

# THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR

/ Jeffrey Race\*

**D**iscussion of events within the revolutionary movement in southern Viet Nam in the 1954-1960 period has been greatly handicapped by the inadequacy of reliable information. Were this period only of academic interest, the situation might be tolerable, but in fact it is critically important for evaluating the present situation in Viet Nam and the direction of its future evolution. Research in Viet Nam has been handicapped by the earlier obsessive secrecy of the Diem regime and by the continuing strictures of military classification, as well as by the lack of qualified Vietnamese-language area specialists and of financial support for independent scholarly work.

Conditions within the revolutionary movement itself from the signing of the Geneva Accords until about 1960 also have made research exceedingly difficult. Perhaps the most important is that from 1954 through 1959 there were few defectors because, in the absence of a mass front, active cadres were almost entirely long-term, "hard-core" Party members intensely loyal to the movement. Yet these are the only ones who were acquainted with Party policies and deliberations, and the vacillations of the "line," during those years.<sup>1</sup> There have been many defectors from the group which began to work for the Party in 1959 and after, but in keeping with Party practice these individuals initially worked entirely at village level and thus were not privy to events within the higher councils of the Party. Furthermore, documents from the period before 1960 are extremely rare, partly also due to the thinness of the Party organization before 1960. In particular the period

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\*This article summarizes some of the findings of a longer parallel study, now in preparation, of both the revolutionary movement and the Saigon government over a fifteen-year period in Long An province of the Mekong Delta. This study was carried out by the author as a private individual, without the sponsorship or financial support of any institution or organization. However the author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to officials of various agencies of the Saigon government and of the United States Mission in Viet Nam for their assistance in providing access to the individuals and documents cited here, and to Mr. William S. Turley of the University of Washington for his many helpful comments on this article and on the longer study from which it was drawn.

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<sup>1</sup>For continuity with quotations from documents and from interviews with former members, the Lao Dong Party is here referred to simply as "the Party," the term which its members themselves invariably use.

from 1954 to 1956 is even more obscure, since many of the Party members who might later have defected simply did not survive.

The following pages recount new evidence concerning this period, mostly in the context of the development of the revolutionary movement in the key province of Long An, immediately south of Saigon. Major sources include interviews with two of the highest ranking Party members to come into government hands (one a defector and one a prisoner), captured internal Party documents located by the author in Saigon government archives, and other documentary sources already in the public domain. It is hoped that the following pages will contribute to an understanding by scholars of an important period in Vietnamese history, both as a matter of historical interest, and for the implications this period has for an evaluation of the present situation and its possible future course.

#### 1954-1956

From what can be pieced together fourteen years later about the Party apparatus in the South, it appears that the two years from the signing of the Geneva Accords until the summer of 1956 were a time of unparalleled disaster.<sup>2</sup> During the anti-French phase of the revolution, the immediate task had been very clear: a military effort proceeding through three stages from a defensive guerrilla struggle, through an intermediate stage of conventional confrontations, to a final general counteroffensive. In this military program, the strategy was to "seize the forests and mountains, contest the open country, surround the cities." The Party foresaw, however, that in the period following the Geneva Accords, the situation would be more complex. Before 1954 the Saigon government had clearly been the tool of foreign powers; after 1954 it would appear superficially to be independent. Thus political action would be the principal effort required in the post-Geneva situation, and this effort would be most decisive, so the Party leadership initially believed, in the towns and cities, either in the event of elections or

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<sup>2</sup>This section relies largely on extensive interviews conducted by the author with Vo van An, who until shortly before his defection in 1965 was a full member of the Tay Ninh province committee and a Party member of 20 years' standing. Only three other native Southerners of An's rank had defected to the Saigon government at the time of the author's departure from Saigon in October 1968. An defected from the Party partly for reasons of policy disagreement and partly for reasons of health, but due to his hostility to the Saigon regime he declined to cooperate with it after his defection and indeed for this reason was threatened with torture by Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms") officials. When located by the present author, An held a menial job in Saigon. Interviews stretching over a period of six months were terminated by An's death in July 1968 from the combined effects of tuberculosis and leprosy, contracted during twenty years' life in the jungle.

Transcripts of this and other interviews, as well as of all the documents collected by the author, have been deposited with the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. Unfortunately all of this material is currently untranslated, but the author hopes shortly to be able to publish English translations of the major documentary and interview materials.

of other opportunities for seizing power such as a *coup d'etat* or anarchy resulting from the outbreak of fighting within the Saigon armed forces. To support this new "city" strategy, the Party leadership organ in the South (COSVN at first, reorganized in 1955 into the Nam Bo Regional Committee) was moved to Tay Ninh, just a few miles from Saigon, from its previous location during the Resistance at the extreme southern tip of the country.<sup>3</sup> In addition a major effort was made to develop the Party apparatus in the urban areas throughout the country, particularly in Saigon, which was the South's political and military nerve center.

At the time of the signing of the Geneva Accords the top leadership of the Party did not anticipate that unification would come about through the elections stipulated in the Accords, although according to Vo van An, this was not discussed below province level within the Party in the interest of morale and also so as not to interfere with the Party's public stance that the Geneva Accords were a great victory for the Revolution. Instead principal reliance was placed on two other more promising alternatives: a *coup d'etat* possibly bringing to power neutralists or other elements which could be manipulated by the Party; or a state of anarchy resulting from fighting within the Saigon regime. To support this second alternative the Party secretly maintained in the South after the final regroupment to the North in May 1955 a considerable number of organized military units. In the event of anarchy these units

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<sup>3</sup>The Central Committee is the supreme continuous policy-making body in the Party, although it is subordinate to an infrequent Party Congress. During the initial period of the war against the French the echelon in the South immediately beneath the Central Committee was the Nam Bo Regional Committee (*Xu Uy Nam Bo*). In 1951 due to the great distance between the Central Committee and the Nam Bo Regional Committee (then located in Ca Mau at the extreme southern tip of Viet Nam), and to the need for more rapid decision-making as the war entered its concluding phase, the Nam Bo Regional Committee was reorganized into *Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam*. This is ordinarily translated Central Office for South Viet Nam (COSVN), and for the sake of consistency with other writings the term will be retained here. However this translation masks an important organizational shift which is clear from the actual meaning of the Vietnamese words: Central [Committee] Southern Branch. In other words the status of the Nam Bo Regional Committee was altered from that of a subordinate echelon to that of a forward element of the Central Committee itself, by the assignment of a number of Central Committee members to permanent duty in the South.

