CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
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Vietnam, known also as Nam-Viet—the land of the Southern People\(^1\) —has throughout its history been the victim of a succession of outside aggression. In the Christian era, the Chinese continuously sought to extend their influence southwards.\(^2\) Nam-Viet was heavily influenced by the Chinese civilization. Traditionally Vietnam along with the rest of the Indochina region, had been a zone of contact and interaction between India and China.\(^3\)

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\(^{1}\)Originating in what is now Southern China and Northern Vietnam, the Vietnamese people pushed southward over several centuries to occupy the entire eastern sea coast of Indochina. The southward expansion began in A.D. 939. *Vietnamese Studies* (Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1985), New Series no. 9(79), p. 6.

\(^{2}\)In the first century A.D. Vietnam was part of the Funan Empire, the first power in Southeast Asia, ibid., p. 7.

\(^{3}\)Refer to Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism* (New Delhi: Allied Publisher, 1964), pp. 3-6; G. Coedes, *The Making of Southeast Asia* (London: Reutledge Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 39-40; Jan Pluviar, *Southeast Asia. From Colonialism to Independence* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974); G. Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, Hawaii: East West Centre Press, 1967). According to these writers, the Vietnamese first emerged in 221 B.C., when the Chinese emperor Chin Shen Huang Ti decided to annex the country of Nan Yueh. The Kingdom of Nam-Viet emerged in the millennium before Christ in South China along the Red River delta of northern Vietnam. In 208 B.C. during the Han dynasty, it was an autonomous kingdom under a vague suzerainty.
The kingdom of Nam-Viet remained autonomous for nearly a century after which it was forcibly incorporated into the Chinese empire in 111 B.C. by the Han dynasty and retained for a thousand years upto A.D.939.4

Cultural assimilation took place during the years of Chinese occupation between the Chinese and the Vietnamese through intermarriage, and fusion of cultural ideas and institutions.5 The Vietnamese, however, continued to resist Chinese political control, and "throughout the thousand years of Chinese rule, the Vietnamese rose time and again against alien domination".6 Eventually, they managed to establish their identity as a separate country within Asia. With the demise of the Tang dynasty in China in A.D.939, they drove the Chinese out.

For the next five centuries, internal battles among princes and dynasties for the throne swept the whole country, although nominally united under a centralized kingship. It was also disturbed by an unending conflict amongst the kings and emperors of the region. The Chinese

took advantage of this disunity and a military leader who proclaimed himself emperor, Ho Quy Ly, usurped the throne. In 1427, a Chieftain, Le Loi, defeated the Chinese and recaptured Hanoi in 1428. Later in 1802, a Nguyen prince, Nguyen Phuc Anh, under the title of Gia Long, restored his own dynasty at Saigon and captured Hanoi, thus uniting the whole kingdom under one administration.

Nineteenth-century Vietnam, like other Asiatic countries, recorded the advent of European powers such as the French and the Portuguese for trade and religious privileges. Though the Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Vietnam, they were soon replaced by the French. Gia Long, to consolidate his territorial gains, accepted substantial military aid from France. This marked the beginning of French interest in Vietnam.

Hammer writes that "the French were willing to get into Vietnam before the British to make up their territorial and trade losses in India".

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9 Vietnam, then known to the Europeans as Cochin-China.


11 Hammer, n.6, p.90.
Gradually the French missionary intervention turned into official military intervention leading to the capture of various provinces. To suppress the frequent riots and attacks against French officers, the French colonial administration followed the most "inflexible policy" among European powers. Its aim was to uproot the indigenous traditional government entirely and replace it with a thoroughly alien administration so that the motive force of opposition would disappear. The suppression of Vietnamese political life was begun by the administrative partitioning of the country, with Cochin-China being administered directly by a Governor, and Annam and Tongking being governed indirectly as protectorates.

While the country remained backward, the masses groaned under the heavy taxes imposed by the administration and the low wages. Capitalism was alien to their ethos. They could clearly see the Frenchmen grow rich from exploitation of Vietnam, while their compatriots were imprisoned for protesting this state of affairs.

The first phase of national resistance against the French rule came to an end with the failure of armed rebellion under mandarinal leadership. Even groups like

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moderates under Phan Boi Chau and reformists under Phan Chu Trinh failed to make any headway against the French oppression. These failures gradually encouraged revolutionary groups and they became the torch-bearers of the independence movement after World War I.14

Revolutionary nationalist agitation in the 1920s centred in Canton, China where the Kuomintang (KMT), the Chinese Nationalist Party, was in power. Having overthrown the Manchu dynasty, the KMT, then supported by the Soviet Union, welcomed the numerous political exiles from Vietnam. Among them was Ho Chi Minh, who preferred the revolutionary method to achieve independence.15


15Ho Chi Minh was the third child of the patriotic scholars, was born in Kimlien hamlet, Hoang Tru Village, Nam Dan district, Nghe An province, one of the poorest in the country. Ho's father Nguyen Sinh Sac belonged to one of the poorest families of the village. Ho had been tutored in Confucian studies, received a Franco-Indochinese education. He witnessed daily miseries, beatings because of failure to pay rents and taxes, corvees. He came in contact with French civilization, in particular the uglier side of colonialism. He witnessed the brutal and humiliating way in which the French treated the Vietnamese people, including students. This was to instil in him an intense hatred all his life, not only for the French, but also for the Western civilization. With his father's encouragement, Ho at fifteen served as a messenger for patriotic scholars who were actively opposing the French rule of Indochina. Born Nguyen Sinh Cung. When he was ten, according to Vietnamese custom, this name was changed by his father to Nguyen Tat Thanh. This was one of many names that Ho was to carry during contd...
Fascinated with the success of the Russian Revolution, he turned to Marxism as a means of liberating the motherland from French colonial rule.

In the history of modern Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh is a legend. Born on 19 May 1890 in a modest mandarin family, he left the shores of Vietnam at the age of 22 as a cabin boy on a merchant vessel, Latouche Treville, and after many odd jobs in England and France, established his reputation as a lifetime. At Versailles in 1919, he took the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc Nguyen (the Patriot), a collective pen name used by a group of Vietnamese nationalists in Paris (among them Tran Van Van). In June 1923, he took the name of Chen Vang and arrived in St. Petersburg. To avoid arrest by the Kuomintang, in December 1924 in Canton, Ho took the name of Li Suei. From 1928 to the end of 1929, Ho operated in Thailand under the name of Thau Chen (Uncle Chan). On 6 June 1931, under the name of Sung Wen So, Ho was arrested in Hong Kong by the British Police. Ho entered Lenin School in October, under the name of Linov, reserved for Communist high cadres. At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, Ho was found there by Cha Yen. Ho appeared in Yenan, China in 1938, took a new name of Ho Quang (Hu Kwang) and in 1940 under the name of Tran Vuong reached Kunming. In 1941 at the founding of Vietminh, he took the name of Ho Chi Minh, which he was to use officially from then on. The name of Ho was first used by Ho Chi Minh in 1939 while in China. At the time of the 1945 August Revolution he was using the name Ho Chi Minh but he signed the appeal for General Insurrection as Nguyen Ai Quoc. For details, see Phan Boi Chau’s Chronology: Literature, History, and Geography (Hanoi: FLPF, 1955), p.30; Bui Lam, “Meeting Uncle Ho in Paris”, Boc Ho (Uncle Ho) (Hanoi: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1960), p.37; DRV. Our President Ho Chi Minh (Hanoi: FLPF, 1970), pp.50-60; Ho Chi Minh, Complete Works (Hanoi: FLPF, 1981), vol.II and IV, pp.1044-143; N Khach Huyen, Vision Accomplished?: The Enigma of Ho Chi Minh (New York: Collier Books, 1971); Jean Lacoutre, Ho Chi Minh, A Political Biography (New York: Random House, 1968).
good pamphleteer in the leftist circles in Paris. At the end of World War I, he was in Paris sharing lodgings with Phan Chou Trinh and helping him with his work as a photographer's assistant. There he formed an Association of Vietnamese People. He appeared in 1918 outside the Versailles conference waving placards asking for the right of self-determination for his country. In 1920, he became a member of the French Communist Party where he wrote the pamphlet, "French Colonialism on Trial". In 1923, he went to Moscow as the party's delegate to the Peasant International and stayed on to study Marxist doctrine, revolutionary techniques and methods. In 1925, he went to Canton where, with fellow exiles from his native province of Nghe An, he established the Vietnam Cach Menh Thanh Nien Chi Hoi (Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League), commonly known as Than Nien. Over a period of two years, he trained about 250 men in Marxist techniques at the Whampoa Military Academy. His following was composed largely of young men who had been trained under Russian supervision. The movement operated from its base in South China. In 1927,

