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Triumphs or tragedies: A new perspective on the Vietnamese revolution

Tuong Vu

A new perspective has begun to challenge both the conventional portrayal of the Vietnamese revolution and the communist account of its success. This essay takes stock of new research that presents revolutionary Vietnam in a more complex and less triumphal way. It is argued that Vietnam's nationalist revolution (1945–46) should be conceptually distinguished from the subsequent socialist revolution (1948–88). The former had a distinctly urban and bourgeois character, was led by a coalition of the upper and middle classes, and lacked ideological intensity. The latter was imposed from above, based on socialist visions, and dependent on foreign assistance. The failure to disentangle the two revolutions in existing narratives assigns little agency to Vietnamese actors and leads to triumphs being exaggerated while tragedies are overlooked.

For much of the twentieth century Vietnam was embroiled in revolution. A colony of France, Vietnam witnessed the rise of nationalism in the 1900s with the Free School and Eastern Travel movements led by intellectuals such as Luong Van Can, Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh. The core agenda of these movements was cultural reform and national independence. By the late 1920s, communist groups trained in the Soviet Union or influenced by the French left came on the scene. These groups were distinguished from others by their radical program, which included not only national independence but also socialism. At the end of the Second World War, the communists rode to power on the back of a popular movement, in an event known in Vietnam as the 'August Revolution' of 1945. If history up to this point was relatively straightforward, what took place during and since August 1945 has been mired in controversy.

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This essay presents an emerging perspective that challenges two long-standing narratives on revolution in Vietnam. The first narrative emanates from Western writers and presents the Vietnamese revolution since 1945 as essentially a nationalist revolution. This revolution was frustrated by foreign intervention, but eventually triumphed in 1975 when Vietnam was reunified. The second narrative is constructed and propagated by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to legitimise its rule. In this narrative, the revolution has been under the leadership of the VCP throughout and has deliberately undergone two stages: the 'national democratic' stage to secure independence and the 'socialist stage' to build a socialist system in Vietnam. The first stage was completed in 1954 in the North and in 1975 in the South. The second stage is still ongoing.

In contrast with the long-standing narratives above, the new perspective counts not one but two distinct revolutions in Vietnam between 1945 and 1988. One revolution was nationalist and the other socialist, and only the latter was under the VCP's leadership. The two revolutions overlapped, but were fundamentally different in key aspects, from goals to class bases and from causes to processes. Yet both suffered eventual defeat: the nationalist revolution in the late 1940s and the socialist revolution four decades later towards the end of the 1980s. The new perspective pays greater attention to Vietnamese agency, while portraying Vietnam's modern history in a more complex and less triumphal way. Although the new perspective is not yet firmly established, I will argue that it is closer to what we now know about events in Vietnam.

The main body of this essay is divided into three parts. The first part reviews the two dominant narratives and discusses issues associated with the new perspective, including sources and ambiguities. In the second part, the nationalist revolution will be reinterpreted according to the new perspective. The third part will focus on the socialist revolution with an emphasis on the ways it was different from the nationalist one. In the conclusion I will touch briefly on the politics of forgetting and remembering revolutions in contemporary Vietnam. The two revolutions, both defeated, must be viewed not as triumphs, but as tragedies. As will be seen, this is in fact how many Vietnamese today think about these events.

Two dominant narratives versus a new perspective on revolution

Until recently there were two dominant narratives about the Vietnamese revolution. In the conventional portrayal based on Western scholarship, twentieth-century Vietnam experienced a protracted nationalist revolution to achieve national independence and unity. The revolution was primarily nationalist in character even though it was led by a communist party. It achieved its initial success in 1945 with Ho Chi Minh's proclamation of independence, and scored its greatest triumph in 1975 when Vietnam was reunified. Prior to 2000 or so, the majority of scholarly works on this topic viewed Vietnamese modern history and politics through the lenses of anticolonialism and nationalism.¹ Very few studies focused on Vietnamese communists *qua*

1 Examples are David Marr's *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), and *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); John T. McAlister, *Viet Nam: The origins of revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1969); John T. McAlister and Paul

communists whose deep belief in communism powerfully shaped their policy. Yet even these works tended to downplay the communist character of the Vietnamese movement.²

By contrast, from Ho Chi Minh's 1927 *Duong kach menh* (Road to revolution)³ to Le Duan's 1956 *Duong loi cach mang mien Nam* (The revolutionary line in the South),⁴ Vietnamese communist leaders made clear that more than national independence and unity was at stake for them. To them Vietnam's destiny must be found in socialism, which was the ultimate goal of their revolution. They claimed leadership of the events in 1945, which represented the first stage of their revolution — the stage of 'national democratic revolution' (*cach mang dan toc dan chu*). The second stage, 'socialist revolution' (*cach mang xa hoi chu nghia*), which involved class struggle, was launched in 1953 through the land reform, and continued in North Vietnam during the civil war, and in all of Vietnam from 1975 until the late 1980s. Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Vietnamese leaders have not talked about socialist revolution, only 'socialist orientations' (*dinh huong xa hoi chu nghia*) for their market economy. Yet they continue to propagate a narrative of the Vietnamese revolution as a single event led by the VCP from the beginning and marked by one triumph after another, as the opening paragraph of a recent official Party Program stated:

From 1930 to the present [...] the Vietnamese Communist Party has led our people through a long and hard revolutionary struggle to overcome many challenges and achieve great victories: the victory in August 1945 that smashed colonial and feudal rule [...] the victory of the wars against foreign aggression [in 1954 and 1975] that liberated our nation, unified our country and fulfilled our internationalist obligations; and the victory of reform for industrialisation and modernisation that continues to take the country step by step along the path to socialism [...].⁵

Since about a decade ago, fresh interpretations based on new sources coming out of Vietnam and other countries have amounted to a new perspective on the Vietnamese revolution. The three most significant new sources from Vietnam include: first, millions of pages of archival documents from the Office of the Prime Minister,

Mus, *The Vietnamese and their revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); William Duiker, *The rise of nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); Alexander Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); Carlyle Thayer, *War by other means: National liberation and revolution in Viet-Nam 1954–60* (St Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Greg Lockhart, *Nation in arms: The origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (St Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1989); and Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and De Gaulle in a world at war* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1991). For a review of this literature, see Tuong Vu, 'Vietnamese political studies and debates on Vietnamese nationalism', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, 2 (2007): 175–230.

2 Notable examples are Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); and Edwin Moise, *Land reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the revolution at the village level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

3 Originally published in 1927, repub. in Dang Cong San Viet Nam [Vietnamese Communist Party], *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [Collection of Party documents, hereafter VKDTT], v. 1 (2005), pp. 17–83, see esp. 105–7.

4 Originally written in August 1956, repub. in VKDTT, v. 17, pp. 783–825, see esp. pp. 805–13.

5 'Cuong linh xay dung dat nuoc trong thoi ky qua do len Chu nghia xa hoi' [Program to build during the period of transition to socialism] (Mar. 2011), http://123.30.190.43:8080/tiengviet/tulieuvankien/vankiendang/details.asp?topic=191&subtopic=8&leader_topic=989&id=BT531160562 (last accessed 14 Feb. 2014).

most line ministries, and other agencies of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1950–1975; second, Vietnamese newspapers and publications in the DRV and subsequently in unified Vietnam, including many diaries, memoirs and journalistic accounts;⁶ and third, the 54 volumes of documents released (most for the first time) by the VCP between 1998 and 2007. The last source includes about 40,000 pages of documents produced by central and local VCP organs, covering 70 years of Party history from 1924 to 1995.⁷ The Party archive remains off-limits to most researchers and the published volumes comprise only a small portion of that archive. Nevertheless, these volumes offer rich and unprecedented access to internal party communication and accounts of how key policies were implemented. When the three kinds of sources are combined together, they cover such an extensive range of activities and periods and come from such diverse loci of state authority that biases in any particular source are minimised.