Details of the formation of COSVN in 1951 are contained in Documents 11 and 211 of the appendices to the *Working Paper on the North Vietnamese Role in the War in South Viet Nam* (hereafter cited as *Working Paper*), produced by the United States Department of State. The *Working Paper* itself, like other treatments of the subject, is sketchy in its treatment of the period 1954-1960. The appendices, however, consisting of approximately 1000 legal size pages of documents and interviews, contain much important information, some of it unfortunately marred by typographical and translation errors and occasionally inadequate introductory passages. The *Working Paper* has been reproduced in *Viet Nam Documents and Research Notes*, No. 37, available from the Joint United States Public Affairs Office in Saigon. Regrettably the appendices were produced in only 250 copies in mimeograph form. According to a private communication received by the author from the Department of State, interested individuals may learn whether a set has been placed in a nearby library by inquiring at the General Publications Division, Office of Media Services, Department of State, Washington, D.C. 20520.

would reappear and, in combination with the newly strengthened urban Party apparatus, would seize power in the cities. Five years later the remnants of these forces were to form the skeleton of the developing Liberation Army, as it was to be called. Intelligence reports from 1957 and 1958, for example, show the existence of seventeen major Party-controlled units in the South, variously called companies, battalions and regiments, and varying in strength from 50 to 200. These were located principally on the Cambodian border and deep in the Delta, and were fully armed, including substantial quantities of light and heavy machine guns and even bazookas.<sup>4</sup> Large quantities of the newest weapons were also cached in the South to support such military activity if necessary. It should be pointed out that this course of events might have come about as the Party leadership anticipated had foreign intervention not propped up the tottering Diem regime in early 1955.

In 1954, then, the Party had prepared, it thought, against all contingencies which might arise in the coming years, by maintaining secret military forces and extensive arms caches, and a widespread network of political operatives. The latter in particular were to be a key element in the Party's eventual takeover, operating either alone in the event of political maneuverings, or as the local eyes and ears for the reserve military forces should events require their use. Although the Geneva Accords provided that no action could be taken against Resistance members for their former anti-government activities, the Party had also taken steps to protect the secrecy of its political apparatus should the Saigon government not live up to its solemn obligations, or be forced to live up to them by the other signatories of the Accords.

What subsequently happened, however, far exceeded the Party's worst expectations, as the government proceeded unhindered with an extensive manhunt in the cities and the countryside, ultimately destroying almost the entire political apparatus which the Party had concealed in the South. In Tay Ninh, An's home province, 50% of the cells had been smashed by the summer of 1955 and 90% by the summer of 1956, with the members either imprisoned or killed. A similar ratio prevailed in other parts of the South, according to An's talks with cadres travelling to Tay Ninh from other provinces, and in Central Viet Nam the situation was even worse.

Thus by the spring of 1956 it was clear to the Party that its plans for seizure of power in the South within two years had failed. The Diem regime had not yielded on the point of reunification talks or general elections, although this had been predicted by the Party leadership and thus came as no surprise. Yet neither had the South fallen into chaos, allowing the Party, as the only organized force, to seize power with the extensive military and

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<sup>4</sup>Contained in *Ban Tran Liet Viet Cong* ("Viet Cong Order of Battle"), a classified intelligence document produced annually and later semi-annually during this period by the Cong An, Diem's secret police. Excerpts from these reports, copied by the author from Cong An archives, are included in the material deposited with the Center for Research Libraries.

political apparatus it had left in readiness. On the contrary its underground apparatus had been extensively damaged. Moreover pressure on the movement was clearly about to increase as the Diem regime, having consolidated its hold on the central government, was able to turn its attention to the countryside. Thus sometime around the middle of 1956, the Party made the decision to rebuild its apparatus in the South, but now with a new strategy for seizing power summed up in the slogan passed down to its cadres with the instructions to rebuild: *truong ky mai phuc suc tich luc luong don lay thoi co*, or, "to lie patiently in ambush, gathering one's forces, waiting to strike at the right moment."

1957-1959

*The Path of the Revolution in the South:* The failure of the Party to seize power within two years, as it had promised its members in 1954, and the increasing pressure on the Party apparatus made possible by the extension of the Saigon government's apparatus into new areas, had a serious impact on the Party membership, leading to a loss of faith in the Party and to widespread defections. The last half of 1956 was, in the words of one high-ranking cadre, "the darkest period in the Party's history in the South up to that time."<sup>5</sup> He went on:

After the failure to hold the General Elections, the Party continued to agitate, but at the same time serious divisions appeared within the Party. When the Geneva Accords were signed there was already much ill will against the Central Committee and Ho Chi Minh, since people felt that the South was always to be treated as a sacrificial animal when it came to reunification. Now the Southerners were called upon to sit by and tolerate more sacrifices. They felt that the Party and Ho Chi

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<sup>5</sup>From an interview with a former Party member who will be called Chan (a pseudonym at his request). Unlike Vo van An, Chan did not surrender voluntarily but was captured in a military operation in 1962. At the time of his capture Chan was deputy secretary of the Interprovince Committee for Western Nam Bo (an area encompassing the six provinces, according to Party geography, at the southern tip of Viet Nam), and a Party member since 1947. He is thus the second highest ranking Party political cadre to come into the hands of the Saigon government, the highest ranking being a member of the Nam Bo Regional Committee named Mac van Lai captured in 1959. After a period of time Chan was given an amnesty, and today he works with an American civilian government organization. As of 1968 no record could be found in government files of the whereabouts of Mac van Lai. It is possible he did not survive the Diem period.

For ease of understanding and for the sake of uniformity, unmarked changes have been made in quotations from interviews. In Vietnamese one's terminology is determined by where one stands in the current conflict. Thus from constant association with government officials, Chan now refers to the Party as "the enemy," while An, who did not work with the government, used the terms "Party" and "American imperialism," which came naturally after twenty years in Party ranks. Quotations have also been altered to meet the demands of good prose, where necessary eliminating extraneous remarks, digressions, repetitions, etc. In many cases transitional words have also been inserted to convert into narrative form what was originally a dialogue.

Minh had turned out to be more stupid than the French, the Americans, or even Diem himself. As a consequence a great many Party members abandoned their Party work and surrendered to the government. Moreover among the population there was also a serious impact. People had sacrificed heavily during the Resistance, then were told that the Geneva Accords would be carried out. Now they saw that the Geneva Accords were ignored. Thus they ceased paying attention to the Party and occupied themselves with their own affairs. Beyond this many of those who surrendered, no longer having any faith in the Party, became government officials intent on destroying the surviving forces of the Party.

Thus from 1954 to 1956, and especially at the end of 1956 when talk of reunification by the Geneva Accords ceased, the Party entered a very dark period, "dark" because of a lack of faith in the future and in the Party's judgment, which had proven completely wrong. During this period the Diem regime was growing stronger, and so the Party's prospects were very bleak.

In this situation there was an urgent need for a clear policy to restore faith among Party members who saw the Party as drifting, on the defensive, with no plan and no hope for the future. This need was fulfilled by a long document titled "The Path of the Revolution in the South," prepared by the Central Committee and given wide circulation among Party members in the South in the closing months of 1956.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of its evaluation of the internal and international situation it described a new long range strategy to achieve national reunification, to replace the "two-year" strategy which had postulated reunification either through General Elections (improbably), a *coup*, or through the Party's superior political and military organization in the event of the collapse of the Diem regime.