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Ho Chi Minh, a national father figure, was a harmonious combination of an oriental philosopher, national poet and staunch Marxist fighter with a boundless love for his nation and his class. A great number of books have been written about him, most of them by Western writers. Books about Vietnam, with parts and chapters related to him number over 1,200. See Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnam* (New York: Arbor publications, 1985), p.9.
the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnam Nationalist Party) or VNQDD, another prominent secret organization was set up in opposition to the Thanh Nien. Operating from Hanoi, it was led by Nguyen Thai Hoc who chose the organization, programmes, and methods of the KMT as the party's model. In 1930, the VNQDD sponsored mutinies and demonstrations, which the French repressed so severely that it was driven underground and did not resurface until World War II.17

Subsequently, in seeking to evict the French, Ho Chi Minh turned to Marxism-Leninism and to violence. In his view, Marxism-Leninism provided a new and effective doctrine for reorganizing society. Those Vietnamese who welcomed Communism probably believed that they had found a doctrine that they could learn and practise and be examined on, reminiscent of the old mandarin system. They believed that they had a sure way to overcome the inadequacies of their lives under the French.18 According to a review made by Nixon, the great majority of the authors came to the conclusion that "Ho Chi Minh was nationalist first and a Communist second, and had the support of a majority of

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people of Vietnam, North and South".19

The national liberation struggle in Vietnam gathered momentum and popular support after the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. The ICP remained active in resisting the French forces till the beginning of World War II, despite the colonial government's repressive measures such as mass killings and capital punishment. During the years of the Japanese occupation, the ICP joined hands with a new organization called Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (Vietminh), which aimed at liberating Vietnam from the Japanese clutches.20

On the eve of the Japanese surrender to the allies, the Vietminh, on 2 September 1945, took over Hanoi and announced the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).21 The DRV government had wide support among


20Huynh Kim Khanh, Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p.256. The Vietminh was a coalition of anti-French groups. Ho Chi Minh built up the organization of Vietminh with the object of overthrowing both the French and the Japanese.

21Vietnamese Studies (Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1985), New Series, no.6(76), pp.18-19. At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, it was settled that Indochina would be temporarily divided along the Sixteenth Parallel into a British Southern Zone and a Chinese Northern Zone. See Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1960, Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference) (Washington: US Government Printing Press Office), vol.II, p.1465.
the people, but the hopes of the Vietnamese of being governed by their own people were soon shattered with the return of the French rule to Southern Vietnam at the end of the war. The Potsdam Conference recognized the Chinese influence over Northern Vietnam and that of the British over Southern Vietnam. The British helped the French to stage a comeback to the South but the Chinese promoted the Vietminh leaders to form their government in the North. 22

This state of affairs led to the presence of two governments in Vietnam claiming sovereignty over the entire country. The French in the South were playing a double game of enticing the Vietminh leaders to negotiations and at the same time trying to stage a comeback.23 They set up Bao Dai (a deposed monarch) as ruler of the South in March 1946. This period was marked by hostilities between the armies of the two regimes.

The success of the Communist movements in the region complicated matters in Vietnam. The Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), soon after it was installed in January 1949, accorded diplomatic recognition to the government of DRV. The Soviet Union and Eastern


Europe followed suit. Britain and the United States, on the other hand, gave formal diplomatic recognition to the Bao Dai government. Vietnam was thus embroiled in the Cold War. The United States became actively involved in the affairs of Vietnam, urging France to adopt anti-communist policies for containment of Communism in Vietnam. The French were willing to toe this line, and fought the Vietminh with American money for the pursuit of American ideas. According to Fifield, by the middle of 1954, it was estimated that the United States was paying 78 per cent of the total war cost, a rise from 60 per cent after the $385 million grant of September 1953. Between June 1950 and May 1954, the United States provided military and economic aid worth $2.6 million in the war effort.

French losses in the war were mounting, when the pressure of growing public opinion in France against the war compelled the French government to open negotiations with Ho Chi Minh. Goaded by the United States, however, the French kept up the hostilities, only to culminate in their decisive rout at the hands of the Vietminh at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

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Phu in north-western Vietnam in April 1954. The debacle at Dien Bien Phu was followed by US threats and warnings to the Communists about intervention. On 12 January 1954, the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, addressing the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, spoke about "massive retaliation" and of "great capacity to retaliate instantly". These stern US warnings were followed by a call for "united action". On 29 March 1954, in a speech to the Overseas Press Club of America, Dulles said that the imposition of the Communist system on Southeast Asia "should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action". This might involve risks, but "these risks are far less than those that will face us in a few years from now, if we dare not be resolute today". Meanwhile, global concern had grown that the war in Vietnam could engulf the entire world because of the Cold War rivalries. Also, France was being drained of its resources both in finance and

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manpower. The big powers comprising the US, the USSR, Britain and France, therefore met at the Berlin Conference in January-February 1954 and suggested that the question of Indo-China be taken up at the Geneva Conference along with the issue of Korea, in order to find a peaceful solution to the problems.29

The opening of the formal discussion in the Conference on Indochina was delayed by intra-bloc differences. The conference was finally convened on 9 May 1954, with Cambodia, DRV, France, Laos, People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States of America attending.30 The negotiations were protracted, complicated and acrimonious.

When the second phase of the negotiations opened on 17 June, the new French Prime Minister Pierre Mendes, sent a new note of urgency to the proceedings by laying down the ultimatum that if by 20 July he failed to bring about a satisfactory settlement on Indo-China, he would resign his post. Thus prodded into greater earnestness, the opposing parties made concessions after crucial talks, and helped arrive at an agreement near midnight of 20th July, the

29 Fifield, n.25, pp.274-5.
30 The Geneva Nine Participants were Anthony Eden, Britain; Chauen Lai, China; Pham van Dong DRV(N); Vyacheslav Molotov, USSR; Georges Bidault, France; John Foster Dulles, USA; Bao Dai Regime, State of Vietnam; Cambodia and Laos, ibid.
deadline set by the French Premier. Before final settlement was reached, Indochina had been discussed at eight Plenary and eighteen restricted sessions.31.

The Geneva settlement on Indochina included three ceasefire agreements, eight unilateral declarations and a final declaration of the conference regarding Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It was also agreed that Vietnam would be temporarily partitioned at the Seventeenth Parallel, with the region in the South under Bao Dai's state of Vietnam. The future unification of the country was to be decided by free elections in July 1956.32 An International Control Commission was set up comprising India, Poland, and Canada, with India as the Chairman, to supervise the proper execution of the ceasefire. It was also agreed that no participating powers would bring troops into either zone pending the elections.33

The Geneva Agreements succeeded in the case of the emergence of Cambodia and the integration of Laos because the participating powers abided by the provisions of the


agreements. In the case of Vietnam, however, the United States and South Vietnam did not endorse the settlement. While withdrawing from Vietnam, the French recognized the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of that country, but did not name the Vietminh as their successor. Part of the reason why Vietminh agreed to this accord was the pressure put on it by its Communist allies, the Russians and the Chinese, as they were pursuing, at that point of time, a policy of "peaceful coexistence with capitalism". Also, the Soviet Union did not relish the prospect of a United Vietnam under a regime whose leaders were closely associated with the Chinese.

In the South, the United States stepped in to fill the power vacuum created by the French evacuation, anxious to contain the spread of Communism. Moscow, after its recognition of the Ho Chi Minh government, had stepped up military supplies to Vietnam. The tilt in the military

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balance in favour of the Vietminh was viewed with concern in the United States. During the period 1950-60, the political winds around the world were thick with the ideology of liberation and independence. The spread of communism, which encouraged the trend, was naturally seen as a detrimental to the interests of the West. In the light of the French debacle in Vietnam, the United States went all out to gain allies for its ideology. SEATO was formed in 1954 as a measure of containment. The US took over the French role not in the service of the empire, but rather as the protector of a post-colonial emerging world order.