Based on these sources, an emerging perspective has begun to challenge both the conventional portrayal of the Vietnamese revolution and the communist account of their revolutionary success. This new perspective presents modern Vietnamese history in a more complex and less triumphal way. While new evidence will continue to change our understanding, what is now available suggests that we can and should, *conceptually*, distinguish two revolutions in Vietnam: a nationalist revolution in 1945–46 and a socialist revolution in the four subsequent decades (1948–88).

Specifically, the nationalist revolution of 1945–46 was a spontaneous event, had a distinctly urban and bourgeois character, was led by a coalition of the upper and middle classes, and lacked ideological intensity.⁸ This revolution — the August Revolution — successfully achieved state power, but failed to keep it. The revolution was defeated in the late 1940s when radical communists in the VCP took control of policy, purged their bourgeois ‘fellow-travellers’, and built a state based on Marxist–Leninist doctrine, supported by poor peasants.

What the radicals did thereafter was to launch a socialist revolution from above, which began in 1953 with a rural class struggle.⁹ Thousands of patriotic landlords who had actively supported the nationalist revolution were executed, marking a bloody end to that ill-fated revolution. Over the next four decades the socialist revolution thus launched succeeded in creating a powerful communist state that towered above a society hungry and exhausted after decades of continuous warfare. War and

6 The most notable among these are Le Van Hien’s *Nhat ky cua mot bo truong* [Diary of a minister], 2 vols. (Danang: Da Nang Publishing House, 1995); *Nguyen Huy Tuong nhât ky* [Diary of Nguyen Huy Tuong], 3 vols. (Hanoi: Thanh nien, 2006); Dang Phong, *Lich su kinh te Viet nam 1945–2000* [Vietnam’s economic history], 2 vols. (Hanoi: Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 2002); Hoi ky Vu Dinh Hoe [Vu Dinh Hoe’s memoirs] (Hanoi: Hoi Nha Van, 2003); Tran Quang Co, *Hoi uc va suy nghi* [Memories and thoughts] (n.p., 2003); and Huy Duc, *Ben thang cuoc* [The winning side], 2 vols. (Pennsylvania: OsinBook, 2012, Kindle edition).

7 See a forum that reviews these volumes in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, 2 (2010): 183–247.

8 I follow Jeff Goodwin’s definition of revolutions as ‘irregular, extraconstitutional, and sometimes violent changes of political regimes and control of state power brought about by popular movements’, in *No other way out: States and revolutionary movements, 1945–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 9–10.

9 For a discussion of the concept of ‘revolution from above’ and its implementation under Stalin, see Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in power: The revolution from above, 1928–1941* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990).

the socialist revolution helped the communist state defeat its rival in South Vietnam from 1955–1975 and project Vietnam’s power abroad (in Indochina and greater Southeast Asia). But this revolution was inimical to peasants and workers’ interests and was resisted from early on. By the late 1980s it could be considered as having been defeated when the Party abandoned the Stalinist–Maoist model from which the revolution drew its inspiration. The circumstances that forced the Party to suspend the revolution included a protracted and severe economic crisis, the death of top leaders, Soviet pressure for reform, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Separating the two revolutions at the conceptual level does not mean a denial of ambiguities. From 1960 to 1975, for example, Vietnamese communist leaders sought to build socialism in North Vietnam while leading a war in South Vietnam to unify the country. Unification can be said to have served both nationalist and socialist goals. Nevertheless, since the 1930s Vietnamese communists had dreamed about a socialist revolution that would transcend narrower nationalist goals. That socialist revolution made a clear break from the nationalist revolution with the execution of many patriotic landlords during the land reform. Finally, the socialist revolution was implemented in the North during the war for unification and extended to the South soon after the war ended in 1975. To neglect the socialist revolution and subsume it under the nationalist one, or to speak of these two revolutions as two stages under communist leadership, contradicts the evidence presented below. By failing to disentangle the nationalist from the socialist revolutions, both the conventional and communist narratives see only triumphs and glories while overlooking defeats and tragedies.

Disentangling the two revolutions in historiography also accords greater agency to Vietnamese actors. The conventional narrative makes the Vietnamese and their leaders appear largely as victims of foreign powers while ignoring the latter’s dogged efforts to pursue a radical vision despite repeated and ruthless Western interventions. It is possible to imagine that Vietnam would not have witnessed the socialist revolution if the West had rallied to Ho Chi Minh in 1945 and afterward instead of opposing his government and creating conditions for his more radical comrades to rise to power. However, the logic behind this counterfactual scenario of ‘missed opportunity’ is faulty for three reasons. First, Ho’s writings as a young man in the 1920s indicate that he was as radical as any of his comrades.¹⁰ Although they were not a monolithic group, all the top Vietnamese communist leaders believed in the Marxist–Leninist credo and their internationalist commitments.¹¹

Second, while French and American actions did affect the course of revolutionary development in Vietnam, this was not always toward a more radical direction. For example, the presence of a few American officers in Ho Chi Minh’s entourage in August 1945 enabled this shrewd man to claim the Allies’ support for his movement and gain an upper hand over his rivals, from both the left and the right. Yet, until their final victory in 1975, the need to unite Vietnamese of all classes in the face of

10 Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam*, pp. 164–70; Tuong Vu, *Paths to development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 183–4.

11 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre 1945–1954* (Paris: Armand Collin, 2011), pp. 396–401.

first French, and then American, threats forced revolutionaries at times to bide their time and slow down the pace or tone down the rhetoric of class struggle.

Finally, the missed opportunity thesis assumes that Vietnamese revolutionaries were isolated and helpless in their struggle against Western domination. In fact, top Vietnamese communists had been trained by the Comintern from the beginning, worked under Comintern direction for two decades, and aggressively sought support from a disinterested and unresponsive Stalin during 1945–1949.¹² If the United States had sought to manipulate the situation in Vietnam in late 1945 in support of pro-Western factions, the Soviet Union might well have intervened on the side of the radicals, if not in 1946, then certainly in 1948. Another example of Vietnamese radicals not being helpless was when the United States escalated the war against the DRV in 1964–65. In response, the Soviet Union, which had been lukewarm about supporting the DRV's desire to unify the country by force, immediately changed its policy and countered American aggression with massive aid to Hanoi. On balance, it is far from clear that France and the United States could have made the Vietnamese revolution less radical than it actually was. They were not the only foreign powers with some stake in Vietnam, and their policies did not always boost the political fortunes of the radicals among the Vietnamese communists.

Below I will discuss and contrast the two revolutions. For the *nationalist* revolution, I rely entirely on secondary sources, some of which come from my own empirical research. Secondary sources on the *socialist* revolution are far more limited, and I will supplement these with data drawn from my work-in-progress.

The nationalist revolution (1945–46)

After the Vietnam War, the so-called 'August Revolution' of 1945–46 is perhaps the political event in Vietnamese modern history that has received the most scholarly attention. Several monographs have attempted to explain it, either directly or indirectly, and its legacies are still being hotly debated in Vietnam today.¹³ The newer scholarship since the end of the Cold War has benefited from the greater availability of sources. Below I will examine some of the main findings in recent studies.

In terms of causes, the nationalist revolution was the culmination of a long process that began with the Free School and Eastern Travel movements. The deep historical, social, and political causes of this process are well known. They include a repressive and racist French colonial regime that exploited the lower classes and alienated the local elites; the integration of Vietnam into the global capitalist economy, which destroyed local values and institutions; and the combination of the Vietnamese 'tradition' of patriotism with new nationalist awakenings. All these factors

12 Goscha, *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre*, chap. 9; Tuong Vu, 'From cheering to volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the arrival of the Cold War, 1940–1951', in Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting histories: The Cold War and decolonization in Asia (1945–1962)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 172–204.