"The Path of the Revolution in the South" began with a forceful reaffirmation of the mission remaining before the movement:

The Vietnamese people, having defeated the French imperialists and the American interventionists after nine years of heroic resistance and having forced the imperialist powers to recognize our national independence and territorial integrity at the Geneva Conference, are determined not to allow them to prolong the division of our country and

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<sup>6</sup>This document, in Vietnamese *Duong Loi Cach Mang Mien Nam*, was the foundation of Party policy in the South from 1956 to 1959, and is constantly referred to by Party members in their discussions of this period. Its existence has been known for some time in the West, but to the author's knowledge no copy has thus far been published. The original document was captured in the Tan Buu area of Long An province in 1957, a copy of which was located by the author in the Cong An archives in Long An province. It is number 1002 in the collection of materials deposited by the author with the Center for Research Libraries (hereafter cited as Race Document followed by the number).

*Working Paper* Document 301, the captured notebook of a high-ranking political cadre, indicates that "The Path of the Revolution in the South" was actually written by Le Duan, at that time secretary of the Nam Bo Regional Committee and a member of the Central Committee.

to prolong the existence of their vicious feudalist-imperialist regime in our beloved South.

The succeeding passage then set forth the three national missions established by the Central Committee for the country as a whole:

In order to cope with the situation created by the Americans and the Diem regime, in order to complete the task of national liberation, in order to liberate the people of the South from the yoke of the feudalist-imperialists, the Central Committee has put forth three principal missions as the general line for the overall revolutionary effort of the entire country at the present time.

These three missions are:

- 1) Firmly consolidate the North;
- 2) Strongly push the revolutionary movement in the South;
- 3) Win the sympathy and support of the democratic, nationalist and peace-loving peoples of the world.

The first of these missions was necessary because "The North must be developed into a firm base of support for the revolutionary movement to liberate the South." The second was an integral part of the task of total national liberation. The third was required because "In this way we gain additional strength, the enemy is isolated and weakened, and additional favorable conditions are created for the defeat of the enemy and the complete liberation of our people."

After describing the three general missions for the whole country, the remainder of the document (some fifteen legal-size pages) went on to expand on the second mission, i.e., the development of the revolutionary movement in the South by the southern branch of the Party, to whom the document was directed. Three principal "contradictions" were anticipated between the people and the Diem regime which the movement could capitalize on:

- 1) The desire for peace, independence and national reunification;
- 2) The ardent desire of the people for democratic freedoms in order to protect their lives and property and to assure their material and spiritual needs;
- 3) The common desire of the people of the South for adequate employment, and sufficient pay for the laboring classes, prevention of seizure of peasants' land, reduction of land rents and taxes, reduction in the cost of living, protection and expansion of various branches of national industries.

These three contradictions, usually referred to in Party literature as "peace and reunification," "democratic rights," and "popular livelihood," were to become the three principal themes of Party political activity in the coming years.

At this point the document recounted the favorable international situation, which had come about due to the growth of the socialist bloc and its having

surpassed the capitalist bloc in economic production and weaponry. Yet once having discussed the favorable international situation, the brutal nature of the Diem regime, and the requirement for its overthrow, the document then drew a conclusion which proved a great disappointment to large numbers of cadres in the South. It abandoned the option of armed activity which had been maintained up to that time, and directed that the conflict was to be carried on by means of political activity, for reasons which it then went on to develop.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the general world situation, the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party brought forth two important judgments:

- 1) All current international conflicts can be resolved by peaceful negotiations;
- 2) The revolutionary movement in various countries can develop peacefully. Naturally in those countries where the ruling class employs a strong police and military apparatus and a fascist policy to suppress the movement, the concerned revolutionary party must clearly perceive the concrete situation in order to have appropriate struggle methods.

Based on the general situation and these judgments, we conclude that, if all international conflicts can be resolved by means of negotiations, then peace may be maintained.

. . . . .

If international peace can be maintained because of a shift in the balance of forces in favor of the peaceful and democratic bloc, then the [world] revolutionary movement can develop peacefully, and the revolutionary movement in the South can develop according to a peaceful line as well.

First of all we must understand the meaning of "a revolutionary movement struggling according to a peaceful line."

"A revolutionary movement struggling according to a peaceful line" means that the movement bases itself on the political forces of the people, and not on their armed forces, in its struggle with the authorities to gain its revolutionary goals.

"A revolutionary movement struggling according to a peaceful line" is different from a reformist movement in that the latter relies on the law and the constitution to struggle, while a revolutionary movement relies on the revolutionary political forces of the masses. They also differ in that a revolutionary movement struggles for revolutionary goals, while a reformist movement struggles to attain reforms.

But in the face of the fascist, dictatorial, feudal-imperialist regime

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<sup>7</sup>Here is another instance in which the Party is not completely honest even with its own members. From the viewpoint of the rank and file, among whom the document was circulated, there were not Party activities involving violence during this period. However in a separate secret directive circulated only down to province level, the Party authorized a limited violence policy known as *tru gian* or "extermination of traitors," which is discussed below.



of the Americans and Diem, can the peaceful political struggle line succeed?

The document answered this question in the affirmative, asserting that

[the American-Diem] regime is not founded on any significant political force. On the contrary, almost all segments of the population are opposed to them. For this reason the regime of the Americans and Diem is not strong. Rather it is just a cruel and cowardly regime which not only has no foundation in the masses but is also being isolated internationally. Its vicious nature certainly cannot shake the revolutionary movement, and it certainly cannot long survive.

Yet given the favorable international situation, the fundamental weakness of the Diem regime, and the asserted revolutionary enthusiasm of the people in the South, why not move directly to the overthrow of the Diem regime? It is here that the document finally came to the heart of the matter: the actual forces of the revolution *within the South* had been seriously weakened. This it attributed to two factors: first an "objective law" according to which "every revolutionary movement has its periods of ascendancy and periods of decline," and second the failure of "a number of cadres to understand the Party's political struggle line . . . which has seriously affected the capability of the movement to develop." In justifying the abandonment of armed activity the Party referred to what it considered one of the principal historical lessons of its existence: *without an internal force in being, it is impossible to take advantage of the international situation*. Thus the overriding question at that time was "how to develop an internal force to exploit a favorable external situation." This was to be accomplished by a period of intense political activity in order to rebuild the forces of the revolutionary movement in the South. How long this period of political activity might last, or what it might lead to, were not specified, except that "we are determined to follow explicitly the Party line until the development of the situation permits us to act." Ultimately, victory was certain:

Under the brilliant leadership of the Central Committee and Chairman Ho, and with the determined fighting spirit of the entire Party, we are certain to fulfill our glorious duty as communists, to bring peace, reunification, independence and democracy to our beloved fatherland.