Partition arbitrarily created two administrative zones in Vietnam, the North and the South, divided at the Ben Hai River and the Seventeenth Parallel. The DRV was confined to territory north of that line with its capital at Hanoi. The State of Vietnam occupied territory south of the line with its capital at Saigon. Together with 46 provinces the new State of Vietnam had the former French colony of Cochin-China and the southern part of the empire of Annam with its old capital Hue. It had an area of 65,726 square miles and a population of 13.5 million. It was bounded on the north by the DRV (along the Seventeenth parallel), on the west by Laos, Cambodia and the Gulf of Siam, and on the southeast and east by the South China Sea. Its ethnic composition was: Vietnamese, 87 per cent; Chinese, 8 per cent; Cambodian and
Laotian, 2 per cent; and others, 3 per cent. The dominant religions were Buddhism, paganism, Confucianism and Christianity.\(^{37}\)

The Vietnamese accepted partition with deep bitterness. The Geneva Declaration gave them uncontested control of only half of the country. \(^{38}\) The partition left a sizeable number of the party's loyal followers at the mercy of an anti-Communist regime in the South. Pending the referendum on unification, bitterness among the Vietnamese people had sharpened on the question which group would guide the political destiny of a united Vietnam.

When, under the shadow of the impending collapse of French power, Bao Dai sought refuge in France, Ngo Dinh Diem became Prime Minister on 16 June 1954 with strong US support. Jean-Baptiste Ngo Dinh Diem was born on 3 January 1901 in Quang Binh, Hue, of an aristocratic family. His father was a mandarin\(^{39}\) and court chamberlain to


\(^{39}\)Mandarin, The term "Mandarin" applies to the old style civil servants of the Annamite Emperors who once had ruled Indochina.
emperor Than Thai. Diem's parents were converts to Catholicism. His formal schooling was interrupted when the French replaced the Emperor. He completed his studies at Hue (where Ho Chi Minh had studied ten years earlier). He graduated in 1921 from the French School of Administration and was made district chief. He was not a supporter of Communism but was hostile to corruption. In 1929, at the early age of 28, he was appointed Governor of Phan Thiet province. When nominated Minister of the Interior in 1933, he resigned in protest against a further reform commission.

During the war and its aftermath when the Japanese, the French and Ho Chi Minh were fighting among themselves for Indochina, all three wanted the support of Diem, who was a nationalist. But he rejected collaboration of any sort. He told the Japanese, "Why should I join you, who enslave my country? I will one day lead a free people". 40

Early in 1945, Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh troops struck at Ngo Dinh Diem, raided his mansion at Hue and burnt his collection of 10,000 books. They dragged out his elder brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi and his eldest son, and murdered both. Diem himself barely escaped. The incident

was the turning point of his life.\textsuperscript{41}

A man, who invariably talked more than he listened, chain smoked and discoursed volubly, Diem made his way to the South as fighting broke out in the North. He remained aloof both from the French regime in Saigon, and from Vietminh activities. He started a small political party called Phong Trac Quoc Gia Qua Kica (Nationalist Extremist Movement). This group advocated resistance both against the French and the Vietminh. Diem brought out newspapers in both Saigon and Hanoi but the French suppressed his party and his newspapers.\textsuperscript{42}

The emperor Bao Dai's acquiescence in a Vietnam not fully sovereign, drove Diem in 1950 to voluntary exile, largely spent in a US seminary from where he lobbied constantly for political support. Important politicians, a spectrum of academics and Catholic religious leaders supported him for his anti-Communist, anti-French policies. All these factors impressed the US and it was stated that:

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles picked him, Senator Mike Mansfield endorsed him, Francis Cardinal Spellman praised him, Vice-

\textsuperscript{41}Bernard B. Fall, \textit{The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis} (Boulder: Westview, 1984), revd edn 2, pp.234-53.

President Richard Nixon liked him, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower OK'd him.\textsuperscript{43}

The US Government selected him, without any consultation with the Vietnamese people, to act for it in South Vietnam. French consent to full independence for Vietnam induced him to leave the Benedictine monastery in Belgium (where he had been since May 1953) on 15 June 1954 to accept the premiership. He achieved popularity for the respect which he commanded initially by consolidating government operations, introducing some reforms, resettling about 900,000 refugees from the north, and most importantly, improving the quality of the armed forces.\textsuperscript{44} In August 1954, the United States decided to provide direct military assistance to build up Diem's forces. In November 1954, full US support for Diem was announced. With the removal of the Vietnamese military leaders opposing Diem, the way was cleared for the consolidation of his power in Saigon.\textsuperscript{45} After their elimination and with his army growing stronger as a consequence of American assistance, he successfully

\textsuperscript{43}Look Magazine, (Heidelberg), 28 January, 1964.

\textsuperscript{44}ibid., and Parimal Kumar Das, India and Vietnam War (New Delhi: Young Asia, 1972), p.76.

\textsuperscript{45}These were the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen, a religious and political group, which conspired against him. Keesing's Contemporary Archives (London), 17 November 1954, p.14949
demanded of France to withdraw its armed forces in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Accord. The political power in South Vietnam soon shifted dramatically from anti-Diem forces to pro-Diem forces. In early 1955, the US undertook the task of military and economic assistance to the non-Communist South Vietnam. More than $325 million were given, included in which aid were, by some accounts, more than $12 million which Diem used to bribe the leadership of the remaining domestic political opposition. In October 1955, Diem organized a referendum in which the South Vietnamese had to choose between Diem and Bao Dai, in which he won more than 98 per cent of the votes, and on 26 October 1955, proclaimed the founding of the Republic of Vietnam with himself as the first President.

Vietnam during this period presented a typical study of a haggard society, fit candidate to be touched off by a spark of revolution. The upheavals caused by the Chinese occupation, the French colonialism, the Japanese invasion,

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46 Jumper and Normad, n.4, p.401.


and the constant struggles to throw off the foreign yoke had taken their toll of Vietnam's economy and social fabric. A veritable rot had set in turning Vietnamese society into one comparable to Dickensian England, as Wilfred Burchett picturesquely describes in his book *North of the Seventeenth Parallel*.

He writes:

Saigon at the end of 1954 was a city of gangsters and assassins, of shots, knife thrusts and the strangler's cord in the dark: a city where people spoke in whispers and disappeared without leaving a trace. Fifty paces from the city's most luxurious hotel, Vietnamese families lived in shelves on the waterfront piers, packed in like bolts of cloth with not enough headroom to sit upright and just enough frontage for two adults and a child to huddle together, with water lapping over the floor boards at high tide. In the main street linking Saigon with its twin cholon, a taxi-rank and refreshment stalls outside, was what French troops called the 'meat-market', a brothel for the use of the Expeditionary corps where between two and three hundred girls stood around, jammed into an enclosed courtyard to be inspected by the customers. The streets were full of beggars. Newspapers were heavily censored. Gaudy neon signs invited one to drink and dance from midnight to dawn—and the most expensive bars and restaurants had grenade-proof grilles. Beautifully lit and decorated shop fronts displayed luxury articles, but little which had any relation to Vietnamese needs or purchasing power.49

The cultural market was flooded with adventures of hooligans and gangsters, novels and cheap love stories with pornographic art. Young boys were

becoming vagabonds and thieves, and young girls were getting dragged into debauchery and prostitution. The number of juvenile delinquents tried by tribunals throughout the country had risen from 1,639 in 1955 to 3,638 in 1959. The paper Thai Luan on 9 September 1957 described the life led by children of Northern refugees at Phu Tho camp thus:

There are only 10 rooms for the whole camp. The pupils have been huddled together for three years now. The rooms are barely protected against the wind and the rain by worn and torn blankets. For the whole camp, there is only one water tap which takes 5 minutes to fill a small wash-basin. Situated close to the latrines, the kitchen is infested with flies and mosquitoes. The dining tables are offensively dirty, butchers' stall indeed! And what of the dining room? It is really an asylum for the homeless who never eat their fill. Most of those poor pensioners have been turned into hooligans and thieves.50

While the country was steeped in this kind of poverty, from 1957 to 1960, Diem built 526,000 square metres of dance hall, churches and residences for high-ranking officials against only 92,000 square metres of schools and hospitals.

