

**NGUYEN AI QUOC, THE COMINTERN, AND THE VIETNAMESE
COMMUNIST MOVEMENT
(1919 – 1941)**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of Nguyen Ai Quoc's (Ho Chi Minh's) role in transmitting communism to Vietnam in the period between the First and Second World Wars. As the Third International (Comintern) provided the theory and much of the organizational support for this task, it is also a study of the Comintern's changing policies towards revolution in colonial countries. It has grown out of research in the Moscow archives of the Comintern, which first became available to researchers in late 1991-1992. It also makes extensive use of the French colonial archives at the Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence.

This study begins with Nguyen Ai Quoc's appearance in Paris in 1919, when he lobbied the Paris Peace Conference for greater Vietnamese freedom and was then drawn into the political world of the French left. It follows his first contacts with the Comintern in Moscow (1923-1924), through his two-year sojourn in Canton during the Communist-Guomindang United Front, when he established the first training courses for Vietnamese revolutionaries. Chapters IV and V cover his return to Asia in mid-1928, his founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, and the 1930-31 insurrectionary movement in Vietnam. Chapter Six deals with his June 1931 arrest and his long period of political inactivity in Moscow, from mid-1934 until the autumn of 1938. The final chapter covers his return to southern China and his efforts to regain his influence in the Vietnamese communist movement from 1939 to 1941.

The thesis concludes that, with the benefit of the documentary evidence now available, it is necessary to readjust the perception of Nguyen Ai Quoc as an influential communist during his early political career. Initially he received little financial support from Moscow and he never became a member of the Comintern Executive Committee. Nor did he exist entirely within the world of the Comintern. Although the latter was an essential force in the creation of Vietnamese communism, there were other factors which shaped its growth, including family and regional ties, as well as Chinese and French left-wing politics.

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I would like to thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for giving me a grant in 1994 to carry out research in Moscow and Aix-en-Provence. The University of London's Central Research Fund contributed to my subsequent research in Aix-en-Provence in 1998. The archivists at the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History also deserve my deep gratitude, for their patient assistance in conditions which were not always easy.

Friends in Vietnam, Russia, the United States, England and France have given me priceless encouragement in the pursuit of my study of Nguyen Ai Quoc, a project which often seemed quixotic and which I began in relative ignorance. During my years at the School of Oriental and African Studies I benefited greatly from the intellectual stimulation of fellow students in the Vietnam history seminar. My husband and two daughters have also been unfailingly supportive of my studies.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the late Huynh Kim Khanh, who first piqued my curiosity about Nguyen Ai Quoc's relations with the Comintern; and to the late Ralph B. Smith, who provided the friendship, advice and example of painstaking scholarship which were so essential to its completion.

Sophia Quinn-Judge

January 2001

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Sketches of delegates to the FCP's First Conference in Marseille

L'Humanité, 31 December 1921



Top row, l. to r.: Andre Julien, Soutif, Tasca, Victor Meric

Bottom row: Cartier, Nguyen Ai Quoc, Georges Pioch

ABBREVIATIONS

AOM	Archives d'Outre-Mer
BNTS	<i>Ho Chi Minh: Bien Nien Tieu Su [Ho Chi Minh: A Year-by-year Biography]</i>
CC	Central Committee
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CYL	Communist Youth League
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
FEB	Far Eastern Bureau
GMD	Guomindang
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
MAE	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères
NCLS	<i>Nghien Cuu Lich Su [Historical Research]</i>
NXB	Nha Xuat Ban [publishing house]
OMS	Otdel Mezhdunarodnoi Sviazi [International Communications Section]
RC	Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History
SHAT	Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre
SLOTFOM	Service de Liaisons avec les Originaires des Territoires de la France d'Outre-Mer
SMP	Shanghai Municipal Police Files
SPCE	Service de Protection du Corps expéditionnaire
VNQDD	Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang
VNTNCMDCH	Vietnam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi

A Note on the Use of Place Names

I have retained the English forms of Canton for Guangzhou, Swatow for Shantou and Whampoa for Huangpu, as these terms are so strongly associated with the events of the first united front in China, and/or occur frequently in the documents from which I cite. Otherwise I have converted all Chinese place names to the Pinyin form, unless the older form occurs in a direct quote. I refer interchangeably to Tonkin or Bac-ky, Annam or Trung-ky, and Cochinchina or Nam-ky throughout the text. The use of the administrative terms imposed by the French does not imply a recognition of the French divisions of Vietnam, but simply reflects the terminology which was current during the colonial period.