What conclusions can we draw about this document? Superficially "The Path of the Revolution in the South" was an exercise in double-think. It acknowledged the cruel and oppressive nature of the government in the South, which did not hesitate to use force to suppress the movement—but then it went on to declare that the matter might be resolved "peacefully." It should be clear that much remained unsaid within the body of the document itself, but that it was based on a realistic assessment of the situation as it existed at that time. It forthrightly acknowledged the war weariness of the Southerners (which it called their desire for peace) as well as the

severe weakening of the Party's forces in the South, due to the regroupment to the North under the Geneva Accords, defections, and suppression activities by the Diem authorities. To have used a military policy in such a situation would have been a serious strategic error—a manifestation of “infantilism” in communist terminology—for the movement would have been destroyed totally. Hence the document declared that what was in any case an immediate necessity was in accord with the world strategic revolutionary line as set forth at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party.

What is also clear, but not stated explicitly within the document, is that the Party envisioned a period of political activity to rebuild its forces to the point where military force might be employed, either in a *coup d'état* or in protracted war. The previous success of the first strategy was mentioned in one passage:

From 1930 to 1945, our Party carried out a prolonged back-and-forth movement of revolutionary political struggle, at times moderate, at times fierce, at times secret, at times overt. Sometimes the struggle was carried out through parliamentary means and in the newspapers, combined with struggle in city streets and in the countryside; sometimes there were limited armed uprisings. As a result in August, 1945, the appropriate opportunity arrived in the high tide of the revolution, which was due basically to the political forces among the great majority of the people, from the North to the South, who rose up to smash the feudal-imperialist, fascist dictatorial regime, reestablishing national independence.

The success of the August Revolution was no coincidence. It was the natural outcome of the history of revolutionary efforts of our entire people and our entire Party.

The protracted war possibility had also been presaged in a 1954 document on post-Geneva strategy, apparently also issued by the Central Committee:

... Peace is concluded to procure advantages for us, not for the purpose of ceasing the struggle. Peace as such is not unconditional. We love peace and do not want war which causes bloodshed, but we are resolved to maintain our fundamental point of view, which is independence, unity, democracy, and peace. If the political struggle does not permit us to accomplish this essential aim, we are resolved to continue the war in order to support our just cause and to achieve total victory.<sup>8</sup>

Yet what was not mentioned explicitly within “The Path of the Revolution in the South” was talked of openly within the higher councils of the Party. Chan and An, for example, mentioned that in Party discussions at province level and above during this period, it was taken for granted that a policy

<sup>8</sup>Working Paper Document 200.

of armed uprising would be employed in the future, but this was not communicated to lower levels for fear of causing "confusion."

*Party Activities, 1957-1959:* The year 1957 was a transitional period for the Party's armed forces in the South. They had been maintained through 1956 because the Party had retained the option of armed overthrow through that time. However with the appearance of the document "The Path of the Revolution in the South," armed overthrow of the Diem government ceased to be an immediate policy alternative. Armed units were still maintained after this time but contact with government forces was avoided and became less and less frequent. The forces themselves decreased in size through desertion, disease, and pursuit by government units.

At the same time the possibility of armed activity by Party military units was disappearing, another type of armed activity was on the rise, one which the Party called *tru gian* or the "extermination of traitors." Although the period after the circulation of "The Path of the Revolution in the South" was supposedly one of pure political activity, extermination activities were considered essential to the survival of the Party's apparatus. They were, however, carried on in absolute secrecy, not even being acknowledged within the Party itself below province level. An described the *tru gian* policy in this way:

Beginning in 1957, 1958 and 1959, but especially 1958 and 1959 as government terrorist activities increased, there was a natural reaction, although this was not generally discussed. Province level and above had various organizations for the "extermination of traitors," and according to whether government suppression activity was fierce or not, the Party reacted strongly or weakly.

The principal purpose of the "extermination of traitors" movement at that time was to protect the existence of the Party. Without exterminating the [government] hardcore elements, the Party apparatus could not have survived. A second purpose was to aid in the development of the Party by creating fear in the enemy ranks and by creating faith among the masses in the skilled leadership of the revolution. Extermination activities had an enormous psychological impact since the masses saw the hardcore elements eliminated.

In carrying out the "extermination of traitors" policy special arrangements were made to conceal the role of the Party, usually—if possible—employing Party agents within the Saigon regime to cast suspicion on the "hardcore" elements, who would then be eliminated by the government itself. This was doubly useful: it protected the integrity of the Party line that only political activity was to be employed, and it created suspicion by one agency against another within the Saigon regime.

Party political activity during this period followed four specific missions for the South laid down in "The Path of the Revolution in the South": develop the Party, consolidate the worker-peasant alliance, expand the national front, and create divisions within enemy ranks. During this period

in the Long An area, much of the Party's political activity in "developing contradictions" was carried on under the name of "The Vietnamese People's Liberation Movement," which was formally proclaimed in 1956.<sup>9</sup> The Party's basic approach in developing contradictions could be expressed simply as "exploit everything exploitable," but its activities followed the three principal themes or contradictions analyzed in "The Path of the Revolution in the South": "democratic rights," "popular livelihood," and "peace and reunification." Under the theme of democratic rights the Party emphasized in its propaganda the daily nuisance caused to the people by government travel restrictions, the expense and bother of identification cards and family books, fraudulent elections, appointed local authorities, and the absence of popular recourse against criminal behavior by government officials. The activities of the Diem regime provided fertile grounds for propaganda on all these subjects.

The "popular livelihood" theme revolved principally around the issue of land. Party propaganda constantly referred to the fact that land had been redistributed to the propertyless during the Resistance but reoccupied by the Diem-sponsored landlords after the Geneva Accords. As with the issue of democratic rights, the Diem regime here also had provided the basis for an effective anti-regime propaganda campaign. Under what was euphemistically referred to as a "rent limitation program," the Diem regime under Ordinance 2 of January 8, 1955 had required that all tenants throughout the country sign written contracts with their landlords, thereby formally acknowledging that the land they had been granted by the Viet Minh still belonged to the landlords. In Long An province alone more than 28,000 such contracts were drawn up under the provisions of Ordinance 2. The Saigon regime's own redistribution program under Ordinance 57 of October 22, 1956 did virtually nothing to counteract the enormously regressive impact of Ordinance 2. Of approximately 35,000 farm families in Long An partly or wholly dependent on rented land, only 3,613 were eligible to purchase land under Ordinance 57; moreover procedures were so slow that by 1960, when the regime was already in serious trouble in Long An, only 973 titles had been returned from the Ministry in Saigon.<sup>10</sup> The Saigon regime's

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<sup>9</sup>In Vietnamese *Phong Trao Giai Phong Nhan Dan Viet Nam*. A thorough search of the Cong An archives in Long An province failed to reveal any reference to the National Liberation Front (*Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Mien Nam Viet Nam*) prior to its formation in 1960, either in captured internal documents or public proclamations, or in official Cong An reports. Where Gerald Hickey refers by name to the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam as operating in Long An province in 1958, he may have been loosely translating *Phong Trao Giai Phong Nhan Dan Viet Nam* as National Liberation Front, which had of course appeared by the time Hickey wrote *Village in Viet Nam*. See Gerald Hickey, *Village in Viet Nam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 10.