13 For example, see Samuel L. Popkin, *The rational peasant: The political economy of rural society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Marr, *Vietnamese anticolonialism*; Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial*; McAlister, *Viet Nam: The origins of revolution*; McAlister and Mus, *The Vietnamese and their revolution*; Duiker, *The rise of nationalism in Vietnam*; Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam*; Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese communism*; and Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*.

applied not only to Vietnam, but they were distinctively shaped by the particular Vietnamese context.

With newly available sources, scholars now have a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances in 1945 that triggered this event. The links between international politics, foreign actors, and the uprisings in Vietnam are clearer. For example, Stein Tønnesson argues that President Roosevelt's support for an international trusteeship over postwar Indochina continued to be reflected in the policies of US diplomats in late 1945 after his death in May of the same year.¹⁴ The assistance provided by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was crucial to the Viet Minh's winning of power over rival groups despite the United States not recognising the DRV led by Ho Chi Minh in 1945.¹⁵ Tønnesson's more recent study further shows the key role that Chinese occupying forces played in averting war between Ho's government and returning French forces in northern Vietnam in early 1946.¹⁶ This Chinese move gave the DRV nine more months to prepare for an eventual showdown with the French as well as domestic opposition in northern and central Vietnam.

Scholars now acknowledge that the brief period of Japanese direct rule (9 March to mid-August 1945) significantly benefited the revolution. In an earlier study of the revolution, Huynh Kim Khanh notes that during the 'Japanese interlude' Vietnamese communists were able to take advantage of two sets of circumstances.¹⁷ First, fewer restrictions on political activities during this period allowed many political groups to form and agitate the masses — the Viet Minh and other groups were able to expand their recruitment. Second, the war, Allied bombardment, and the conversion of rice fields to produce other supplies for the Japanese army led to a devastating famine in the North, which provided the Viet Minh with a cause to mobilise the masses for revolution.

There was more to the story, however. In particular, Vu Ngu Chieu has shown how the brief Tran Trong Kim government (17 April to 23 August 1945) during the Japanese 'interlude' greatly facilitated the revolution.¹⁸ This government removed press censorship and released thousands of political prisoners, many of whom were senior communist leaders.¹⁹ It also launched an urban Vanguard Youth movement, which would lead the seizure of power in many towns, including Saigon, after the Japanese capitulated. Tønnesson adds that the Japanese overthrow of French rule contributed decisively to the later communist success because it also put a stop to the very effective French police infiltration of the Viet Minh and capturing of its leaders.²⁰

Comparing the situation in French Indochina and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Jeff Goodwin argues that Japanese unwillingness to assist Vietnamese non-communists

14 Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*.

15 Viet Minh (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh or Vietnam Independence League) was a united front founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1941.

16 Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*.

17 Huynh Kim Khanh, 'The Vietnamese August Revolution reinterpreted', *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, 4 (1971): 766–7.

18 Vu Ngu Chieu, 'The other side of the revolution: The empire of Vietnam (Mar.–Aug. 1945)', *Journal of Asian Studies* 45, 2 (1986): 293–328.

19 *Ky uc Huynh Van Lang* [Huynh Van Lang's memoirs], vol. 1 (self-pub., 2011), p. 251.

20 Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*.

was an important reason why the communists prevailed in the revolution.²¹ In Indonesia, on the other hand, nationalists and Muslims gained a critical advantage over communists thanks to the Japanese. We do not know what would have happened if the more ambitious and experienced Ngo Dinh Diem instead of Tran Trong Kim had been invited by the Japanese to set up a government following the March 9 coup.

Moving on from causes to the events leading up to the nationalist revolution of 1945–46, earlier studies have simply repeated the official Vietnamese narrative of a powerful and far-sighted communist party leading a national uprising.²² In contrast, more recent research has denied the Party's central role in the event while emphasising the spontaneity of the revolts. Communist leaders had predicted Japanese defeat, but expected an Allied invasion to push the Japanese out of Indochina. To prepare for this scenario, Ho Chi Minh and his comrades were building a militia in their base area near the Chinese border. Without knowledge of the atomic bombs to be employed soon, they did not expect a quick Japanese defeat or surrender. When this occurred, the communist forces were still small and far from major urban centres.

Political groups that had been mobilising in big cities during the Tran Trong Kim government became the primary leaders of the pro-independence protests. Most acted on their own initiative, often in response to what they heard was happening in Hanoi, Saigon, or neighbouring towns. David Elliott, in his study on war and social change in the Mekong Delta, aptly describes the revolutionary movement as spreading like 'a typhoon'.²³ The general pattern was local elites and ordinary Vietnamese seizing the opportunity of a power vacuum to establish new local governments without any central direction or leadership. Unable to control the situation, the Tran Trong Kim government resigned and turned over power to Ho Chi Minh and his group who had by then arrived in Hanoi with the aura of being part of the victorious Allies.

Although the typhoon was fast and forceful, it did not sweep away everything in its path as often assumed. In another work I have disputed the assumption of a complete break between the Tran Trong Kim government and the new Viet Minh regime under Ho Chi Minh.²⁴ While the former was a constitutional monarchy and the latter a republic in appearance,²⁵ continuities ran deep. Most ministers and high-ranking officials serving Ho Chi Minh in late 1945 had worked under Tran Trong Kim. Most colonial laws and institutions were kept intact, and most civil servants were retained to serve the new government.²⁶ While the Viet Minh government issued many progressive laws, these were either ignored by local officials who came to power on their own, or not aggressively implemented by central officials mindful of maintaining the fragile political coalition made up of representatives of the middle and upper classes of colonial society. At the top, the coalition was headed by leaders of the Indochinese Communist Party (e.g. Ho Chi Minh) and members of the former

21 Goodwin, *No other way out*.

22 Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese communism*.

23 David Elliott, *The Vietnamese war: Revolution and social change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

24 Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*, chap. 5.

25 This point is made by Tønnesson to support his argument that the state was reconstituted as a result of the revolution. See Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945*, p. 4.

26 David Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), chap. 1.

Tran Trong Kim government (e.g. Phan Anh, the Minister of Youth).²⁷ Ideology was in fact downplayed, as evidenced in Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence, which quoted Thomas Jefferson but not Lenin, in the 1946 Constitution, which had more similarities to that of the United States than the Soviet Union, and in the (fake) dissolution of the Indochinese Communist Party in November 1945.

Understanding the true class basis of the revolution and the political deals made by revolutionary leaders also forces us to reconsider the link between the nationalist revolution and subsequent events. I have argued elsewhere that events in 1948–50 are a neglected break in Vietnam's modern history.²⁸ The imminent victory of the Chinese communists in mainland China enabled radical Vietnamese communists (e.g. General Secretary Truong Chinh) to assert a more radical line for their party and to prepare for a socialist revolution that would, by the early 1950s, destroy the class alliance and the political compromises undergirding the Viet Minh government. The nationalist revolution was for all practical purposes defeated at this point, as non-communists were effectively removed from power. Steered by radical communists, the DRV would become an outpost of the Soviet bloc, with its initial class basis being the poor peasants who benefited from the land reform.

The rise of the radicals triggered the onset of the civil war.²⁹ A large number of Viet Minh officials and followers left the movement in the late 1940s with bitterness. They returned to French-controlled zones, either resigning from politics or rallying to the new Bao Dai government. The nationalist revolution of 1945–46 was defeated although the nationalist *movement* would linger for another decade under Ngo Dinh Diem, who succeeded Bao Dai. With the French departing and the two regions of Vietnam becoming independent, the 'national revolution' (*cach mang quoc gia*) launched by Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955 was essentially an anticommunist nation-building project, but not a nationalist movement in the normal sense of that term.³⁰

In sum, recently available studies have revealed the spontaneous nature of the nationalist revolution as well as its bourgeois class basis. As seen below, this revolution was very different from the socialist revolution that displaced it.