Introduction

The Double Myth

Nguyen Ai Quoc, introduced to the world as Ho Chi Minh in 1945, became the symbol of Vietnamese communism in the years after he took power as his country's first president. During the American war with Vietnam he came to represent the treacherous 'double-face' of Asian communism -- to Lyndon Johnson Ho Chi Minh was his personal enemy. This persona was in part the creation of Cold War propaganda, which portrayed Ho as a power-hungry zealot who used and then betrayed non-communist nationalists.¹ Ho is still held personally responsible by many overseas Vietnamese for all the suffering which war and communism brought to Vietnam.

This anti-communist portrait of Ho Chi Minh is the mirror image of the myth fostered by the Vietnamese communists: Ho as the wise and prescient father of independent Vietnam, a monk-like figure who devoted his life to his nation. After 1945 the Vietnamese communists began to use Ho Chi Minh as a device to create a party history of unity and impeccable decision-making. At the outset Ho himself seems to have encouraged his portrayal as an austere nationalist patriot (accurate up to a point). This use of Ho as a legitimizing and unifying figure became more marked after 1947, when it became clear that the French were going to fight for their colony and that the US government questioned the Viet Minh's nationalism. The preface of a Ho Chi Minh biography which appeared in Paris in 1949 referred to him as a 'symbol of popular hopes'; his heart was said to 'beat in the same rhythm as the heart of the people'. His teachings were full of 'lofty and humanitarian concepts'; at the same time they were 'extremely simple'.² Yet a *Nhan Dan* article of 25 March 1951 made an important distinction regarding Ho's role. It described President Ho as 'the soul of the Vietnamese revolution and the Vietnamese resistance,' while referring to Truong Chinh, then leader of the communist party, as the revolution's, 'builder and commander'.³

¹ This characterization is in part drawn from the story of Ho Chi Minh's supposed betrayal of nationalist leader Phan Boi Chau in 1925. I discuss this episode in Chapter III.

² Tran Ngoc Danh, *Tieu-su Ho Chu Tich (The Biography of Chairman Ho)*, (Paris: Chi Hoi Lien-Viet tai Phap, 1949), p. 6.

³ Cited in Thai Quang Trung, *Collective Leadership and Factionalism*, (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1985), p. 20.

By 1964, when the Vietnamese communists were being drawn deeper into confrontation with the USA, Ho Chi Minh's role as a unifying figure in party history became especially important. As we now know, 1963 was marked by considerable tension within the party over the correct international line to pursue. So the February 1964 article in *Nghien Cuu Lich Su (Historical Research)* which emphasized Nguyen Ai Quoc's 1930 role as the unifier of the communist party carried an important message. The message was that compromise and unity are valued political virtues, endorsed and personified by Ho Chi Minh.⁴ At the same time, the party was presenting itself as inherently infallible, thanks to the wisdom of Ho Chi Minh. Ironically, by 1964 Ho's personal political authority may well have been much reduced.⁵ In 1973, when a fifth edition of Truong Chinh's biography of 'Chairman Ho' appeared, it included a long section on Ho Chi Minh's 'revolutionary policy' and another on his 'virtue and conduct'.⁶ But it would not be until the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 that the Vietnamese would make an effort to systematize 'Ho Chi Minh Thought' as part of their guiding ideology.

Review of the Literature

Both stereotypes of Ho Chi Minh -- Machiavellian apparatchik or nationalist saint -- have in my view become deadweights which impede the search for the historical figure. Most writers on Vietnamese communism, for example, exaggerate Ho's early importance within the international communist brotherhood. Jean Lacouture, whose 1967 biography has been until recently the standard work by a sympathetic author, pictures Quoc as an intimate of French leftist intellectuals such as Boris Souvarine.⁷ Yet French and Russian documents tend to present Ho as a supplicant in these relationships. Souvarine, moreover, may not have had much contact with Ho until 1923, as he spent very little time in France after his imprisonment in 1920 and 1921, until his removal from the French party in 1924.⁸ William Duiker describes Ho as 'the recognized spokesman for the Eastern question and for increased attention to the problems of the peasantry' by the close of the Fifth Comintern

⁴ Nguyen Nghia, 'Cong cuoc hop nhat cac to chuc cong san dau tien o Viet-Nam va vai tro cua dong chi Nguyen Ai Quoc' ['The Unification of the First Communist Organizations in Vietnam and the role of Comrade Nguyen Ai Quoc], *NCLS*, no. 59, February 1964.