Race Document 1001 is a proclamation dated August 1956, announcing the formation of the Vietnamese People's Liberation Movement.

<sup>10</sup>There were few potential beneficiaries of the government redistribution program in Long An because only 34 individuals owned in excess of the 100 hectares maximum permitted by Ordinance 57.

requirement that beneficiaries pay for the land also compared unfavorably with the Viet Minh method of summary redistribution.

The Party's third propaganda theme was "peace and reunification." As the document "The Path of the Revolution in the South" had noted, there was a widespread war-weariness and a desire to return to the tasks of rebuilding after the destruction and neglect of nine years of the Resistance. Party propaganda depicted the Saigon regime's military efforts not as a means of self defense but rather as a means of internal repression or as preparations for an invasion of the North. Youths were encouraged to avoid entering the army and were promised protection by the movement.

*The Situation within the Party by 1959:* The results of three years of political activity by the Party were contradictory. On the one hand opposition to the Diem regime in the rural areas was becoming much deeper, and sympathy for the Party's cause increasing. Yet on the other hand, after a period of recovery in 1957 and 1958, the Party apparatus began another serious and apparently terminal decline in 1959 or late 1958. This in turn brought about a bitter conflict within the Party organization itself.

What factors led to the Party's recovery in 1957 and 1958, and the increasing support which it obtained in rural areas? Defectors emphasize that this recovery and increasing support was not principally due to the Party, but rather to a series of "not very intelligent" actions and policies by the Diem government itself, which were cleverly exploited by the Party. Although corruption and abuses by government officials played some role, the most important element was the highly regressive nature of the government's "land reform" program under Ordinances 2 and 57, which undid the Viet Minh redistribution, creating enormous hostility. As noted previously, for example, almost all the new owners lost their land in Long An, i.e., were required to sign tenancy contracts, but very few subsequently got the opportunity even to buy their land back.

Yet despite increasing popular disaffection with the Diem regime, the Party apparatus began a serious decline in 1959, after its temporary recovery during the two previous years. It may be best to quote at length Chan's review of this period.

During 1957 and 1958 the Party apparatus was able to recover, but at the same time the government began to stabilize itself after resolving the conflicts with the sects such as the Binh Xuyen, the Hoa Hao, and the Cao Dai. Beyond this there were numerous military campaigns into the rural areas, and the government began to establish its village and hamlet apparatus in the remote rural areas where the French never dared set foot. When the government local apparatus was established this naturally limited the Party's activities, but after a certain period of time they were bound to be exposed. Because of this we lost a great number of cadres imprisoned or shot.

This from 1954 through 1956 was a period of faith in the General Elections, but toward the end of 1956 the communists were most pes-

simistic. Then there was a second period from 1957 to 1958, during which the Party recovered and was comparatively well off. Finally there was this third period toward the end of 1959, the darkest period for the Party in the South, when if you did not have a gun you could not keep your head on your shoulders. This period was the darkest because of Law 10/59, because of the various political organizations such as National Revolutionary Movement and the rural youth organizations, and because of the constant military campaigns. There was no place where Party members could find rest and security. Almost all were imprisoned or shot or were forced to surrender. Some village chapters which had four or five hundred members during the Resistance and which had one or two hundred members in 1954 were now reduced to ten members, and even those ten could not remain among the people but had to flee into the jungle to survive.

In the face of such fierce activity by the Diem government the demand for armed activity by Party members increased daily, particularly in the West [i.e., Western Nam Bo] and particularly after the proclamation of Law 10/59. Party members felt that it was no longer possible to talk of political struggle while looking down the gun barrels of the government. But despite the bitterness within the Party and the anger against the Central Committee, the Regional Committee, the zone committee, the province committee, the district committee, the village committee, etc., Party members were unable to break out from the organization that was killing them. There never were clear factions or groups within the Party demanding armed activity which might have broken off from the Party organization in the South or from the Central Committee in Hanoi—that could never happen. Nevertheless there were individuals—say draft-age youths—who became so angry that they took weapons which the Party had hidden and came out of the jungle to kill the officials who were making trouble for them or their families. They did this not because the Party had condemned these officials, but in order to preserve their own lives or to defend their families. Sometimes these individuals were so angry at the Party that they purposely allowed themselves to be captured afterwards—just to spite the Party.

Chan's comments on this period are confirmed by a document captured in July 1959, titled "Situation and Missions for 1959," prepared by the Nam Bo Regional Committee.<sup>11</sup> After analyzing the favorable international situation and the progress of the Party in the North, the document went on to discuss the developments in the South:

The enemy has been determined to consolidate his oppressive war apparatus by increasing its strength and reactionary character in a number of villages, and to use it to attack the Party, at the same time that the people's movement under the Party's leadership has not yet become strong enough to stay the enemy's bloody hand. Thus in the

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<sup>11</sup>Race Document 1025.

recent period, generally speaking, *the enemy has created greater losses for the Party and for the popular movement than in previous years*, and has been able to carry out a relatively greater number of plots, particularly of an oppressive and a thieving nature, *although the people's struggle movement against the enemy has also progressed compared to previous years. . . . Basically the movement is in a defensive position in the face of the daily increasing strength of the enemy's attacks.*

By analyzing enemy activities and plots in the past compared to the coming period, we see that the American-Diem regime has become temporarily more stabilized, and it has been able to gain hold of and to employ in some degree the village authorities. As a result they have been *relatively successful* in their attacks on the struggle movement and on our Party organization, and in carrying out their policies of war, oppression, theft and prolonged division of our country. Nevertheless the mass movement has also advanced compared to previously.

In the past year the enemy has fiercely attacked the movement and our Party organization, creating considerable losses, although the enemy's plot to destroy the mass movement and our Party has basically failed.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this sober assessment of the events of the past year, the document was optimistic about the possibilities for future development, due to the "daily increasing hatred of all classes of people for the American-Diem regime, and the daily more bitter contradictions." The document prescribed a continuation of the previously laid out political struggle line.

As the situation took on an increasingly hopeless appearance for the Party in late 1958 and 1959, the latent opposition to the Party's political struggle line became more apparent. The southern branch of the Party had never been comfortable with the political line: thus "The Path of the Revolution in the South" had to devote so many pages to justifying it and the reasons for its feasibility. From talking to individuals who were in the movement at this time, it becomes clear that southern Party members had found armed activity congenial and effective during the Resistance, and were now anxious to resolve their difficulties in the same way as they had before 1954. But Party documents from this period are full of exhortations to have faith in the political struggle and to cease demands for an "armed solution." One document on land struggle noted at one point, "It is necessary to overcome

<sup>12</sup>All italics are as in the original document. Such expressions as "considerable losses" and "relatively successful in their attacks on the struggle movement" are very strong language for a communist document, even an internal document. Even "The Path of the Revolution in the South" did not use such language though it was developed in similar circumstances. Thus we may be sure that the situation was actually very grave.