A society as frustrated as the Vietnamese, did not have to look for outside mobilization to vent their anger on regimes that did not give heed to the aspirations the people held closest to their hearts. From

the very outset, Diem had been frenziedly campaigning against the armistice and possible reunification. On 1 August 1954, a mass demonstration was held in Saigon for peace and national reunification. The "Saigon Cholon peace movement" was established on the occasion, which called on the people to demand the gains of the Geneva Accord. The movement, which was led by lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho, conducted intensive agitation in factories, schools, and districts, and expanded rapidly to Hue and other provinces. It kept in close touch with the International Commission for Supervision and Control of the Armistice, requesting it to intervene in favour of patriots who were victims of reprisals and to send delegations to visit political detainees.

After vain efforts to contain it, the authorities dissolved the movement on 11 November 1954. Its leaders,

51"Phong Trao Hoa Binh Saigon - Cholon" was formed by several Saigon figures long active in Vietminh circles, including the lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho. The movement was designed specifically to attract non-party intellectuals with patriotic inclinations, who were considered potentially hostile to the Diem regime was the first ever movement after, 1954. Tran Van Giau, Mien Nam Giunung Thanh Dong (The South on the Road of Victory), (Hanoi: FLPH, 1964), pp.86-88.


53See Scigliano, n.13, pp.20-21, and Fall, n.41, pp.245-6.
like Nguyen Van Duong and Nguyen Huu Tho were arrested, arrested, then deported, but the movement's basic committees survived the repression till May 1955, after which the Saigon Cholon peace workers gathered in other organizations. 54

In the countryside, Diem resorted to more brutal repression than in the cities. Here the political struggle against the sabotage of the Geneva Agreements was coupled with a fierce agrarian struggle against landowners reinstated by the Saigon administration. Diem had carried out an agrarian policy, aimed at reinstating the class of landowners dispossessed by the resistance. The aim was to create a new class of rich peasants to make the mainstay of the regime in the countryside. This policy resorted to roundabout ways to take back from the working peasants the land they had owned and hand over these lands to the former landowners. 55

Nevertheless, in spite of long experience in guerrilla warfare, the rural population avoided resort to armed self-defence which might bring about the resumption

54 Under the pretence of clearing up Saigon, the Diem administration set fire to the city's slums so as to drive away from the city the large masses of poor working people considered to be dangerous to the regime. Burchett, n.49, pp.219-20, and Ta Xuan Linh, "How Armed Struggle Began in South Vietnam", Vietnam Courier (Hanoi) no.22, March 1974, p.19.

55 Scigliano, n.13, pp.47-49.
of hostilities and obstruction of the implementation of the Geneva Agreements. They limited themselves to political struggle, sent delegations to the authorities with petitions, staged mass demonstrations and meetings, collected signatures, requested the International Control Commission to intervene, all in vain.

The campaign against the US-Diem manoeuvres to perpetuate the partition of the country now gathered force. On 1 July 1955, the Consultative Conference of the Lien Viet Front of Nam Bo, issued an appeal calling on the people to demand the holding of general elections. Ten days later a general strike paralysed Saigon and My Tho. Hue, Da Nang and other South Vietnamese cities joined in the strike soon after. The strike spread to the countryside and the Central Highlands. Meanwhile, Diem had refused to begin negotiations with the Vietminh concerning elections. He asserted in July 1955 that he had not signed the Geneva agreements and that he could not, therefore, be bound by them. In this, he was merely reflecting the position of Dulles, who had asserted, in June 1955, that the preconditions for free elections did not exist in the North.

The Diem government also rebuffed overtures from Hanoi for the referendum, insisting that "nothing constructive" could be achieved towards reunifying the country through free elections "as long as the Communist regime in North Vietnam does not allow each Vietnamese citizen to enjoy the democratic freedoms and fundamental rights of man." While the United States and the United Kingdom supported his position, the Soviet Union failed to do anything. Disappointed, the DRV began to concentrate on supporting the revolutionary activities in South Vietnam.

Faced with an uprising which had popular backing, Diem in July 1955 launched his campaign of "Denounce the Communist". Terroristic reprisals, which caused thousands of deaths among former resistance members, became bloodier after this.

Opposition to Diem's policies was building up on other fronts as well. The workers' movement became very active in the cities after 1954. It immobilized workshops belonging to the logistics services of the French Expeditionary Corps in the regions of Saigon-Cholon, Gia-Dinh-Thu, and Dau Mot-Bien Hoa. The workers' struggle reached its peak in 1956.

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with individual and collective actions. Railway workers, dockers and workers of the Saigon Electricity Company struck work, demanding an end to reprisals, the holding of general elections and national reunifications. In the growing workers' movement, the strikes hit American enterprises. Small wage-earners and small traders protested against heavy taxation and appalling living conditions in the districts. While intellectuals demanded freedom of the press and opinion and the defence of national culture against the invasion of the "American way of life", school and college students spoke out against the shortage of schools and the use of foreign languages as teaching media. The students organized a movement under the slogan, "Reform the educational programme in the spirit of National Independence", "Enforce Democratic Liberties". Craftsmen and industrialists denounced the "commercialized" US aid which condemned handicrafts and industry to bankruptcy. The urbanites' anger was evidenced by the 1958 May Day demonstrations in Saigon, in which people demanded


60 A whole programme of studies with the Vietnamese language as the medium had been applied in North Vietnam but in the South, French or English, as the main language was compulsory in universities and the South Vietnam University was merely a nursery to train children of the "privileged". Vietnamese Studies, n.50, pp.50-51; and Fall, n.41, p.315.
better living and working conditions, an end to repression
and massacres, the democratization of the regime and
peaceful reunification of the country. 61

In seeking to consolidate his position, Diem had
offended all sources of extra-legal challenges to
his authority, namely, the three religio-military
sects of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xugen. 62
He announced his plans for unilateral election of a
"National Assembly" in March 1956 which was to draw up a
constitution for the new republic. The new constitution
was promulgated on 26 October 1956. In the ensuing
election Diem was voted to power, after which the RVN
set up a Revolutionary Council, a High Council of
Judiciary, a Supreme Court on the French pattern, and
similar institutions. The former mandarin openly
established a family dictatorship and a police state. The
administration, army and police were entirely reorganized.

61An Outline History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1976,

62All these groups controlled important segments of rural
Vietnam, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao especially imposed levies on
their local populations and ran the local administration.
The Binh Xuyen was more concerned with commercial
activities and by 1954, was operating lucrative gambling
and prostitution establishment in Saigon. It was able to
run the city of Saigon-Cholon as its personal preserve. By
1954 the sects had become deeply involved in Saigon
politics. They had also become as much interested in
preserving their territorial autonomy Scigliano, n.13,
pp.18-21.
Catholicism, Diem’s own religion, was made the state religion. The administration tried to impose on the people a so-called spiritualistic and personalistic ideology. The major part of the blame for turning Diem autocratic belongs to the US policy-makers of the time. As the limited US perception could see no further than a conflict between the forces of freedom and Communist totalitarianism, they never prompted Diem to introduce reforms on the socio-economic front. Instead, 75 per cent of the aid provided to Vietnam was used to bolster Diem’s military budget. For the Americans the Geneva settlement marked the end of French presence in Asia which, however repugnant at one time to Americans on general anti-colonialist principles, could have been rendered useful in anti-Communist terms. Having decided in 1954 not to buttress French rule any longer, the US sought an alternative anti-Communist and anti-Chinese force. US policy-makers disapproved of the Geneva settlement because it not only failed to constitute such a force but threatened to accelerate Chinese Communist expansion by giving Ho Chi Minh the whole of Vietnam in two bites - the North by

\[\text{Turner, n.59, pp.173 and 175.}\]

\[\text{By 1957, the United States paid half the government budget, including the full payroll of the armed forces. See Bouscaren, n.42, p.65.}\]
the armistice agreement and the South through elections. Ho Chi Minh was regarded as a satellite of the Communists. The Americans resolved therefore to maintain the independence of the anti-Communist regime established by Diem in the South, and also to create a new anti-Communist alliance to check China in Asia. When the South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty (the Manila Pact, SEATO) was signed in September 1954, its purpose was to ensure the independence of South Vietnam.

In November 1956 Diem denounced the Franco-Vietnamese monetary and financial agreement, as a consequence of which RVN's trade with France fell from 70 per cent to 30 per cent of its total foreign trade. More and more he seemed to rely on US support. During fiscal year 1955-56 US aid to RVN amounted to $320 million, of which 73 per cent went to the military, 18 per cent to refugees and 9 per cent for technical and economic assistance.