⁵ Judith Stowe, 'Revisionism in Vietnam', paper for AAS Conference, Washington DC, March 1998; author's conversation with Hoang Minh Chinh, Feb. 1995: Chinh claims that by 1963 Ho Chi Minh had been made politically ineffective (*bi vo hieu hoa*).

⁶ Truong Chinh, *Ho Chu Tich, Lanh Tu Kinh Yeu Cua Giai Cap Cong Nhan va Nhan Dan Viet-Nam [Chairman Ho: Beloved Leader of the Workers and People of Viet Nam]*, (Hanoi: N.X.B. Su that, 1973), p. 66.

⁷ Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 33.

⁸ Branko Lazitch, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), p. 378.

Congress in 1924.⁹ He was, however, a rather junior spokesman on colonial issues, who did not even represent an Asian communist party. Charles McLane suggests that after his return to Moscow from China in 1927, Quoc may have reviewed policy for Southeast Asia with Comintern leaders, 'conceivably even with Stalin himself'.¹⁰ Yet there is no evidence that Quoc did more than deliver a report to the Krestintern and confer with his superiors in the Executive Committee during his 1927 stay in Moscow. Charles Fenn claims that Ho was one of two delegates to the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935 who supported the popular front strategy.¹¹ In fact Ho did not have a vote at the Congress, and the policy had been carefully prepared in advance by Georgy Dimitrov, with Stalin's support. Quoc's early effectiveness as a propagandist is also sometimes exaggerated. An official biography, printed in the party paper *Nhan Dan* on 17 May 1970, the year after his death, claimed that the anti-colonial newspaper *Le Paria* which he edited in Paris had 'created a revolutionary gale which swept through Indochina and many other countries'. This is in my view a vast overstatement of the role which *Paria* played in the early twenties.

Anti-communist writers tend to accept a variant of this view of Nguyen Ai Quoc's influence. Ton That Thien in his essay, 'Truths and Lies: Ho Chi Minh's Secret 1923 Voyage to Russia and his Disgrace in the Comintern', expresses no doubt about Quoc's importance within communist circles. He maintains that a speech by Quoc at the Second Congress of the French Communist Party (FCP) in 1922 so impressed the Comintern agent Dmitry Manuilsky, that Quoc was invited on the spot to prepare himself to participate in the Fifth Comintern Congress in Moscow.¹² The reality, as represented by documents in the French and Comintern archives, was a bit more complicated. As I will show in Chapter II, Quoc had planned to spend only three months in Moscow when he first arrived, and did not expect to attend the 1924 Fifth Congress. According to Lacouture, Quoc attended an important Anti-imperialist Congress in Brussels early in 1928, where he is said to have mingled with Nehru and other nationalist leaders.¹³ However, that meeting was held in February 1927 when Quoc was still in Canton. On close inspection, it is interesting to see how many times Quoc (and later Ho Chi Minh) is credited for deeds which he was not in a position to have accomplished, either because he was not present or was not sufficiently influential.

⁹ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, (Hyperion: New York, 2000), p. 102.

¹⁰ Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia, An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1966), p. 137.

¹¹ Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1973), p. 59.

¹² Ton That Thien, 'Vérités et mensonges: le voyage clandestin de Ho Chi Minh en Russie en 1923 et sa disgrâce Au Komintern en 1933-1939', in *Ho Chi Minh, L'Homme et son héritage*, (Paris: La Voie nouvelle, 1990), pp. 51-2.

¹³ Lacouture, op. cit., p. 48.