The reader should note that this document places the start of the Party's decline in 1958, rather than in 1959 as Chan noted. This difference is probably due to the fact that Chan was from the "Western Region," i.e., Ca Mau, a communist stronghold during the Resistance and chronologically the last area in which the government reestablished its local apparatus in the years after the signing of the Geneva Accords.

the attitude that slights or lacks confidence in the mass political struggle against terrorism and emphasizes armed methods.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly the document “Situation and Missions for 1959” mentioned first among the Party’s shortcomings:

A not inconsiderable number of Party members have not yet understood and developed confidence in the Party’s political struggle line, and have not yet grasped the Party motto: “The long hard struggle is certain to be victorious.” They do not yet have confidence in the force of the masses, do not enthusiastically concern themselves with the livelihood, the hopes, and the desires of the masses, do not rely on the masses, and do not lead the masses in struggle against the enemy.

The principal and most widespread erroneous outlook in the Party is: rightist passivism, due to overestimating the enemy and underestimating ourselves, and due to a less than totally prepared viewpoint. This erroneous outlook appears in the daily struggle movement in the form of a tendency toward reformism, a fear of arousing the masses to struggle, or else a reliance on individual assassinations and careless extermination of traitors, a passive waiting for the armed uprising, or a lack of urgency in attacking the enemy and a lack of determination to overcome difficulties and hardships.

Ironically the same Party committees that were exhorting the rank-and-file Party member to have faith in the political struggle line were at the same time vigorously protesting through Party channels to the Central Committee that the political struggle line was no longer workable. Although there were some breaches of Party discipline by individuals, the great majority of Party members carried out the political struggle line faithfully, “no matter what the losses” in the words of An, “for otherwise they would no longer have been communists.” Yet by 1959 it was becoming clear that despite words of encouragement the choices were surrender or death . . . or a new policy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Race Document, 1016.

<sup>14</sup>There has been considerable debate over the so-called “last-gasp” interpretation of this period favored by American military leaders. Critics of this view are fond of citing the testimony of then Major General Samuel L. Myers before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 17, 1959, to the effect that “The Viet Minh guerrillas . . . were gradually nibbled away until they ceased to be a major menace to the Government,” in order to demonstrate the self-delusion of American military leaders about Viet Nam. Nevertheless General Myers only echoed what the Party leadership itself was saying about the Party during this period, and no doubt his testimony relied on the very documents cited in the previous pages, few of which have previously been available to the public. In the critics’ view the revolutionary movement was not in decline but on the upswing during these years, and to support this interpretation they cite numerous examples, some spurious as will be noted in the following pages. Thus the critics’ are correct in their assessment that the revolutionary potential was increasing. This was also the assessment of the Party leadership itself and, as we have seen, a point of much bitterness within the Party.

What permitted this anomaly to exist—i.e., the revolutionary organization to be ground down while the revolutionary potential was increasing—was of course the Central Committee’s decision that, except in limited circumstances, violence would not be used, even in self-defense, against the increasing repressiveness of the government.



## A NEW POLICY

The Fifteenth Conference of the Party Central Committee, meeting in May 1959, set forth a new line for the revolution in the South, superseding the political struggle line which had just been reconfirmed in the Regional Committee's annual strategy document for 1959. No copy is available of the decision of the Fifteenth Conference, but from interviews with defectors and from subsequent instructions to lower echelons we can gain a clear idea of its contents. We can also tell from the way the previous policy is discussed in subsequent Party commentaries that the new policy must have been born of a sharp conflict within the Central Committee itself, in which the proponents of change overcame the backers of the *status quo*. For example, the Regional Committee's 1961 annual strategy document noted:

From 1954 to 1959, due to our rightist tendency for the peaceful maintenance of our doctrine, our enemies seemed to be strong enough. In consequence, after we corrected our rightist mistakes and mixed the political struggle with the armed one, the situation was changed quickly.<sup>15</sup>

Another document from 1960 remarked:

If we do not educate the people to rise up and smash the government then we will fall into legalistic reformism as we did before.<sup>16</sup>

In substance the new policy called for the limited formation throughout the South of armed units, according to the slogan "political struggle mixed to the right degree with armed struggle." This approach had three principal purposes: to preserve the physical existence of the Party, to support the political struggle, and to partially cripple the government apparatus at the lowest levels in the rural areas. In preceding years the expansion of the government hamlet and village apparatus had created tremendous difficulties for the Party. The crippling of the government apparatus in turn would thus have the dual advantage of establishing large "secure areas" without which the revolutionary movement could not move forward, and at the same time would deny the material and human resources in these areas to the government.

During 1959, when the fundamental strategic decisions were being made by the Central Committee, the expectation was that the development of the situation in the South would lead to a gradual weakening of the Diem

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<sup>15</sup>Document 241 of the collection gathered by Douglas Pike for use in writing *Viet Cong* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966). These documents are also available from the Center for Research Libraries.

<sup>16</sup>From *Hoc Tap*, Binh Duong province, (January, May, August, 1960), Race Document, 1038.

regime, culminating in an uprising and seizure of power such as the Party had employed against the Japanese authorities at the conclusion of World War II. The Party apparently did *not* expect the conflict to develop into the type of three-stage war of resistance such as was employed against the French, due to the inherent weakness of the Diem regime—a weakness which had been saved exposure by the Party's restraint in using violence until that time. The Party discounted the likelihood of American intervention. On the other hand it acknowledged that the "insane imperialists" might become openly involved, although this would only prolong and complicate the conflict but not alter its outcome.<sup>17</sup>

Why did the Party approve this sharp change in policy? In retrospect it seems clear that it had no choice: it was then or never. As Chan noted at one point, "The Central Committee kept calling for political struggle. If they had kept that up, where were they going to find the cadres to carry it out?" He went on:

During 1957 and 1958 the Party was able to recover its apparatus and its mass organizations, and it counted on contradictions within the government to produce a *coup*. Thus it emphasized troop proselyting activities with the hope that in the event of a *coup* it could seize power. Because the Party judged that it had a sufficient chance to seize power in a *coup* through its mass organizations and its apparatus, it did not allow the armed forces which it was still maintaining in the South to appear.

However by 1959 the situation in the South had crossed to a stage which the communists considered to be the darkest in their whole lives: almost all their apparatus had been smashed, the population no longer dared to provide support, families no longer dared to communicate with their relatives in the movement, and village chapters which previously had had one or two hundred members were now reduced to five or ten who had to flee into the jungle. Because of this situation Party members were angry at the Central Committee, and demanded armed action. Party members did not dare break discipline, but nevertheless there were instances of undisciplined behavior, kidnappings and assassinations, in order to resolve the problem of survival. At the same time the southern branch of the Party demanded of the Central Committee a reasonable policy in dealing with the southern regime, in order to preserve the existence of the southern organization. If not, it would be completely destroyed.