The Socialist Revolution (1948–88)

Unlike the 'August Revolution', the socialist revolution has been neglected by analysts (except for the land reform that started this revolution). Earlier scholarship sometimes portrayed it as a deviation or aberration.³¹ Overall, we know much more about the rural campaigns than those in urban areas, and much less about

27 The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was the name of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1930–1945. Between 1946–1951, the Party operated under the name 'Association for Marxist Studies'. Its name was changed in 1951 to the Vietnam Workers Party, and once again in 1976 to the Vietnamese Communist Party.

28 Tuong Vu, "'It's time for the Indochinese revolution to show its true colours': The radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 3 (2009): 519–42.

29 *Ibid.*

30 For the best treatment of the early years of Ngo Dinh Diem's national revolution, see Edward G. Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), chap. 4.

31 For example, see Moise, *Land reform in China and North Vietnam*.

cultural campaigns than economic ones. Below I analyse the characteristics of this neglected revolution by contrasting it with the better-known nationalist revolution.

Foreign ideology and support

In sharp contrast with the non-ideological and locally driven nationalist revolution, the socialist revolution was primarily motivated by Marxist-Leninist ideology (often as interpreted by Stalin and Mao) and entirely dependent on foreign support. In the early period this revolution was carried out under the direct supervision of Chinese advisers, and throughout its lifetime it was inspired by foreign models and financed chiefly with foreign aid. The basic idea of the ideology was to construct a classless socialist society without the exploitation and oppression of man by man. In this society, the means of production were to be publicly owned, and the fruits of economic production were to be distributed 'to each according to his labour'. The material basis of this society was an industrialised economy characterised by large-scale production in industry and agriculture. Vietnamese communist leaders were clearly impressed with the Stalinist approach to socio-cultural reform and economic development in the early 1930s.³² Yet it is not clear whether they had thought carefully about the concrete issues involved in the process of socialist construction. While Vietnamese revolutionaries closely followed developments in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, no serious debate on economic issues under socialism can be found in available sources. The Stalinist model might simply have been assumed to offer adequate solutions to all problems. In the early 1950s, elements of the Maoist model were enthusiastically added to that model.³³ By 1959, Stalin's 1936 Constitution had been adopted in North Vietnam. Although the conventional narrative claims that Vietnamese communists turned to China and the Soviet Union only to obtain diplomatic and material support for Vietnamese independence, the zeal with which they welcomed the Cold War and embraced Stalin and Mao's thoughts suggests their sincere belief in Stalinism and Maoism.³⁴

The importance of ideology and foreign aid for the socialist revolution cannot be exaggerated. In fact, the revolution achieved little economically, but as long as foreign aid was forthcoming and the first generation of communist leaders, presumably the most doctrinaire, was in power, it continued to forge ahead (or limp along?). In agricultural production, for example, the consistent pattern since collectivisation was decline (except in a few isolated years). This happened in the early 1960s before American bombing began, and continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Central leaders knew about the persistent decline in production, yet they nipped any tinkering with collectivisation in the bud. The Party Secretary of Vinh Phu Province was publicly rebuked for allowing household contracts in the late 1960s.³⁵ Only when faced

32 Tuong Vu, 'Dreams of paradise: The making of a Soviet outpost in Vietnam', *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 2 (Aug. 2008): 255–85.

33 See Tuong Vu, 'Workers and the socialist state: North Vietnam's state-labor relations, 1945–1970', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 38 (Sept. 2005): 329–56.

34 Vu, 'From cheering to volunteering'.

35 It has been speculated that the crackdown on contract farming around 1967–68 may have related to the efforts of top leaders to silence dissent while they prepared to launch the controversial Tet Offensive. See Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'The ideological debate in the DRV and the significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967–68', *Cold War History* 5, 4 (2005): 479–500.

with a deep economic crisis and an imminent famine in 1979 did Party leaders relent somewhat. As soon as conditions improved, however controls were reimposed, leading to another severe crisis in the mid-1980s. Collectivisation was not fully dismantled until the reduction and eventual suspension of Soviet aid, and the death of General Secretary Le Duan and the subsequent retirement of his cohorts (Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong, and Le Duc Tho) in 1986.

Revolution from above

If the nationalist revolution was a ‘typhoon’ marked by the spontaneity and swiftness of popular response, the socialist revolution was one that was imposed from above and involved intense debates and careful deliberation. Several times Party leaders decided to delay socialist construction and publicly denied any intention to ever do so. In 1941, the Eighth Plenum of the Party’s Central Committee decided to postpone land reform to avoid alienating landlords and rich farmers.³⁶ Such themes as ‘social justice’ or ‘equity’ rarely appeared in Viet Minh propaganda during 1941–1945.³⁷ The Viet Minh program promised that capitalists would be free to get rich, while workers would have to work only eight hours a day. Landlords could keep their land and tenants would get their rents reduced. The Viet Minh newspaper *Viet Nam Doc Lap* at least once warned its cadres that the goal of the revolution was not to take from the rich to distribute to the poor.³⁸

After coming to power in 1945, the Viet Minh government immediately denied that it intended to create a state based on a worker–peasant alliance.³⁹ It issued some progressive laws such as rent reduction and an eight-hour workday, but no radical policies. This led a frustrated Truong Chinh to complain in late 1946 that

Now we need to criticise a mistaken view about the stages of the Vietnamese revolution. Some people believe that our revolution has to go one step at a time: (anti-imperialist) national liberation first, then (anti-feudalist) land revolution, then socialism. This step-by-step view that strictly divides the revolution into three stages is not correct. Externally, the Soviet Union, a socialist country, has emerged victorious and the new democratic movement is growing fast. Internally, the leadership of the revolution is firmly in the hands of the proletariat and the democratic progressive forces are united. Under these historical conditions, our national liberation revolution can accomplish anti-imperialist tasks and fulfil *part of* our anti-feudalist responsibilities.⁴⁰

Apparently Party leaders were divided over the timing of their socialist revolution. It was not until 1948–50 that the radical faction led by Truong Chinh was able to persuade their more cautious comrades to go along, and a rural class struggle

36 Vu, ‘From cheering to volunteering’: 178.

37 A rare exception was Phi Son, “Nong dan voi cach mang” [Peasants and revolution], *Cuu Quoc* [Save the Country], Spring 1945, p. 4. See my examination of the contrast between Viet Minh’s newspapers *Cuu Quoc* and *Viet Nam Doc Lap* [Independent Vietnam] with *Thanh Nghi*, a non-Viet Minh publication, in *Paths to development in Asia*, pp. 187–93.

38 *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, July 30, 1945.