One of the most curious of these cases is the attribution to Nguyen Ai Quoc of an essay entitled 'The Party's Military Work among the Peasants' made in the 1970 re-edition of the Comintern manual, *Armed Insurrection*. The original was published by the Comintern in June 1929 under the pseudonym A. Neuberg, although an earlier work with a similar title by Alfred Langer had been published in 1928 in Germany. Scholars such as William Duiker and Huynh Kim Khanh have used this essay to explain Quoc's views on the peasantry and the Nghe Tinh uprising of 1930-31.¹⁴ In the introduction to the 1970 reprint, Erich Wollenberg, who claims to be one of the original authors, identifies Ho as the author of the final chapter, on peasant insurrection.¹⁵ Wollenberg also claims that it was the Red Army Staff which sent Quoc to China in 1924. This identification of Quoc as a specialist in military affairs occurs from time to time in western publications, but is not confirmed by any documentary evidence that I have seen. Within the Comintern he worked as a translator, propagandist and specialist in political mobilization. When he returned from China to Moscow in June 1927 he reported on the peasant movement in Guangdong province, but in a concrete, descriptive manner quite unlike the critical style of the later essay. In Berlin in 1928 he also composed a popularized account of Peng Pai's peasant movement. But he was not present in China during the Nanchang uprising, the Hai-Lufeng soviets or the Canton insurrection, all of which are analyzed in the 1929 essay. According to Comintern documents, the Military Commission of the Comintern's Eastern Secretariat assigned the Lithuanian A. Gailis (known as Tom when he worked in China) and another man, Y. Zhigur, who had worked in military intelligence in southern China from 1926-7, to study the problem of tactics for an armed insurrection. That decision was made at a meeting on 22 March 1928, when Quoc was in Berlin.¹⁶ Gailis's book on this topic was being printed as of 20 June 1929 in Moscow.¹⁷ Thus the 1970 claim that Quoc authored the final essay would seem to have been an attempt to increase his posthumous reputation as a communist theoretician. (The essay in fact presents a standard Comintern view of 1928, and while it is not unlikely that Quoc shared many of its ideas, he would hardly have been in a position to take such an authoritative tone on the failings of the Chinese party.)

¹⁴ William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power In Vietnam*, (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996 ed.), pp. 21-23; Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism: 1925-1945*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ., 1982), p. 168-170.

¹⁵ A. Neuberg, *Armed Insurrection*, (London: NLB, 1970), trans. By Quentin Hoare from the German edition of 1928 and French edition of 1931.

¹⁶ Titarenko, Leutner et al., *VKP, Komintern I Kitai (dokumenti)*, [*The Soviet Communist Party, the Comintern and China*], (*Documents*), vol. III 1927-1931, part 1), (Moscow: Russian Center, 1999), p.355, Protocol of a Meeting of the Eastern Secretariat's Military Commission.

Early western biographies of Ho (e.g. Lacouture, Fenn) were necessarily impressionistic, due to the lack of sources. Ho himself made a fetish of covering up his past. The biographical information he supplied over the years amounts to a variety of anecdotes and conflicting dates rather than a real record of his life. The biography published in Paris in 1949, which first appeared in Chinese, was printed in later Vietnamese editions under the title, *Nhung Mau Chuyen ve doi hoat dong cua Ho Chu Tich [Glimpses of Chairman Ho's Life]* . Although the author's name is given as Tran Dan Tien, it is believed, in fact, to be an autobiography.¹⁸ But the book is constructed as a series of edifying vignettes recalled by his comrades, with a loose approach to dates. While it is based on fact, its omissions, embellishments and insistence on Nguyen Ai Quoc's proletarian virtue make it an element in the construction of his myth rather than a serious record. A Russian biography by Yevgeny Kobelev is the work of a publicist rather than a scholar.¹⁹ It draws heavily on the writing of Vietnamese biographer Hong Ha, who must also be classified as a publicist, given his casual attitude towards sources.²⁰

Biographical information on Ho's youth and his first years in Paris, uncovered in the French archives by Nguyen The Anh, Thu Trang Gaspard, and Daniel Hémery since the publication of Lacouture's work, has added to our appreciation of the origins of Ho's nationalism.²¹ In particular, Hémery's 1992 article, 'Jeunesse d'un colonisé, genèse d'un exil, Ho Chi Minh jusqu'en 1911' shows the importance of his father's career and disgrace as a mandarin in the young Ho's development. The most recent biography, however, a 577 page work by William Duiker, fails to take into account Hémery's research. Duiker follows the basic narrative of Ho's life presented in Hanoi publications. While he includes countervailing views from time to time and uses some Comintern documents, he echoes Kobelev in over-stressing Ho's importance within the Comintern. He does not make use of newly available information on Comintern structures.