In the face of this situation the Central Committee saw that it was no longer possible to seize power in the South by means of a peaceful struggle line, since the southern regime, with American assistance, was becoming stronger and not collapsing as it had predicted. Not only had

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<sup>17</sup>See for example the article *Muc Tieu Phan Dau cua Toan Dang va Toan Dan Ta Hien Nay* ("The Current Struggle Objective of Our Entire Party and Our Entire People"), in Race Document 1038.

the southern regime not been destroyed, it was instead destroying the Party. Thus it was necessary to have an appropriate line to salvage the situation; if not, then it would lead to a situation which would not be salvageable. As a result the Fifteenth Conference of the Central Committee developed a decision permitting the southern organization, that is the Nam Bo Regional Committee and Interzone 5 [a portion of Central Viet Nam lying below the 17th Parallel] to develop armed forces with the mission of supporting the political struggle line. These forces were not to fight a conventional war, nor were they intended for a guerrilla conflict. Their mission was to sap the strength of the government village and hamlet forces, or what they called the "tyrannical elements." They were only to attack such units as entered their own base areas, in order to preserve the existence of the apparatus and to develop forces for a new line which the Central Committee would develop. Only in November of 1959 did this policy reach the village level, and it was from this decision that the guerrilla movement and the current armed forces in the South sprang into existence.

On the other hand we might well ask why the Central Committee had waited so long before moving to the armed phase of the revolution in the South. This is a subject of considerable debate in the West. Some consider that the North was occupied with its own problems, while others emphasize that the Central Committee must have been under pressure from the Soviet Union not to begin an adventure in the South which would create difficulties for the then current "peaceful coexistence" line. Evidence exists to support both of these viewpoints, and it is likely that both factors entered into the Party's deliberations.

It is significant, however, that southern cadres interviewed by the author mentioned neither of these factors in accounting for Hanoi's desire to postpone the armed phase. Rather they noted that the Central Committee felt the political situation in the South was not yet "ripe" and that armed action would thus be premature. The disagreement between the southern branch and the Central Committee they looked upon as a natural conflict between those making sacrifices at the front and those making policy decisions in the rear, much like the discontent of American field commanders in Viet Nam over restrictions imposed from Washington. An discussed the subject in this way:

The general situation, as I know personally from my own area, and as cadres from other areas told me, was that the cadres and the people were terribly anxious to cross to the armed phase, but the Central Committee sought every means to prolong the political phase according to its concept of the "ripe situation." Why did the southerners demand armed action? As for cadres, they had largely been exposed. But to be exposed was to be terrorized, to be forced into a harsh underground existence, constantly threatened with death. The cadres saw themselves being killed off with no means of fighting back and became bitter. The

same applied to the people who sympathized with the Party, particularly the masses in the rural areas who knew of no other means than their own personal experience of armed struggle during the Resistance. They also demanded violence and were not afraid of the prospect of death.

Why then not cross to armed activity in 1957 or 1958? It was already obvious in 1956 that there would be no General Elections, so why not start immediately instead of waiting until 1960? In this I think you must understand the Party's view of the conditions for a successful revolution. There are many factors to consider. A successful revolution must have a favorable external situation, that is, favorable objective conditions. But most important it must have favorable subjective conditions [those pertaining to the Party itself and its supporters], that is, a "ripe situation." But what is a "ripe situation"? It is one in which the masses have been brought to a point where, if not a majority, then at least a certain number *must* follow the path laid out by the Party: they must see no other escape from their predicament. How does one create a "ripe situation"? That is the purpose of political struggle. During that period Diem's terrorist policy was becoming more blatant day by day, and the alienation of the people from the government was becoming greater and greater. Thus the Party pushed the struggle movement, which increased the terrorism. But the more the people were terrorized, the more they reacted in opposition, yet the more they reacted, the more violently they were terrorized. Continue this until the situation is truly ripe and it will explode, according to a saying of Mao Tse-tung: "A firefly can set a whole field ablaze." Yet for a firefly to set a whole field ablaze the field must be extremely dry. "To make the field dry" in this situation meant we had to make the people suffer, suffer until they could no longer endure it. Only then would they carry out the Party's armed policy. That is why the Party waited until it did.<sup>18</sup>

The new phase of the Revolution in the South was signalled by the Party's successful attack on the headquarters of the 32nd Regiment at Trang Sup, Tay Ninh province, on the 25th of January, 1960. As a member of the Tay Ninh province committee, An had attended the planning session for this attack approximately a month prior. He noted that cadres from the Regional Committee, whose forces were employed, explained that the purpose of the attack was to kick off the new phase of the conflict with a resounding victory, and to show that the military defeat of government forces was easy and not difficult. Regional Committee cadres acknowledged that the attack, which received considerable attention, would "arouse the watchfulness of American imperialism" but that the threat to the final success of the revolution,

<sup>18</sup>An interpretation of slightly different emphasis but leading to the same conclusion is contained in the captured notebook of an unidentified but apparently high-ranking political cadre, *Working Paper* Document 301, the so-called Crimp Document.

The move to a policy of armed activity was apparently connected with the return to North Viet Nam in late 1958 of Le Duan, then secretary of the Nam Bo Regional Committee. This is mentioned in *Working Paper* Document 36.

even if America intervened, had already been considered by the Party and discounted.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of the Party's new policy a number of actions were taken in Long An and surrounding areas. During the last six months of 1959 the Party reorganized and rearmed a number of provincial main force battalions and began to rebuild traditional base areas such as the Plain of Reeds and the *Rung Sat*.<sup>20</sup> In January of 1960 a number of province committees began publishing *Hoc Tap*, a theoretical journal apparently intended as a measure to "improve the political level" of Party members in the new period. Defectors also report that reinfiltration of cadres formerly regrouped to the North began in 1960 in Long An, as in other areas of the South.

However, perhaps the most significant aspect of the new policy was the greatly increased level of violence directed against local officials. We can

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<sup>19</sup>It was this attack which Philippe Devillers inexplicably placed a year too soon in his article "The Struggle for the Unification of Viet Nam" *China Quarterly*, No. 9, (January-March, 1962), pp. 2-23. When he wrote "In the course of that December and the following January armed bands sprang into being almost everywhere" the year was 1959, not 1958 as indicated in the text. The armed bands did not spring into existence spontaneously because of the Phu Loi incident in December of 1958, as he suggests, but instead on orders from the Central Committee, which only reached to district and village level in the South in November of 1959 because of the Party practice of requiring a complete discussion of a new policy at each committee level before the policy decision is passed to the next subordinate echelon. Devillers is correct in his subsequent statement that "the initiative [for armed action] did not originate in Hanoi." This fact does not, however, cast doubt on "the point of view of most foreign governments, in the West especially, . . . that the fighting going on in South Viet Nam is simply a subversive campaign directed from Hanoi." While it is obviously erroneous to say that it was simply "a subversive campaign directed from Hanoi," since the grievances on which the campaign was founded lay in the South nevertheless the major strategic decisions were made by the Central Committee in Hanoi.