Thus fortified by the US administration, the Diem regime's policy of repression intensified. It placed restrictions on patriotic leaders struggling for peace, independence and unification. Their activities were

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declared illegal. A number of revolutionary fighters were imprisoned. More than 2,000 suspected Communist leaders were killed. In late 1956, a Western observer described South Vietnam as a "quasi-police state characterized by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, strict censorship of the press and the absence of an effective political opposition and press". This repression, while in theory it was aimed against the Communists, in fact, affected all democrats, socialists and liberals, who expressed their disagreement with the ruling oligarchy's stand on unification.

The RVN regime tortured the lower class and the upper alike, and the intellectuals, mostly French-educated and pro-French landowners. Among the tortured were also the Buddhist clergy, the politico-religious sects (particularly the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) and a section of the Catholic Church. As his only social support, besides his own family, Diem had behind him a handful of former mandarins and landowners from Central Vietnam for favour and promotion. He recruited his favourites


67After 1956 every opponent was called a communist, who were denounced as the "left over" from the French colonial regime.

from the cohort of hooligans in the cities and the countryside and from the emigres from North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{69}

Diem terrorized the people with his "Denounce the Communist" and "To Cong" campaign and by carrying reprisals on former resistance members. He consolidated a huge repressive apparatus by strengthening the army and police, building thousands of prisons and concentration camps, erecting military posts everywhere and setting up reactionary rural councils.

In early 1957, presuming that he had gained control over the cities and the countryside in the delta, Diem opened a third front, and began to tackle the minorities in the Tay Nguyen Highlands.\textsuperscript{70} His policy consisted, on the one hand, of settling in the mountain regions one million peasants from the majority people and, on the other, of concentrating minority peoples, whose dispersion had always kept them out of his control. The latter fiercely defended their way of life and demonstrated against Diem's arbitrary policies. They founded the movement for the autonomy of Tay Nguyen Nationalities in 1958, which actively resisted these moves.\textsuperscript{71} In 1958, matters


\textsuperscript{70}This region constituted a strategic position of prime importance from which one could reach out into Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, and Central Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{71}Duiker, n.69, pp.184-5.
deteriorated. Round-ups of "dissidents" became more frequent and more brutal. A certain sequence of events became almost classical—denunciation, encirclement of villages, searches and raids, arrest of suspects, plundering, interrogations enlivened sometimes by torture (even of innocent people), and deportation. In 1959 Diem passed the notorious Law 10/59 under which special military tribunals were set up to try "infringements of national security". The tribunals were permitted to pass only sentences of death or hard labour for life and were expressly forbidden to allow extenuating circumstances. Under this law no appeal was possible. Thousands during this period were executed, or were herded into concentration camps and kept under the most appalling conditions.

Tight police control and brutal repression in 1959 led to the popular revolt going underground. In early 1959, in the mountains of Quang Ngai (Central Vietnam) the Kor

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73 Under Law 10/59, special courts-martial followed by the troops unleashed against the people, the aim was to legalize the murder of opponents of the regime. There were mopping-up raids, pacifying operations and probing operations in one year, from July 1959 to July 1960. The mercenaries pillaged, raped, burned, massacred. See Henderson, n.66, p.285.
tribe annihilated a government garrison.74 Similar rebellions broke out in other areas. Peasants fortified their hamlets and organized themselves into combat units to face government troops with home-made shotguns and crossbows. Gradually, armed propaganda made its appearance.75

Organized uprising soon broke out. In Ben Tre (Mekong Delta) on 17 January 1960, led by Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh, insurgent forces stormed posts of the government's "rural militia" and seized firearms. Within a week they swept away established village administrations, replacing them with people's committees for self-management. A huge demonstration by women, with occupation of Mo Cay town forced the government delegate to order the withdrawal of troops. In the rural areas and the Highlands, landlord's property was confiscated and distributed to poor peasants supporting the revolution.76


75 An Outlined History, n.61, p.87; Duiker, n.69, p.192 and Thayer, ibid., pp.42-43.

76 Ben Tre had a long tradition of rebellion against the central government authority. Nguyen Thi Dinh. No other Road to take, (Ithaca: Cornell, 1976), p.64; DRV, Outline, n.56, p.109.
In January-February 1960, in Tay Ninh, insurgents overran the Tua Hai fortress, killed many troops and captured small arms, automatic weapons and heavy equipment. The seized equipment was so vast that it enabled the revolutionary armed forces to equip the first regular battalion of the movement and these were also sent to various guerrilla bases. The New York Times wrote that by January 1960 terrorist attacks were averaging seven a day, and Communist operations against government outposts were becoming almost regular.77

There were uprisings almost everywhere - the countryside, the cities and the mountain regions. In My Tho province the people held meetings and demonstrations on 11 November 1960 demanding dissolution of concentration camps, abolition of the fascist Law 10/59 and the expulsion of all US military advisers from South Vietnam. The Government, determined to suppress the uprising, even ordered firing on the demonstrators. According to the Vietnam News Agency, "from October 11 to December 28, 1960, a hundred localities in 27 provinces in South Vietnam were strafed and bombed by the South Vietnam authorities". The casualties comprised 200 killed, 75 wounded, more than 300 houses burned down and

77The insurgents attacked a trainee regiment of the Army of RVN 5th Division, and with that armed incidents increased rapidly. See New York Times, 17 April 1960, p.27 and 2 May 1960, p.13.
hundreds of boats capsized during air raids. In the early morning of 11 November 1960, the Diem government was shaken by an attempted military revolt led by Colonel Nguyen Chan Thi, Commander of a parachute brigade, and Lt. Col. Vuong Van Dang, his deputy, who accused Diem of dictatorial and corrupt practices. They easily occupied the capital but Diem barricaded himself in the presidential palace. Paratroopers set up a mortar in front of the presidential palace, and occupied Saigon but were in the end dispersed by loyal troops.

The insurgency had by now escalated with political assassinations and terrorism, and large battalion-size battles had become frequent. The conditions were ripe for the creation of a national united front bringing together all shades of opposition. It was against this backdrop that Ho Chi Minh decided to mount a protracted campaign against the RVN. In the South there were some Communists and their sympathizers. They were reminded that they had promised to provide a better life to the people in the past. They were made conscious that the goal of reunification would be out

78Vietnam News Agency, n.52, 15,16,21 and 26 January; 9,17,18 February; and 3 and 14 March 1961.

of their reach if they did not act quickly.\textsuperscript{80}

It would appear that though Diem was a fierce nationalist to begin with, he was totally ill-suited to rule over a democratically inclined Vietnam. He treated the entire country as his fiefdom, which he administered through a network of secret societies, nepotistically, intolerantly and unintelligently. Diem's wealthy and aristocratic family were out of touch in assessing the aspirations and needs of the semi-destitute people of Vietnam. In the cities Diem and his relatives, who included five brothers, became increasingly unpopular due to the antagonism of the Buddhists, the dominant religious groups, and the hill people who, although only a small minority of the population, inhabited more than half of the countryside in which subversive movements might be sustained. The cities became generators of inflation and vices while the countryside became an open field for the settlement of private grudges and for extortionate demands.\textsuperscript{81} But Diem was ignorant of the developments in his own country. His intelligence network never gave him the true picture.


Diem's main problem was that he was unable to grasp the essentials of the pluralistic society of which he was in command. Also, "under the veneer of his commitment to republican institutions, Diem was at heart a traditional figure, more comfortable in the world of Confucian hierarchy and enlightened despotism than in the rough-and-tumble arena of democratic politics."\(^{82}\) He ruled in an aloof and paternalistic manner, withdrawing himself within the walls of the "Forbidden Palace" and depending for information and guidance on a close coterie of "court sycophants and members of his extended family". His principal source of support was the United States. At home, the Catholics constituting 10 per cent of the population and largely refugees from the North—and hated by most of the Buddhists extended their support.\(^{83}\)

When Diem embarked on a policy to destroy Communism, which period the Communists in the South later recalled as their "darkest hour", they decided that the only way to survive was to take up arms. Diem soon was confronted with a thriving indigenous insurgency and an organized opposition to him emerged. This did not have the support of the government in North Vietnam. They were restrained by the leaders in the North who were reluctant to permit it because

\(^{82}\) Duiker, n.14, p.78.