39 Vu, ‘Workers and the socialist state’, p. 332.

40 ‘Cach mang thang Tam: Trien vong cua Cach mang Viet nam’ [The August Revolution: The prospects of Vietnam’s revolution], *Su That*, 7 Sept. 1946 (italics in original).

was officially launched in 1953. Because the war with the French was still going on, he proposed to retain the cover of a nationalist struggle over the rural class struggle to be unleashed:

*Nationalist democratic revolutions are [essentially] peasant revolutions. Wars of national liberation are essentially peasant wars [...] Leading peasants to fight feudalism and imperialism is class struggle and nationalist struggle at the same time. It is class struggle within a nationalist struggle and under the appearance of a nationalist struggle.*⁴¹

This pattern of careful deliberation would be repeated with the nationalisation of industry. During 1954–56 the Party promoted collaboration between workers and their employers to reduce conflicts and restore production.⁴² Mindful of the possible national elections for unification according to the Geneva Accords, the Party tried to avoid alienating capitalists. By 1957, as the Party no longer expected unification through elections, as its leadership was under threat externally and domestically, and as the prices of major goods rose sharply and caused severe shortages,⁴³ the Party ordered the nationalisation of most private enterprises.⁴⁴

The debate on collectivisation was an exception. Following the suspension of the land reform, the Party launched a campaign to correct the ‘mistakes’ of wrongly punishing many local cadres and rich peasants in 1957. The campaign was still in progress when the Chinese leadership began the Great Leap Forward. The Leap, which coincided with the successful launching of the Soviet Union’s Sputnik I, generated huge euphoria in North Vietnam. After only a few meetings, the Party decided to start collectivisation despite the lack of preparation.⁴⁵

That quick move on collectivisation aside, the VCP’s generally careful implementation of the socialist revolution can be explained by two factors. First, the revolution depended heavily on foreign support, which at times was either not forthcoming (late 1940s) or insufficient (late 1950s and early 1960s). Second, the Party leadership anticipated that Vietnam’s old social elites would resist its socialist agenda.⁴⁶ The Party did not want to alienate them until it had gained full control over the North in the late 1950s and in the South after 1975. This calculation was clearly behind the changes in Vietnamese citizens’ constitutional right to private property: while the Constitution of 1946 ‘protected the private property of all citizens’, that of 1959 merely ‘acknowledged the existence of property owned by national capitalists’.⁴⁷ By

41 ‘Bao cao cua Tong Bi Thu Truong Chinh’ [Report by General Secretary Truong Chinh], speech at the Fourth Central Committee Plenum, 25–30 Jan. 1953, *VKDTT*, v. 14 (2000), pp. 53–4. Italics in original.

42 Vu, ‘Workers and the socialist state’, pp. 338–9.

43 Party leaders blamed the shortages on hoarding by Hanoi’s ‘capitalists’.

44 Vu, ‘Workers and the socialist state’; Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thanh, ‘The reform of capitalists and capitalism in North Vietnam (1958–1960)’, (n.p., 1999).

45 Benedict J.T. Kerkvliet, ‘Wobbly foundations: Building co-operatives in rural Vietnam, 1955–61’, *South East Asia Research* 6, 3 (1998): 193–251.

46 Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*, pp. 202–6.

47 The text of this document is available at http://laws.dongnai.gov.vn/1951_to_1960/1960/196001/196001010001.

1980, a new Constitution did away with even that and declared all property to ‘belong to the people’ and to be managed by the state.⁴⁸

Participants and beneficiaries of revolution

Another important contrast between the nationalist and socialist revolutions was their primary participants and beneficiaries. As noted, participants in the nationalist revolution were mostly the urban middle and upper classes; they were members of the local elite and ordinary people in urban areas who were motivated by a combination of hunger, opportunism, and patriotism. The revolution generally lacked the participation of the lower classes, but it was not against their interests. In contrast, the socialist revolution claimed to fight for the interests of all workers and peasants, but in reality served more to consolidate and expand state power. Below I will also examine both the rural and urban (industrial) sectors to highlight the contrasting faces of the socialist revolution.

In the *rural* sector, the socialist revolution initially benefited poor peasants but later betrayed them. The rent reduction and land reform campaigns of 1953–56 served the interests of poor peasants by redistributing 37 per cent of agricultural land and some tools to landless and land-poor peasants.⁴⁹ Yet the land reform also benefited the state significantly. Land reform in Vietnam involved not just land redistribution, but also a class struggle. Because the central leadership wanted to purge members of the ‘bad classes’ from the Party and government, it ordered an ‘organisational rectification’ campaign in conjunction with the land reform.⁵⁰ Poor peasants were incited to ‘struggle’ against not only landlords but also local cadres. About half of all local governments and Party units were dissolved with old leaders violently purged and new ones promoted from the ranks of poor peasants. The purge helped Hanoi centralise control over local governments and Party units. The reach of the communist state now extended to every village. With landlords destroyed as a class, the potential for organised opposition or resistance to central policy by the rural elites was largely eliminated.

But if land reform served the interests of poor peasants and not just those of the state, collectivisation was much less useful to them; indeed in the long run, it was inimical to their interests. On the one hand, the cooperatives provided peasants with many important services, not only related to production but also to their well-being, such as education and health care. These services were very basic, but they were available to all peasants regardless of income. On the other hand, cooperatives exploited peasants through procurement quotas and the work-points system. Peasants may have benefited from cooperatives if production had increased, but the opposite was the case, and not only because of external factors. As the average size of cooperatives quadrupled between 1960 and 1980, staple food production per capita fell steadily, and staple food consumption per capita

48 The text of this document is available at http://www.moj.gov.vn/vbpq/Lists/Vn%20bn%20php%20lut/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=1536.

49 Benedict Kerkvliet, *The power of everyday politics: How Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

50 Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*, chap. 6.

declined by half between 1959 and 1980.⁵¹ The decline began before American bombing could have affected production, but war exacerbated it. In the early 1970s the average villager had only about 14 kg of paddy and other staples per month to eat, well below their basic nutritional needs. As Benedict Kerkvliet summarised from official reports in some regions, during the difficult months between two harvests, 'People most desperately dug up immature cassava roots to eat, begged door to door, sold paddy still growing in their household plots, and sold their immature pigs and household belongings. A few parents even sold their children or gave them away to others who could feed them.'⁵²

Peasants were certainly not docile, and they coped with the situation by passive resistance, shirking collective work, stealing cooperatives' produce, and buying and selling in the black market. By the 1970s, most of their income came from the 5 per cent communal land reserved for private farming. Their resistance contributed to the bankruptcy of collectivisation as a national program, but they also paid dearly in the process. Most suffered from chronic hunger and those in poorer provinces from occasional famines (e.g. in 1979 and 1988).

In *industry*, we observe the same discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Workers' Party and its practice. There was also a gap between early policies which served the interests of workers, and later policies aimed at enhancing state control and extraction.⁵³ Between 1945 and 1954, the Party implemented many progressive labour policies to improve working conditions and to increase workers' participation in factory management. In DRV-controlled zones, a factory management campaign was launched in state enterprises from 1948–1954 to promote 'democratic management', with workers allowed to participate in factory councils. By around 1957, however, the policy had shifted to emphasising control as workers became restless in the face of high inflation and worsening living conditions.⁵⁴ Inspired by the Great Leap Forward in China, Vietnamese leaders launched an intense campaign 'to reform factory management' in 1958–59. The first goal of this campaign was to strengthen party leadership over state enterprises by organising self-criticism sessions for cadres. The second goal was to indoctrinate workers through 'study sessions' at which workers were taught about the superiority of the socialist system over the colonial/capitalist alternative. The campaign's goals were clearly made without workers' interests in mind, although Ministry of Labour reports indicate that workers had a field day venting their complaints during the study sessions.⁵⁵

Despite these and many later campaigns, the state also failed to motivate workers to work hard for socialism, just as it had failed with respect to peasants.⁵⁶ Like the peasants who would rather expend their energy tending small private lots than working for the collectives, most industrial workers shirked if they could. This was reflected in the decline of labour productivity in North Vietnam from 1960 up to the 1970s (data is not available for later periods). Interestingly, shirking was also prevalent

51 Kerkvliet, *The power of everyday politics*, pp. 52–6, 251.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

53 Vu, 'Workers and the socialist state'.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 341–2.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 344–6.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 347–9.

among state workers who enjoyed high socio-political status and larger quantities of rationed goods but low monetary wages. In contrast, workers in cooperatives had a lower status and had to work much harder to earn their piece-rate salaries, but their incomes were much higher than their counterparts in the state sector. The black market, which traded in scarce raw materials and rationed goods stolen or sold by state managers and employees, was a major cause for the breakdown of the state-constructed labour hierarchy and for the eventual failure of the socialist revolution in industry.