In this context Devillers' emphasis on the March 1960 "Declaration of the Veterans of the Resistance" as proving that the southern Party organization began acting independently is mistaken, since the armed line had already been approved and begun to be carried out, as the Tran Sup attack demonstrates. In fact the Declaration, according to defectors' statements, was simply the product of a meeting called in accord with Central Committee policy, with the dual purpose of arousing internal support for the new phase of the revolution and of misleading public opinion about the true leadership of the revolution.

The view that a coordinated policy of armed activity began in the South due to organizational or factional splits within the Party is not supported by historical evidence—except that planted by the Party—and it is vigorously denied by defectors. For example, both Chan and An, who did not know each other, found very amusing several quotations from Western publications espousing this view. They both commented humorously that the Party had apparently been more successful than expected in concealing its role.

Several other prominent works, such as *La Fin d'Une Guerre* by Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers and *The United States in Viet Nam* by George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, tend to the same conclusion regarding the independence of the southern revolutionary movement from Hanoi as expressed in Devillers' article. All of these writers correctly emphasize the effect of the increasing repressiveness of the Diem regime in generating pressure for armed action in the South. However by relying on the incomplete—and sometimes planted—data available at the time they wrote, they reached conclusions regarding the independence of the southern movement which do not seem justified on the basis of subsequent evidence.

<sup>20</sup>"Viet Cong Order of Battle," July-December 1959.

detect a marked change in the Party's public pronouncements beginning at the end of 1959;<sup>21</sup> and in Long An by January 1960, many local officials had already resigned or ceased working due to the increased virulence of the warnings they had been receiving. Many suspected that something bad was coming, and their fears were realized during the week of Tet (January 18-25), the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, in a series of armed actions which created a profound and lasting psychological impact in Long An. According to Vietnamese belief, as Tet goes so will the next twelve months, and thus all efforts are bent toward averting unpleasantness and misfortune during Tet to insure the family fortune in the months ahead.

In 1960, however, Tet in Long An was a week of horror as a wave of assassinations and attacks swept the province. During the previous year only three individuals had been assassinated in the whole province. Now within one week—the most solemn week of the year—twenty-six local officials died: hamlet and village chiefs, teachers, Cong An, etc. Some were simply shot while others died more agonized deaths. Moreover the Party had planned a great many more than twenty-six executions, but after a few days the police reports typically began to read: "Five armed men surrounded the home of the hamlet chief, but he had already fled the hamlet several days before." The Party's goal of paralyzing the government was well on its way to fulfillment.<sup>22</sup>

While the government as a whole did not collapse, the great majority of local officials who lived alone among the people—hamlet and village chiefs, police agents, information cadres—either stopped working or fled to market towns where outposts were located. At the same time that the government withdrew from the rural areas into outposts and towns the Party apparatus, previously forced to lead an underground existence, surfaced and took the place of the Saigon authorities. Thus the Party actually *became* the government in considerable areas as early as 1960, gradually expanding and consolidating its grip in the following years.

These preliminary measures approved at the Fifteenth Conference of the

<sup>21</sup>For example, compare Race Document 1024 dated March 14, 1959 with Race Document 1032 dated January 18, 1960.

<sup>22</sup>This is another regrettable instance in which governmental secrecy has hindered historical research. The aggregation of publicly released statistics on a yearly basis has concealed the fact that so many assassinations took place during the week of Tet, 1960, and that this week (as also indicated by the Trang Sup attack), marked a decisive turning point in revolutionary strategy. Monthly assassination figures for Long An province, as culled by the author from daily Cong An reports, are as follows:

	1959												1960											
Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Total	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	26	6	7	2	1	5	3	6	6	10	6	1

Scholars have not been the only victims of this situation. Had the significance of the Party's attacks during Tet of 1960 early become public knowledge, instead of being forgotten in the files of intelligence agencies, then there would very likely have been a much greater awareness of the possibility of similar attacks at a later date. Had such been the case it is improbable that the wave of attacks during Tet of 1968 could have come so unexpectedly as in fact happened.

Central Committee in May, 1959, were apparently only stopgap moves intended to catch up with events which had in fact overtaken the Party in the South. The breathing space which the Party obtained by these moves was employed to develop a coordinated long-range strategy to be employed in the South. Moreover the decisions involved were so important that they required the approval of a Party Congress—only the third in the history of the Party in Viet Nam. It was this Third Party Congress, meeting in September 1960, which approved the new direction of Party policy in the South, including most importantly the shift to armed activity already underway, the formation of a new national front, the alteration of the name of the Party in the South, and the upgrading (for the second time in history) of the Nam Bo Regional Committee into COSVN, a direct extension of the Central Committee itself.

Such were the circumstances of the decision by the revolutionary movement to initiate a policy of armed conflict in the South. The rapid success of this new strategy led in turn to massive foreign intervention to restore the collapsing position of the Saigon regime, and to the war which is being waged with such ferocity at the present time in southern Viet Nam.

#### CONCLUSION

Several conclusions are suggested by the evidence reviewed here, though these conclusions must remain tentative pending more intensive research into this very murky period in Vietnamese history. The first is that the Party leadership has apparently relied on a number of models for victory in accordance with changing historical circumstances: a three-stage war of resistance in the pre-1954 period; then in the 1955-1956 period reliance either on elections, a *coup d'état*, or on fighting within the Diem regime culminating in a lightning takeover as against the Japanese in August 1945; then a phase of largely non-violent political activity during which there was some expectation of a *coup*, but at least at the higher levels in the Party, there was also the belief that violence would again be necessary; then in 1959 a shift to a strategy of limited armed activity, in which the expectation was that victory would come through the gradual disintegration of the Diem regime, possibly culminating in a *coup*; finally in 1964 a return to the classic Maoist three-stage war culminating in a general uprising.<sup>23</sup>

A second conclusion suggested by the evidence reviewed here is that the Party leadership in Hanoi successfully maintained its authority over the movement in the South even during periods of enormous pressure. Similarly the major strategic decisions have been made by the Party leadership in Hanoi, although there has been a complex interplay between the Hanoi leadership and the Party organization in the South. The view that Hanoi unilaterally made all decisions for its own purposes appears

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<sup>23</sup>Recently captured documents indicate that this strategy may be undergoing yet another shift.

to be an unwarranted oversimplification, just as does the view that the southern organization began acting independently of Hanoi.

That the major strategic decisions were made in Hanoi should not blind us, however, to a third important conclusion, namely that only the reactionary and increasingly repressive policies of the Diem regime permitted the revolutionary leadership to motivate so many to accept a policy of violent action. Without this invaluable assistance from the Diem regime and its allies the violence policy would never have succeeded, regardless of orders issued in Hanoi. A realistic resolution to the violence in Viet Nam must seemingly take into account this fact that the motivation for violence lies in the South and not in the North.

Finally we might note the striking consistency of intent among the Party leadership in Hanoi to achieve national reunification under the Party alone. At times, when it appeared that this might be achieved with little or no violence, the leadership has accepted and exploited that possibility. But the Party has also consistently maintained and acted upon the view that, if peaceful means fail, there is no alternative to fighting until final victory.