\(^{83}\) Sardesai, n.33, p.404.
it could jeopardize the necessary support from other nations and provoke retaliation.\textsuperscript{84} The factors which led to the process of revolution and civil war inside the country were: Diem was a Catholic, and he was from North Vietnam. The political system was based on the American model but Article 44, 49 and 98 of RVN were arbitrary and the regime was authoritarian. Article 44 and 49 talked about emergency and it was said that during the emergency Article 98 could suspend all civil rights in the name of public security and threat to the national security from outside, internal as well external. The worsening situation and unemployment, hunger, poverty, disease, military operations, mass genocide, flight of many people into a refugee status etc. and programmes such as "Denounce the Communist" campaign provoked even several hundred officials into supporting revolutionary activities.\textsuperscript{85} The political climate in South Vietnam was highly conducive to the formation of an organization that would give vent to the people's anti-government feelings and strive for the objective of


unification. The National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) thus came into being on 20 December 1960, at a secret meeting of various forces, classes, parties and religious groups at Eastern Nam Bo, near Saigon. The Front had as its main objective "to break the chains of oppression and slavery, and to regain independence and freedom". It was to provide a single platform around which all anti-Diem activities could cluster. Its founding fathers were Nguyen Huu Tho, a lawyer, Huynh Tan Phat, an architect, Ho Thu, a pharmacist, and Le Van Tha, an engineer. Phung Van Chung, a Paris-trained medical doctor, was elected its Chairman. Members were drawn from the Vietminh, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, minority groups, ethnic minorities, university and school students, farmers, leaders of small political parties, professionals, intellectuals, military deserters, refugees of various sorts etc. The volunteers made use of Ho's ideology and Giap's strategy to confront the enemy forces.


Nguyen Huu Tho, who was elected the President of the Front, said at the inaugural meeting:

The idea of a front dates back to 1954. In that year, the people rejoiced at the signing of the Geneva Agreement and we created our Saigon-Cholon committee to see that it should be respected, in particular the clauses relating to the safeguarding of peace and the democratic liberties. This committee was the embryo of the front and it was a fully legal body. It rallied the Saigon intelligentsia, newspaper publishers, dramatists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, as well as trade union leaders and peasants on the outskirts of Saigon. 88

The new Front was formed, when, according to Fall, on 19 December 1960, at 8 p.m. — exactly fourteen years to the hour from the beginning of the Vietminh's anti-French resistance — a small group of representatives of various South Vietnamese opposition groups met in inaccessible forests north of Saigon of about ten persons representing specific organizations and approximately fifty others attending as individuals, there may have been. The meeting lasted beyond midnight, and resulted in giving birth to the NLF. 89

The Communist party (Vietnam Workers' Party - VWP) from the DRV had approved plans at its third congress in September 1960 to set up an overt leadership organ for a people's democratic national revolution in South Vietnam. This had its desirable impact. The role of VWP in this development was once a subject of sharp controversy.


89 Fall, n.41, p.362.
Somewhat less clear is the role played by the party's southern membership in making key decisions. Some members who remained in the South after 1954, were known to have opposed the concessions made at Geneva. More concessions required the southern branch of the party to bear all the risks of their implementation, while North Vietnam advanced peacefully to socialism. When Diem apparently succeeded in eliminating his rivals and opened a vigorous campaign to exterminate the Communists, a number of the party's southern membership demanded that the party give higher priority to the "Southern revolution". At no time, however, did the southern membership constitute a separate Communist party or make policy independently of the Central Committee in Hanoi.

In 1954, the Communist party organization in South Vietnam had 50,000 to 60,000 members. Increasingly, the depredations of Diem's policy sharply reduced the membership. By 1956, party membership in the South was about 15,000 and it was reduced further by 5,000 in 1959. With their numbers falling, morale worsening, and prospects for reunification dimming, some southern cadres began to demand a new policy.90

90Although popular discontent in many areas rose to a point that party members in the South were reluctant to act, they had to think of their survival. Cadres demanded a change of policy. For detailed discussion, see Thayer, n.74, p.34 and 42-43.
The growing insurgency in the South prompted the North Vietnamese to act, and a new party policy began to emerge. The Party Politburo issued a directive to establish a revolutionary base in the Central Highlands with the purpose of helping the "political struggle advanced to carrying out limited guerrilla warfare". The 15th Plenum of the VWP Central Committee met in May 1959 to approve a significant change in policy. Party members acknowledged that the struggle eventually would take a violent form, but authorized armed struggle to begin only in combination with political struggle as local circumstances required. According to the communique of the 15th Plenum: A policy was implemented in the highlands of Trug Bo, where preparations had long been under way to launch an armed uprising. However, the Plenum also foresaw that, "the uprising of the people of the south" might become a "protracted armed struggle", because of US determination to support Saigon. In this case the Southern revolution might require external support. The Plenum instructed the Central Military Party Committee to

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Committee to set up a special unit charged with moving people, weapons, and supplies overland from North to South.  

A historic resolution reached the party cadres in the highlands in June-August 1959. It gave them the green signal to switch from political struggle to armed self-defence and support activities. A new page had been turned in the history of the South Vietnamese revolution. During May, no doubt as a result of Politburo initiative, preparations were undertaken to increase the Southern regroups back to South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The movement of cadres to the South began on a modest scale in July 1959. The party's underground unit took the offensive by killing and kidnapping RVN officials. This tactic effectively cut off


93 Thayer, n.74, pp.31-48.

94 The demarcation line at the Seventeenth Parallel had become one of the strictest borders in the world. The only way to communicate with the South was through Laos. The Vietnamese had withdrawn their troops from Laos after Geneva, but continued to back the Pathet Lao in the very complex political developments in the country. In December 1958, North Vietnam occupied some disputed villages at the border between Laos and South Vietnam, close to the Seventeenth Parallel. This was probably done in order to make it possible to send men and equipment to the South along with what was later to be called the "Ho Chi Minh trail". Smith, n.84, pp.323; R.B. Smith, Revolution versus Containment. 1955-1969. An International History of Vietnam War (London: Macmillan, 1983), vol.I, pp.166 and 168 and Ho Chi Minh Trail (Hanoi: FLPH, 1985), pp.1-21.
the RVN from certain rural areas where the party cadres developed large-sized military units. The weapons captured in these attacks were used in the successful assault on the headquarters of RVN's Regiment during Tet 1960. At the same time the party cadres conducted an uprising in the Ben Tre province which inaugurated the period of "simultaneous" uprising.95

The expansion of the Northern influence in the rural areas of South Vietnam followed in the wake of armed violence. While the party cadres concentrated on restoring underground cells, village revolutionary administration and mass organizations,96 ex-warrior and resistance veterans convened a meeting to call for the overthrow of the Diem government.97

In September 1960, the party's underground cadres in the South witnessed a change in their fortune. The policy of armed violence permitted them to strike at the RVN forces


96Wilfred G. Burchett, *Vietnam Will Win!* (New York: Monthly Press, 1970), p.121 writes that "in Ca Mau a regional resistance organisation was founded several months before the NLF was officially established".

at the local level. It subsequently crippled RVN’s administrative capacity. The political climate in South Vietnam was such that throughout 1960 a series of spontaneous uprisings broke out. This prompted Le Duan to issue the following statement:

To ensure the complete success for the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam, our people there, under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist Party of the working class, must strive to establish a united bloc of workers, peasants, and soldiers, and to bring into being a broad National United Front directed against U.S. and Diem and based upon...

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98 Le Duan was head of the regional committee at the time, member of the Politburo and a long-time specialist in Southern affairs. Born in 1908 in Quang Tri Province, he had spent much of the 1930s in prison, along with other party leaders, first in Hanoi and then on the island of Poulo Condore (Conson). By 1939, he was a member of the central committee and may have been implicated, while serving on the Saigon Party Committee, in the abortive Nam Ky uprising of November 1940 that resulted in the rout of the hitherto strong Southern branch. Returned to prison, he escaped in 1945, resumed activity in South, and was appointed head of the Central Committee Directorate for the South when this organ was created out of the Nam Bo regional committee in 1951. Though the directorate reverted to regional committee status at the end of the war with France, Duan remained in charge and built a reputation as the flame of the South for his ardent advocacy of reunification. His reward, when his views gained ascendancy was election in 1960 to the post of the party first Secretary. For further reference see Le Duan, On Some Present International Problems (Hanoi: FLPH, 1964), edn 2; Le Duan on the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam, (Hanoi: FLPH, 1965); edn 3; Le Duan, Forward Under the Glorious Banner of the October Revolution (Hanoi: FLPH, 1969), edn 4. Le Duan, The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems. Essential Tasks (Hanoi: FLPH, 1970); Le Duan Selected Writings (Hanoi: FLPH, 1977).