A cultural revolution

The socialist revolution also involved a massive effort to re-mold culture. In the last decades of colonial rule, urban Vietnamese had absorbed Western culture to a considerable degree, both in form and content. Newspapers, novels, oil paintings, and classical music spread widely while Western thinking and norms excited the elites and urban youth. Yet the colonial regime maintained a strict censorship on political topics and debates, except when conducted in French in Cochinchina. Between the Japanese coup of March 1945 and their surrender in August 1945, Vietnamese enjoyed for the first time in the modern era freedoms of speech and press. Numerous newspapers appeared to take advantage of the newly gained freedoms. The Viet Minh government organised a literacy campaign that taught reading skills to millions of Vietnamese.⁵⁷ The nationalist revolution was truly liberating in this sense.

The socialist revolution in the cultural realm rolled back many of those achievements. From 1948, Party leaders such as Truong Chinh and To Huu sought to impose Stalinist–Maoist norms on cultural life in the resistance zone under Viet Minh control.⁵⁸ The Party required the complete submission of culture to politics and the promotion of values associated with the working classes. By the mid-1950s, the government moved to nationalise private presses and the print media in North Vietnam. The state-owned press then worked hard to spread the ideas of Marx and Lenin (but not other Western thinkers) in Vietnam. During 1955–59, for example, 73 ‘kinds’ of books written by Lenin were published with a total print run of 343,546 copies.⁵⁹ These included Lenin’s *Complete Works* (four volumes). Given that the total number of copies of books published in North Vietnam during the same period is estimated to be about 35 million, Lenin’s works must have dominated, with one out of every 100 copies.⁶⁰ With a total population of about 14 million in North Vietnam at the time, there was one copy for every 41 Vietnamese. But few could really understand Marx and Lenin’s ideas, given the low levels of education.⁶¹

57 Alexander Woodside, ‘The triumphs and failures of mass education in Vietnam’, *Pacific Affairs* 56, 3 (1983): 401. See also Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)*, pp. 530–6.

58 Kim Ninh, *A world transformed: The politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

59 Minh Tranh, ‘Nhưng tác phẩm của V. Lenin ở nước ta’ [V. Lenin’s works (published) in our country], *Hoc Tap*, Apr. 1960, pp. 24–5.

60 Calculated based on ‘Bao cao ve ke hoach nha nuoc nam 1957’ (Report on the state plan of 1957), *VKDĐT*, v. 18, p. 179; and ‘Chi thi của Ban Bi Thu ve công tác xuất bản’ (Instructions of the Party Secretariat on the task of publication), 23 Nov. 1959, *VKDĐT*, v. 20, p. 911.

61 In 1959, 90 per cent of peasants, and 80 per cent of workers, had only between one and two years of schooling. Among 630 high-ranking central cadres, 10.5 per cent had elementary-level schooling, 50 per

Rather than enlightening the Vietnamese, Marx and Lenin (and for some time Stalin and Mao) were simply made into gods of a new public religion. Huge portraits of these founders and heroes of socialism were hung in public, while very small images were sold to young men and women to keep in their pockets.⁶²

Audio means also helped broadcast new cultural norms. By 1957, 38 public address systems reportedly covered all towns and nearby rural areas in North Vietnam. A Party resolution issued by its Secretariat in 1959 ordered the extension of this system 'further into the villages ... , to produce small receivers that could tune into only our frequencies'.⁶³ This resolution defined the tasks of the broadcasting system as:

to propagate and mobilise support for Party and state policies, to guide people in carrying out socialist revolution, to mobilise people in the whole country to struggle for unification, to educate people about internationalism, to strengthen the international solidarity between our people and the socialist countries, and to strengthen the solidarity between our people and the other [remaining] countries, especially those in Southeast Asia.

The public address system typically broadcast hourly and daily programs to every household within its range, whether they tuned in or not.

During the revolution, schools became places to train future revolutionary heroes and 'new socialist men and women' among students from a very young age.⁶⁴ An examination of the 1956 reader for first-grade students (typically six-year-olds) shows that 84 out of 328 lessons (25.6 per cent) had political content.⁶⁵ Among those 84 lessons, 32 per cent taught students about communist military heroes, most of whom had died fighting, 19 per cent about 'Uncle Ho', 10 per cent about revolutionary and socialist life, 7 per cent each about the South, socialist brother-countries (one about the young Lenin), and peasants' and workers' lives. Only two out of 328 lessons were focused on general patriotism and one on a historical hero (Tran Quoc Toan) compared to two lessons on the land reform. In the 1972 edition of the same textbook, 69 out of 236 lessons (29 per cent) had political content.⁶⁶ 55 per cent of those 69 lessons were about Communist military heroes, 14.5 per cent

cent had not finished middle school, 16.5 per cent had an education above middle school level, and 23 per cent above high school and college. Among the 914 members of all provincial Party committees, 85 per cent had less than five years of schooling. Among 4,000 members of all district Party committees, 87.8 per cent had less than four years of schooling. See 'Nghị quyết của Ban bi thu số 93-NQ/TW' [Resolution of the Secretariat no. 93-NQ/TW], 2 Dec. 1959, *VKDĐT*, v. 20, p. 937.

62 While doing research at the Vietnam National Archive III, Hanoi, in 2002–3, I once saw those pocket-sized pictures of Marx and Lenin among the personal effects of a young man who had died fighting in South Vietnam and whose relatives had come to the Archive to receive what he had left behind prior to leaving for the South.

63 'Nghị quyết của Ban Bi Thu số 80-NQ/TW', 14 Jul. 1959, *VKDĐT*, v. 20, p. 599.

64 For a detailed study of cultural campaigns to create a new elite of socialist heroes as part of the communist state's efforts to transform society, see Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and revolution in Vietnam*, trans. Claire Duiker (Singapore: NUS Press, with IRASEC, 2012). De Tréglodé's study corroborates my analysis of the textbooks above.

65 Bo Giao Duc [Ministry of Education], *Tap Doc Lop Mot* [First-grade reader] (Hanoi, 1956). The same textbook was used throughout the country.

66 Bo Giao Duc, *Tap Doc Lop Mot* [First-grade reader] (Hanoi, 1972).

about ‘Uncle Ho’, 11.6 per cent about unification or the south, 10 per cent about revolutionary and socialist life, and 3 per cent about socialist brother countries. The numbers of lessons on general patriotism (2) and historical heroes (1) remained the same. The contents of these textbooks suggest that Vietnamese students were taught less about patriotism connected to Vietnamese history than about socialism with its internationalist values. In general, the Party wanted youths to have a strong belief in those values and a willingness to die for the socialist cause.

The socialist revolution in the cultural realm thus sought to indoctrinate people, not to enlighten them in the normal sense of the word. The effects of this revolution are debatable. If fully absorbed, those under its spell could develop hatred for imperialism, love for national independence and socialism, love for ‘Uncle Ho’, and loyalty to the Party — which are not necessarily despicable values. On the other hand, like collectivisation, this revolution can be said to have enslaved people by limiting their information to one particular way of thinking in order to create obedient subjects of the state.

Revolutionary violence

A final and important contrast between the nationalist and socialist revolutions concerns the character and use of violence. During both revolutions, political violence was extensive. Significant violence occurred during the nationalist revolution between the Viet Minh government and its opponents in the forms of armed skirmishes, assassinations, and summary executions.⁶⁷ In the most recent study of this topic, David Marr shows that, among all rival groups, Viet Minh security squads were the most unrelenting in arresting and eliminating their opponents.⁶⁸ The period also witnessed the massacre of French citizens in Saigon, and race riots in the Mekong Delta involving ethnic Khmers and Vietnamese.⁶⁹

Violence during the socialist revolution was much more systematic and centralised, and related to class rather than to racial or national identities. Landlords and comprador capitalists were enemies of the state to be ‘reformed’ or eliminated. Prior to implementing the land reform campaign in 1953, the Party decided on the ratio of executions as one landlord per every 1,000 people.⁷⁰ While the Land Reform Law did not mention execution and specifically banned torture, violence

67 François Guillemot, ‘Vietnamese nationalist revolutionaries and the Japanese occupation: The case of the Dai Viet parties (1936–1946)’, in *Imperial Japan and national identities in Asia, 1895–1945*, ed. Li Narangoa and Robert B. Cribb (London: Routledge, 2003); and François Guillemot, ‘Autopsy of a massacre: On a political purge in the early days of the Indochina War (Nam Bo 1947)’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, 2 (2010): 225–65.

