Note sur l'activite des partis d'opposition antifrancaise en indochine (sic)," First trimester of 1929, 1568, Nouveau Fonds, Indochine (INDO-NF), ANOM.
he and other communists like Trần Văn Giàu led a press campaign against Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries and reformers, denouncing former heroes like Nguyễn Thế Truyện as "traitors" and condemning "reformist nationalists" [quốc gia cải lương] including Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, Phạm Quốc, and Bùi Quang Chiêu.10 But the attacks could not blunt the ascendency of the Vietnam Nationalist Party in France. Affiliates of the ICP soon found themselves disarmed at meetings in Marseille, Le Havre, and Paris when nationalist partisans pointed out that the communists only printed leaflets. As proved at Yên Bái, the Nationalist Party was leading an actual fight against colonialism.11

Though the violence to that point had been mainly rhetorical, with the occasional fist-fight, French and Vietnamese communists escalated matters. Members of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party met with their Vietnamese counterparts in Marseille. They demanded an active campaign against the Nationalist Party received assurances that ICP members would no longer meet with Nationalist Party members. And, suspecting that the Nationalist Party was informing on them, the French Communist Party encouraged ICP cadres in Marseille to form a "Đội hòng Quân" [Red Army Squadron] that would identify and suppress police informers among the nationalists.12

Now, the conflict in Marseille was more the echo of a main affair in southern China and Vietnam. Here also the ICP leadership looked upon the Nationalist Party as a serious competitor, perhaps a temporary ally, but ultimately a class threat to overcome. Beginning in late 1929 the ICP Central Committee instructed its cadres to cooperate with the Nationalist Party, all the while propagandizing its members and leading them towards the ICP. "This means," the Committee clarified, "that the Communist Party will be secretly leading [the Vietnam Nationalist Party]." However, if the party resisted their conversion to communism, the ICP would and did cease all cooperation.13

Over the next decade the Nationalist Party and ICP fluctuated between expedient alliance and low-scale civil war. While the endurance of a more conciliatory pattern of Vietnamese politics remained possible, it was undermined by the more common

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12 Letter n. 1533, 22 December 1930; Letter n. 508, 9 April 1931, both in III-12, SLOTFOM, ANOM. "Note sur la propagande révolutionnaire," n. 176, 14 February 1931, III-81, SLOTFOM, ANOM.

reversion to partisan conflict. Each party's attempt to overcome the other led to spying and assassinations of suspected infiltrators and spies.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time Nguyễn Hải Thần, who was now working with exiled Nationalist Party leaders like Vũ Hồng Khanh in southern China, attempted to blunt the impact of the ICP infiltration campaign. In the early 1930s, he advised those in Tonkin to sever all contact with Nationalist party cells across the border in Guangxi, fearing they had been compromised by ICP cadres and could no longer be trusted.\textsuperscript{15}

But often too, the ICP found its campaign blunt by the Nationalist Party's hostility to communism. For their part, some ICP cadres were taken aback by any change in tactics that called for cooperation with their former rivals. Instead they continued to denounce nationalism. In another case, a communist cell had penetrated the leadership of a Nationalist Party cell. But so great was their hostility to communism, that the infiltrators feared they'd be killed upon revealing their true affiliation to the ICP. Instead they scuttled the mission.\textsuperscript{16}

These revolutionaries may have been taking their cues from Phan Bội Châu, who remained an important influence for them. He once again emerged on the national stage in 1938. That year he gave an interview on the state of the country and specifically his views on communist class-struggle. Once again he declared this ideology unsuitable and attacked its supporters. In forceful terms, he declared: "In sum, those who exploit socialism do so to split the ranks of the nation, to destroy our unity, and to annihilate our peoples' national spirit."\textsuperscript{17}

But the battle between the ICP and Nationalist Party was not at its fiercest in newspaper columns, but rather inside the colonial prison system at places like the Con Đảo penal colony. Confinement led to intense ideological conflict, and resulted in violent reprisals as each side attempted to overcome the other. A copy of the Nationalist Party's twelve-point platform for 1935 discovered in Hanoi's Maison Centrale demonstrates that they viewed the existential threat not as France, but the ICP. The first two priorities were: "1.) Raise awareness of the nation [Đổ cảo tư-tuồng Quốc-dân], 2.) Eliminate communism [Đạo-Cộng]."\textsuperscript{18} Violent fights were not uncommon. Some who had betrayed their party to join the other were assassinated. At times the guards segregate the two sides to prevent further bloodshed. "The cool ocean breeze on Con Đảo," one prisoner

\textsuperscript{14} Sûreté du Tonkin, Note Confidentielle n. 138/C, 22 June 1930, 6990, Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds (RST-NF), ANOM.

\textsuperscript{15} Letter n. 163-CS, L'Administrateur-Adjoint de Laokay to Résident Supérieur au Tonkin, 8 April 1933, 1598, RST-NF, ANOM; Sûreté du Tonkin, Note Confidentielle n. 12097/S, 23 Sept 1930, 6990, RST-NF, ANOM.


\textsuperscript{17} "Phòng vấn ... nhà cách mạng Phan-Bội-Châu đối với vấn đề giải-cập tranh-dấu," Tràng-An Báo, 7 October 1938.

\textsuperscript{18} Sûreté du Tonkin, Note Confidentielle N. 608-S, 18 Jan. 1935, 7069, RST-NF, ANOM.
remembered of these battles in the 1930s, "could not dissipate the smoldering atmosphere that enveloped the island."\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Conclusion}

When the Vietnamese revolution began in 1945, those tensions had not yet dissipated. The Việt Minh and its communist leadership oversaw the execution of their longtime rivals, including Nationalist Party leaders and reformist nationalists denounced by the ICP in the 1930s. For a time, the Việt Minh state held together a unity cabinet with ICP members and nationalist leaders like Phan Bội Châu's confidant Nguyễn Hải Thần and Vũ Hồng Khanh. Within months the entente collapsed and the two sides reverted to a bloody civil war, long before the official start of the Indochina War in December 1946. Troops loyal to the ICP branch of the Việt Minh attacked units affiliated to the Vietnamese nationalist parties led by Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nguyễn Hải Thần, who eventually fled to China in defeat.

\textbf{Figure 2:} The 1947 Hong Kong Conference, which endorsed a separate Bào Đại-led non-communist state project, sponsored by France.

But soon they chose to support Bảo Đại’s French-sponsored State of Vietnam, as would members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party and other personalities opposed to the ICP’s communist authoritarianism and the centralizing Việt Minh state. This was a consequence of the French re-occupation of Vietnam, which presented the opportunity for an alternative, non-communist political space. But my point today was that France did not create the politics that filled that space. Rather what emerged was the pre-existing conflict, begun in the late-colonial era, between rival Vietnamese organizations and personalities vying for control over the fate of the post-colonial state. And, if we can say that Phan Bội Châu’s legacy was carried forward after 1945, it was not by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Rather, it was the State of Vietnam that truly took up his complicated views on revolution, accommodation, and independence.