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the worker-peasant alliance. This front must rally all the patriotic parties and religious groupings, together with all individuals inclined to oppose the U.S.-Diem (regime). The aims of the struggle of the National United Front against the U.S. and Diem in the South are peace, national independence, democratic freedoms, improvement of living conditions of the people and the peaceful reunification of the fatherland. 99

Preparations to create a Front at the village level had by this time been under way for nearly a year. 100 Apparently, the unexpected and unsuccessful coup d'etat against the Diem government in November 1960 enabled the party cadres of South Vietnam to speed up their movement. 101 At the end of 1960, they had control of at least one half of the territory of the country, including most of the southern area. They were already on the way of strong military efforts in the highlands and central coastal strip. Their armed forces during the year were about 10,000. 102

In this favourable atmosphere Ho Chi Minh decided to give material aid to the forces gathering against Diem in the countryside. Despite American pressure Diem had refused

99 DRV, n.91, pp.62-63.
to supply food to North Vietnam in the mistaken belief that the northern regime was about to collapse. This gave the North an economic as well as political motive to oppose the Diem government.\textsuperscript{103} By 1960, it became more than apparent that the DRV had full control of Northern Vietnam headed by the legendary nationalist hero Ho Chi Minh, popularly called uncle Ho, who treated and ruled the nation with affection and dedication of a father figure.\textsuperscript{104} He was, besides, well supported by an able and dedicated cabinet and well organized cadres. The party had endeared itself to the masses by its dedication to the country's reunification. It had by now also framed a clear strategy of building socialism in the North and liberation in the South.\textsuperscript{105}

The escalation of struggle in the South made for reinvigoration of the revolutionary apparatus and the formation of a new front. Following the Third Congress, the party decided to return to the operational arrangements used in the war against France. COSVN, the old southern branch of the Central Committee that had been abolished in 1954, was

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\textsuperscript{104}Sardesai, n.33, pp.402-3.

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reconstituted.\textsuperscript{106} What was needed above all was a new and dynamic front that could "rally all patriotic classes and sections of the people", in South Vietnam against the Diem regime. Since 1954, the party had looked for a front organization in the South with such qualifications. The absence of such a front, according to various writers, was remedied with the formation of Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Mien Nam Viet Nam (NLF), at the Congress of People's Representatives in eastern Nam Bo (a liberated area).\textsuperscript{107}

The North's help in the NLF's struggle notwithstanding, it would be inapt to regard the struggle through the NLF as one directed purely by the North Vietnamese. The southerners manned the movement themselves with assistance from the DRV in terms military training and arms supplies. According to Gabriel Kolko,

\textsuperscript{106}After the Vietminh War the Central office was abolished and the Southern branch became a truncated zone. Once it had been Interzone six, ibid., p.122.

Every peasant in the South supporting the revolution identified the NLF with the party and a movement dating back to the early 1940s, that was legally and historically part of one country, which the U.S. sabotage of the Geneva Accords had temporarily divided. By the same token, every group the party might ally within the south knew that the Vietminh and its successors had not lasted beyond 1953 in terms of sharing real power in the DRV.\textsuperscript{108}

The fractured class structure of South Vietnam was also far more promising to a Front strategy in 1960 than it had been when the Vietminh were created nationally. The power of its possible rivals, particularly the sects, was greater than that of any comparable group ever found in North Vietnam. Diem had, in fact, forced most of his countrymen into opposition. There was so much anti-Diem feeling that the party from the North had to attempt to channel it, lest another force or coalition pre-empt it. Morrison and Suhrke rightly point out that "the absence of forceful large-power involvement enabled the smaller protagonists to seize the initiative." They add that the southern branch of the Vietminh had retained its organization and supplies which made it possible to resume guerrilla warfare in which the political front was strengthened with the establishment of the NLF.\textsuperscript{108} George McTurnam Kahin and John Lewis write:

\textsuperscript{108} Kolko, n.80, p.105.

\textsuperscript{108} Morrison and Suhrke, n.25, p.65 and Tang, n.87.
The insurrection in the south is deep-rooted: it arose at southern initiative in response to southern demands...Contrary to U.S. policy assumptions, all available evidence shows that the revival of the civil war in the South in 1958 was undertaken by Southerners at their own—not Hanoi's-initiatives.\textsuperscript{110}

The origin of the NLF was greatly influenced by the nature of the debate over the efficacy of Western involvement in Vietnam. Official US and RVN interpretations correctly stressed the role of the Lao Dong Party but failed to indicate that the party itself was a national organization which had operated throughout Vietnam prior to partition.\textsuperscript{111} The official interpretations put forward in various White Papers overlooked the pre-existing areas of party influence in the South. The same accounts also tended to overlook the widespread opposition to the Diem regime by politico-religious sects and others as well as the increasing alienation of various groups (like farmers, ethnic minorities, urban intellectuals etc.) caused by Diem's domestic policies.

Critics of the US and RVN interpretations have correctly stressed the brutal treatment accorded to ex-members of the resistance as one of the major factors


\textsuperscript{111}The Revolutionary Party (the Southern VWP) was assumed to be under the control of the North Vietnamese Vietnam Workers Party.
leading to a renewal of insurgency in the South. These writers, however, have overstressed the independence of cadres in the South in their relations with the party Central Committee. Although it is true that the demand to resort to armed forces arose in the South, it is also true that other cadres, particularly on the Nam Bo Regional Committee (1957-59), felt that unification could be achieved by peaceful means. In the course of internal disputes in the South the Nam Bo Committee exercised strict discipline over any lower-level cadres who violated the party's guidelines. The regional committee only changed its policies after the Central Committee passed Resolution 15 which approved the principle of using revolutionary violence in support of the political struggle.

That the impetus for the creation of the NLF came from the Southerners is also evidenced in their stress on the importance of the March 1960 meetings, which occurred before the party's National Congress approved the formation of a front. Jean Lacouture has argued, for example:

The actual birth of the NLF must be traced back to March 1960. At that time a group of the old resistance fighters assembled in zone D (eastern Cochin-China), issued a proclamation calling the prevailing situation 'intolerable' for the people as a result of Diem's action, and

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112 Refer to n.37 for further discussion.

113 The Third National Congress of the Lao Dong Party, See n.91.
called upon patriots to regroup with a view towards ultimate collective action ... the little Congress of March 1960 was in some ways the general call for the creation of the front, the signal that, coming from the South, was to force the government in the North to assume its responsibility.  

Under the provisions of the Geneva Accord, nearly 900,000 Vietnamese living in the Northern zone had been moved South. Western writers have often interpreted this fact to argue that these were the men who conspired and were responsible for insurgency in the South. They often ignore that 600,000 of those who left the North were Catholics. Of the non-Catholic population of North Vietnam, 98 per cent remained where they were. It is also a matter of record that a large number of these Catholics had actively collaborated with the French against their own countrymen. They moved South because they feared punishment. The Catholic migration to the South, in the words of Fall was "admittedly the result of an extremely intensive - well conducted in terms of its objectives - very successful American psychological warfare operation. Propaganda slogans and leaflets appealed to devout Catholics with such themes as "Christ has gone to South" and "the Virgin Mary has departed from the North."  

114 Locouure, n.85, pp.53-54.  
115 Fall, n.41, pp.153-4.
The NLF was an organization nationally conceived and nationally organized with ample cadres. It was not an ordinary secret society of the kind that had been part of Vietnamese political landscape for decades. It projected a social construction programme with scope and ambition that was necessary to build a revolutionary organization in a country like Vietnam which had been facing many social ills. It began with persons suffering genuine grievances, who were slowly organized and whose militancy gradually increased "until a critical mass was reached and the revolution exploded". The creation of the NLF was an accomplishment of skill, precision and refinement.