68 Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)*, chap. 7, esp. p. 383.

69 Shawn McHale, ‘Understanding the fanatic mind? The Viet Minh and race hatred in the First Indochina War (1945–1954)’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, 3 (2009): 98–138; Shawn McHale, ‘Ethnicity, violence, and Khmer–Vietnamese relations: The significance of the lower Mekong delta, 1757–1954’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, 2 (2013): 1–24.

70 “Chi thi cua Bo Chinh tri ngay 4 thang 5 nam 1953 ve may van de dac biet trong phat dong quan chung” [Politburo’s Directive issued on 4 May 1953 on some special issues regarding mass mobilization], *VKDTT*, v. 14, pp. 201–6. For an English translation of this decree, see *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, 2 (Summer 2010): 243–7.

nonetheless occurred on a large scale and reached ‘barbaric’ levels.⁷¹ Earlier accounts of the land reform noted how the quota of landlords imposed from above led to widespread mislabelling and excessive killings authorised by local land reform teams.⁷² In contrast, I have called attention to the massive media campaign at the time that desensitised the population to cruel behaviour and justified revenge by violence.⁷³ In public sessions of ‘telling about sufferings’ (*vach kho*), through the ubiquitous public address system, and with numerous pamphlets and newspaper stories, graphic accounts of landlords beating, killing, raping, and maiming their tenants in numerous forms were told and retold. Many, if not most, stories of landlords’ brutalities were fabricated. In one scene, written by Ho Chi Minh himself, readers and listeners learned of how a (female) landlord tortured her tenants by ramming sharp sticks down their throats and burning them with candles.⁷⁴ This media campaign was critical in creating a frenzied environment in which violence became acceptable among people who used to be friends, neighbours, relatives, and even members of the same family.⁷⁵

After the excesses of land reform, overt brutality became less common and was replaced with implicit but systemic coercion and surveillance. During the collectivisation campaign, for example, despite an official policy of forming cooperatives on a voluntary basis, subtle coercion was employed to pressure peasants into joining and staying in cooperatives. Once consolidated, cooperatives served as an effective tool of surveillance and control and contributed decisively to North Vietnam’s victory in the civil war. Working closely with local governments and army recruitment boards, cooperatives kept track of the boys in each household and groomed them for two years before they reached draft age.⁷⁶ Cooperatives made draft avoidance almost impossible for young rural men, but they could also guarantee soldiers that their families would be taken care of if they served. A common slogan at the time suggested cooperatives’ key political role, ‘Not a single kilogram of paddy short [of procurement quotas]; not a single soldier short [of recruitment quotas]’ (*thoc khong thieu mot can; quan khong thieu mot nguoi*).⁷⁷ While cooperatives failed to motivate peasants to work hard for socialism, they made sure that villages surrendered to the

71 The term was used by Truong Chinh himself in his report at the Tenth Central Committee Plenum in Oct. 1956, “De cuong bao cao Bo Chinh tri [Draft report of the Politburo], VKDTT (2002), v. 17, p. 435.

72 Hoang Van Chi, *From colonialism to communism: A case history of North Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

73 Vu, *Paths to development in Asia*.

74 C.B. [Ho Chi Minh], ‘Dan ba de co may tay’ [How many women could be compared to her?], *Nhan Dan*, 21 Feb. 1954.

75 A study of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia reminds us that organising the general context for such violence is a much more important factor than organising specific techniques of murder. Cornelia Sorabji, ‘A very modern war: Terror and territory in Bosnia–Hercegovina’, in *War: A cruel necessity? The bases of institutionalized violence*, ed. Robert Hinde and Helen Watson (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p. 86.

76 Kinh Lich, *Tuyen quan trong lang xa* [Military recruitment in the villages] (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1972).

77 Phuong Hien, ‘Tiep noi truyen thong “Thoc khong thieu mot can, quan khong thieu mot nguoi” [To continue the tradition of ‘Not a kilogram of paddy short, not a soldier short’], *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* [People’s Army Daily], 9 Feb. 2012.

communist state all able-bodied men⁷⁸ needed for its war-making (North Vietnam lost about a million soldiers in the civil war between 1959 and 1975 out of a population of less than 20 million).

But cooperatives may have disintegrated without the household registration system (*ho khau*) and the strict ban on private trade. These two crucial tools of coercion and surveillance were implemented mostly in the cities, but had the effect of denying peasants an escape from cooperatives, practically ensnaring them in the villages. Created in the 1950s and operated in combination with urban grain rationing and forced eviction from the cities, *ho khau* was aimed at maintaining local police surveillance and at controlling population movement between rural and urban areas and within urban areas. It bound people to their birthplaces, where it would be easier for the state to monitor them and their extended families. It served effectively as a tool to reward loyal subjects (who could keep their urban registration together with grain rations) and discipline disloyal ones (who were banished to the countryside forever).

We do not have access to police reports, but the ban on private trade appeared less successful than *ho khau*. In fact, Hanoi leaders had a hard time fighting the black market in Northern cities.⁷⁹ Every few years they launched a campaign to fight thefts of ‘socialist property’. Every year hundreds of small traders in the cities were routinely arrested and sent back to their places of origin or to labour camps. In his speech at the Sixteenth Plenum of the Central Committee in May 1969, Le Duan admitted that there were as many as 1,000 child thieves roaming the streets of Hanoi.⁸⁰

Coercion was applied, if necessary, to produce compliant intellectuals. The Maoist method of *cheng feng* (forced self-criticism in a group setting) was employed early on with great success.⁸¹ Public show trials in which dissidents were publicly chastised and shamed by their neighbours and colleagues were common.⁸² Dissidents faced many other forms of punishments short of being imprisoned, such as political and social isolation, denial of food rations, lifetime bans on publishing, family harassment, and banishment to the countryside.

In sum, the socialist revolution was a remarkable attempt by Vietnamese communist leaders to wholly transform society. The transformation was meant to be comprehensive, spanning economic, social, and cultural realms. It also was aimed at radical goals: an industrialised economy and socialist culture. It served primarily to

78 This is not to deny the critical role played by women volunteers (*thanh nien xung phong*). The point here is about the systematic coercion of the state. For an insightful analysis of women volunteers, see François Guillemot, ‘Death and suffering at first hand: Youth shock brigades during the Vietnam War (1950–1975)’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, 3 (2010): 17–60.

79 For example, see *VKDTT*, v. 34, p. 265 and v. 35, pp. 1, 102, 106, 112.

80 See ‘Bai noi cua Dong chi Le Duan’ [Speech by Comrade Le Duan], *VKDTT*, v. 30, p. 157.

81 Ninh, *A world transformed*.

82 See memoirs by Nguyen Manh Tuong, a French-trained lawyer and scholar who was involved in the Nhan Van–Giai Pham Affairs, *Ke bi mat phep thong cong, Hanoi 1954–1991: Ban an cho mot tri thuc* [The excommunicated, Hanoi, 1954–1991: The verdict for an intellectual] (trans. from French by Nguyen Quoc Vy), available at http://viet-studies.info/NMTuong/NMTuong_HoiKy.htm (last accessed 14 Feb. 2014); and Tran Vang Sao, ‘Toi Bi Bat’ [I was arrested], available at http://viet-studies.info/TranVangSao_HoiKy.pdf.

consolidate state rule and employed systematic indoctrination and coercion to generate the desired impact. Its success was uneven, and after nearly four decades, it was defeated. Unlike the case with Stalin's and Mao's socialist revolutions, we still have limited knowledge of this Vietnamese era and its legacies.