The Front was regarded by North Vietnam itself and other Communist countries as the genuine representative of the South Vietnamese people. The Front was made public on 29 January 1961 through the Vietnam News Agency. To welcome the new organization and to initiate Liberation Front meetings, demonstrations were held in various parts of South Vietnam before 20 January 1961. In Southern Central Vietnam, especially the former Vietminh strongholds of Quang-Ngai and Binh-Dinh, it was said that as many as three million

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people participated in anti-Diem demonstrations between 25 December and 8 January. In Nam-Bo, where the peak of activity came around 15-20 January, thousands of people from six provinces participated in meetings. 117 Thousands of leaflets acclaiming the recent formation of the NLF were handed out in Saigon-Cholon and other towns for a whole week beginning 1 January, "hundred of balloons carrying greetings to the Front" were released above the city of Saigon, so far recognized as the "stronghold" of the US-Diem clique in South Vietnam. These leaflets were distributed amongst the people, and even to members of Diem's administration, army and deputies to the "National Assembly". People in Saigon-Cholon and surrounding districts held meetings, staged market strikes, stopped traffic and trade activities for some hours to mark the emergence of the Front. Similar demonstrations were held in different parts of South Central Vietnam. The participants carrying streamers and placards, went and lodged petitions with the administration. They demanded an end to the policy of terror, dissolution of concentration camps disguised as "prosperity zones" and Diem's resignation. 118


118 Vietnam New Agency (Hanoi), 5 and 11 February 1961.
According to the Vietnam News Agency, in a village of My Tho province, southwest of Saigon, thousands of people carrying banners and hundreds of slogans welcomed the newly founded Front through demonstrations. The demonstration was followed by a meeting where songs and dances were performed. According to the same agency, seventeen meetings were held in one district of Sa-Doc province, where the demonstrators moved past Diem's local military posts "carrying slogans welcoming the Front" and burst fire crackers.\textsuperscript{119}

The people in DRV also greatly rejoiced at the news of the founding of the NLF.\textit{Nhan Dan} said that the birth of the NLF is a logical result of the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam to overthrow the fascist dictatorial US-Diem regime, to liberate the South and to take it on the path of independence and democracy, to overthrow the US-Diem clique and liberate South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{120}

After the founding of the NLF, the representatives of various opposition movements and prominent personalities met in a Congress and adopted a political programme and a manifesto. These documents were distributed in all provinces in South Vietnam, to the local press, diplomatic delegations and foreign correspondents there, and to the army and administrative personnel. The content of the manifesto of


\textsuperscript{120}\textit{Nhan Dan} (Hanoi), 30 January 1961, quoted by \textit{Vietnam News Agency}, of the same date.
the Front, addressed to "compatriots in the country and overseas Vietnamese", read:

During nearly a hundred years, the Vietnamese people repeatedly rose up to fight against foreign aggression for national independence and freedom.

In 1945, the people throughout the country as one man waged an armed uprising to overthrow the Japanese and French domination and seized power. When French colonialists invaded our country for a second time, our compatriots determined not to return to a slavery life but to defend national sovereignty and independence. The solidarity and heroic struggle of our compatriots during nine years have led the resistance war to victory. The 1954 Geneva Agreements restored peace in our country and recognized the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam.

Under these circumstances, our compatriots in South Vietnam would have been able to live in peace, earn their livelihood in security and build a life of plenty and happiness. 121

The manifesto denounced the US-Diem collusion during the past six years in South Vietnam: terror against and massacre of democratic and patriotic persons; abolition of all democratic rights and freedoms; ruthless exploitation of workers, peasants and other labouring people; strangulation of home industry and trade; poisoning the mind of the Southern people with depraved foreign culture, thus causing decadence of the national culture and morality; intense military reinforcements and building of military bases.

121Vietnam News Agency (Hanoi), 29 February 1961. See Appendix A for the text of founding objective of the NLF.
Throughout the past six years, tens of thousands of patriots in South Vietnam have been murdered and hundreds of thousands of others thrown into jail or deported. Various sections of the people have been living in a stifling atmosphere under the iron heels of the US-Diem clique. Countless families have been destroyed, and mourning scenes are seen everywhere as a result of unemployment, poverty, exacting taxes, terror, massacre, drafting of manpower and press ganging, usurpation of land, forcible houses removal, and herding of the people into concentration camps dubbed 'prosperity zones' or 'resettlement centres', and the like.122

The Front called on the "entire people to unite and heroically rise up to struggle" in accordance with the following ten-point programme of action:

1) To overthrow the disguised colonial regime of the US imperialists and the dictatorial Ngo Dinh Diem administration - lackey of the United States; and to form a national democratic coalition administration.

2) To carry out a broad and progressive democracy, promulgate freedom of expression, of the press, of belief in reunion, association, of movement and other democratic freedoms. To carry out general amnesty to all political detainees, dissolve all concentration camps dubbed the "prosperity zones" and "resettlement centres", abolish the fascist 10/59 law and other anti-democratic laws.

3) To abolish the economic monopoly of the United States and its henchmen, to protect home-made products, encourage

122 Ibid.
home industry and trade, expand agriculture and build an independent and sovereign economy; To provide jobs for the unemployed, increase wages for workers, armymen and office employees; To abolish arbitrary fines and apply an equitable and national tax system; To help those who have gone South to return to their native places if they so desire; and to provide jobs for those among them who want to remain in the South.

4) To carry out land rent reduction, guarantee the peasants' rights to till their present plots of land, redistribute communal land and advance toward land reform.

5) To eliminate the US-style culture of enslavement and deprivation, to build national and progressive culture and education to eliminate illiteracy, open more schools, carry out reforms in the educational and examination system.

6) To abolish the system of American military advisers, eliminate foreign military bases in Vietnam and to build a national army for the defence of the fatherland and the people.

7) To guarantee equality between men and women, and among different nationalities and realize the right to
autonomy of the national minorities; to protect the legitimate interests of foreign residents in Vietnam; to protect and take care of the interests of overseas Vietnamese.

8) To carry out a foreign policy of peace and neutrality, to establish diplomatic relations with all countries which respect the independence and sovereignty of Vietnam.

9) To re-establish normal relations between the two zones of Vietnam for the attainment of peaceful reunification of the country.

10) To oppose aggressive wars, and actively defend world peace.123

Like its famous predecessor, the Vietminh, the NLF leadership comprised largely of Communists, but it also played down ideology and sought to rally all those disaffected with Diem by promising sweeping reforms and the establishment of genuine independence. The Front hoped for broad-based popular support, having attracted thousands of adherents from among the rural population and having established a presence in villages. It presented itself to the world as a national movement, divorced from both the VWP and the government of the DRVN in Hanoi.

War and movement for independence had been a long and

123 ibid.
dominant feature of Vietnam's history. The experience of the
First Indochina War (1930-45) had a profound influence on
the people of South Vietnam. But it was the Front's effort
which brought them into direct action, for independence and
social progress in which they believed. It represented their
emotions, conscience and aspirations.

Soon after the Front was founded, its ranks swelled
with people from the poor areas of the country and well-
known Communists. The Front set up administrative
organizations and committees throughout South Vietnam. It
built up an armed force, instituted land reform programmes,
built schools, started a banking and postal system of its
own, becoming a parallel government. It controlled 80 per
cent of the countryside.124 The NLF could develop the
revolutionary consciousness of the people, particularly in
the villages, to such a point that spontaneous uprisings
became a common occurrence.

The emergence of the NLF transformed the course of the
struggle in South Vietnam into a liberation movement,
culminating into a permanent war against the Diem regime.

Like many other third world countries, the South
Vietnamese also achieved their goal after a great struggle.

124 For details, see Burchett, n.96; Joseph H. Weiss, "How
Hanoi Controls the Vietcong", The Reporter (New York),
11 January 1968, pp.27-28; Kahin and Lewis, n.110, p.119
and Edwin E. Moise, "Recent Account of the Vietnam War",
Journal of Asian Studies (Ann Arbor), vol.44, no.1,
February 1985, pp.337-42.
But in the process, the NLF established its own tradition of guerrilla warfare and pattern of socio-economic emancipation of the masses. Given the geographical, economic, political, psychological and socio-cultural differences between the South Vietnamese and NLF forces, how the Front fought so well baffles the historians even today. The Front's role, its strategy, its resistance style, its negotiating techniques, and its final march to Saigon in April 1975 offer an interesting field of study.