Conclusion: Forgetting and remembering revolutions

In this essay, I have presented an emerging perspective on the Vietnamese revolution based on evidence gathered from recent research and primary sources. Unlike the long-standing conventional and communist narratives, this new perspective suggests that we need to think of not one but two conceptually distinct revolutions in twentieth-century Vietnam. There is now sufficient evidence available for us to speak of a socialist revolution that was distinguishable from the better known 'August Revolution' of 1945. While the communists played an important role in the latter, they did not direct it, nor had they much control over it. For these reasons, it is self-serving for communist historians to claim that it was a stage in their socialist revolutionary course. On the other hand, it also is no longer possible for outside observers to deny the communists' deep commitment to socialism. To be sure, Vietnamese communists cared about national independence and unity, but what distinguished them from their rivals such as Tran Trong Kim and Ngo Dinh Diem was their sincere and passionate endorsement of communism. For them, nationalist and socialist values were entangled, but they made relentless attempts to implement a socialist revolution over nearly four decades. To launch this revolution, they made a sharp break with their nationalist fellow-travellers through the purge of bourgeois elements from the Viet Minh government and the brutal executions of thousands of patriotic landlords in the land reform.

The VCP still considers its revolutionary past to be glorious, but two revolutions in a century were tragic for Vietnam in terms of human suffering. Throughout, millions of Vietnamese lost their lives, and millions were forced to flee their country for good. Such tragic consequences are all the more poignant because both revolutions ended in defeat in some important senses. The defeat of the nationalist revolution in the late 1940s and early 1950s (in the sense that the bourgeois coalition leading it was marginalised or purged) left an acute sense of bitterness among those who had participated in it but felt betrayed by the communists.⁸³ The later abandonment of socialism to embrace capitalism under *Doi Moi* profoundly confounded and disillusioned those cadres who had followed the VCP through its three tumultuous decades of socialist revolution with a blind trust in the Party's wisdom.

The politics of forgetting and remembering revolutions in Vietnam today deserves an entire paper, but here I can sketch out a rough picture. Of the two revolutions, it is only the socialist revolution that the Party wants to forget. The opening paragraph of the recent Party Program cited above is completely silent about those four decades when the Party vowed to 'march fast, forcefully, and firmly toward socialism' (*tien nhanh, tien manh, tien vung chac len Chu nghia Xa hoi*). Ordinary people who are old enough to have lived through the period, often recall it with

83 See <http://culangcat.blogspot.com/2011/12/ba-oi-am-anh-cai-cach-ruong-at.html> (last accessed 11 Dec. 2011) for a moving account by the family of a loyal Party member who had been executed during the land reform.

revulsion because of its self-destructive fanaticism and steep human costs.⁸⁴ Yet the ‘August Revolution’ of 1945–46 is now being celebrated by the Party, advocates for political reform, and even dissidents. Why?

Official historiography has long presented that event as a watershed in Vietnamese history and emphasised the far-sighted and determined leadership of the Party at the time. Recent reinterpretations by professional historians have added more details while remaining loyal to the myth about the central role played by Vietnamese communists, especially Ho Chi Minh, in the event. The reasons for this reinterpretation lies in the Party’s changing policy since market reform. In particular, the Party has dropped central Marxist–Leninist precepts and raised the status of ‘Ho Chi Minh thought’ as a key ideological pillar. Vietnam’s foreign policy today seeks ‘friendship with all nations’, regardless of ideology. After decades of ruling society by decrees, the Party today calls for building a ‘law-based state’ (*nha nuoc phap quyen*). Thus Vietnamese historians have returned to the nationalist revolution and explored themes about innovative state-building and dynamic foreign policy under Ho’s leadership in 1945–46.⁸⁵ The point is to underline the legitimacy of current foreign policy and the wisdom of Ho Chi Minh. For example, his letters sent to President Truman are a favourite topic for Hanoi historians (while Ho’s letters to Stalin at the same time are conveniently forgotten).⁸⁶

Dissidents and advocates for political reforms also celebrate the ‘August Revolution’, but for a different reason.⁸⁷ Desiring greater democracy, they propose to restore the liberal 1946 Constitution, which proclaimed a state based on the nation, not on classes; which assured the people’s right to ratify the Constitution and their right to private property; which acknowledged citizens’ rights to do what the laws did not prohibit (as opposed to current laws that allow them to do only what the laws permit); and which maintained equality among all economic sectors, not favouring the state sector.⁸⁸ Many call for dropping the current official name of Vietnam (Socialist Republic) and reusing the old name (Democratic Republic) coined by Ho

84 See, for example, interviews in Bao tang cach mang Viet Nam, *Cuoc song o Ha Noi thoi bao cap, 1975–1986* [Hanoi life under the subsidy economy], (Hanoi: Bao tang dan toc hoc Viet Nam, 2007).

85 See, for example, Nguyen To Uyen, *Cong cuoc bao ve va xay dung chinh quyen nhan dan o Viet Nam trong nhung nam 1945–1946* [The construction and defense of the people’s government during 1945–1946] (Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1999); Nguyen Dinh Bin, *Ngoai giao Viet Nam trong thoi dai Ho Chi Minh* [Vietnamese diplomacy in the age of Ho Chi Minh] (Ha Noi: Chinh tri quoc gia, 2000); and Vu Duong Huan, *Gop phan tim hieu tu tuong Ho Chi Minh ve ngoai giao* [To explore Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts on diplomacy] (Hanoi: Lao Dong, 2002).

86 See ‘Nhưng bức thư Bác Hồ gửi tổng thống Mỹ’ [Uncle Ho’s letters to US presidents], 16 Feb. 2010, <http://bee.net.vn/channel/3921/201002/Nhung-buc-thu-Bac-Ho-gui-Tong-thong-Mỹ-1741184> (last accessed 14 Feb. 2014).

87 By advocates for political reforms or ‘reformers’, I mean those who sharply criticise the current system but remain loyal to the Party, whereas ‘dissidents’ are those who demand a multiparty political system.

88 See, for example, Pham Duy Nghia, ‘Ban Hien Phap sau muoi nam truoc va nhung mon no lich su’ [The Constitution of 60 years ago and the historic debts], *Tuoi Tre*, 18 Feb. 2007, <http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/187737/Ban-Hien-phap-sau-muoi-nam-truoc-va-nhung-mon-no-lich-su.html> (last accessed 14 Feb. 2014); and Vu Trong Khai, ‘Ky niem 65 nam quoc khanh VNDCCCH: Vai suy ngam va lam ban ve Hien Phap dau tien (1946) va Hien Phap hien hanh (1992)’ [To commemorate the 65th anniversary of the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: Some comments on the first Constitution (1946) and the current one (1992)], Sept. 2010, <http://boxitvn.blogspot.com/2010/09/ky-niem-65-nam-quoc-khanh-nuoc-vndcch.html#more> (last accessed 14 Feb. 2014).

Chi Minh in September 1945. Not all agree in their evaluation of Ho Chi Minh. Many (e.g. Nguyen Trung and Tong Van Cong) assume that Ho Chi Minh truly believed in democratic values and sincerely looked to Thomas Jefferson for inspiration, while others (e.g. Pham Hong Son) argue that Ho Chi Minh did so because the communists still needed the cooperation of other political groups at the time to stay in power. Regardless of their differences, the 'August Revolution' is regarded by both reformers and dissidents as a great achievement, and its defeat as a tragedy from which Vietnam has not recovered.