¹⁷ Titarenko et. al., op. cit, p.572-574, Letter from Berzin and Sudakov to Shifres.

¹⁸ Tran Dan Tien, *Nhung mau chuyen ve doi hoat dong cua Ho Chu Tich*, (Hanoi: NXB Chinh tri Quoc Gia, 1994). The attribution of the 1949 Paris edition to Tran Ngoc Danh, a Moscow-trained militant, is curious. As Danh was expelled from the ICP in 1949, the attribution may have been a way of quelling rumours of dissent within the party.

¹⁹ Yevgeny Kobelev, *Ho Chi Minh*, (Moscow: Progress, 1989), trans. from 1983 Russian edition.

²⁰ Hong Ha, *Ho Chi Minh v Strane Sovetov [Ho Chi Minh in the Land of Soviets]*, (Moscow: Polit. Literaturny, 1986); trans. from Vietnamese edition titled, *Ho Chi Minh tren dat nuoc Lenin [HCM in the Land of Lenin]*, (Hanoi: NXB Thanh Nien, 1980).

²¹ See Nguyen The Anh, 'How Did Ho Chi Minh Become a Proletarian? Reality and Legend,' *Asian Affairs*, vol. 16, part II; Thu Trang Gaspard, *Ho Chi Minh à Paris (1917-1923)*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992); and Daniel Hémery, 'Jeunesse d'un colonisé, genèse d'un exil, etc.', *Approches Asie*, no. 11, 1992.

Other aspects of the study of Vietnamese communism have, in the West, been less subject to myth-making than the career of Ho Chi Minh. There have been several serious western studies of its origins, as well as two studies of the intellectual origins of Vietnamese radicalism.²² One work which concentrates on the Comintern role is Charles McLane's 1966 book, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia, An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin*.²³ McLane examines both the rhetoric of support for revolution and the actual evidence of Comintern involvement. Within the limitations of the materials available in the 1960s, mainly Comintern publications such as the weekly *International Press Correspondence (Inprecor)*, as well as Soviet journals and academic works, he does a careful job of evaluating the Comintern's role. (He is not able to provide much detail of the internal workings of the Vietnamese party, as he uses neither Vietnamese language materials nor the French archives.)

McLane's analysis holds up better for the period up to 1930-1 than for the following years, perhaps because until 1928 debates at Comintern meetings were published almost in full. He misconstrues greater secrecy in the Comintern after 1930 as inaction in the East. Moreover, McLane's discussion of the Popular Front era from 1936 is somewhat erratic: he fails to differentiate the Trotskyist-oriented front established in 1933-34 from the later 'United Democratic Front', which the Vietnamese began to implement in 1937 (with only moderate success). A more coherent account of the internal skirmishing which accompanied the creation of the latter front is Daniel Hémerly's *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine*,²⁴ a well-documented study of southern Vietnamese radical politics from 1932-1937.

In addition to his biography, Duiker has written two works which explore the development of Vietnamese communism: a monograph, *The Comintern and Vietnamese Communism*, and *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*.²⁵ Both of these make use of the French colonial archives, but were too early to take advantage of the documents now available in Moscow. The latter book, updated in 1996, gives a clear outline of the main events in Ho's evolution as a communist, but lacks a full analysis of the development of Comintern policy from 1920 to 1930.

²² David Marr, *Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1971) and Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard, 1992).

²³ Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia, An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1966).

²⁴ Daniel Hémerly, *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en indochine*, (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1975).

²⁵ William Duiker, *The Comintern and Vietnamese Communism*, (Athens: Ohio Univ., 1975), and op. cit.

Huynh Kim Khanh's *Vietnamese Communism: 1925-1945*, looks at a shorter period in more depth²⁶. While somewhat dated now, it also incorporates material from the French archives and Hanoi publications. Khanh created the image of Vietnamese communism as a hybrid plant, with communism grafted onto the stock of Vietnamese nationalism. He provides the first documented description of Nguyen Ai Quoc's eclipse between 1931 and 1938, a phenomenon which is still disputed by other writers such as Ton That Thien, who reject the idea that anyone out of Comintern favour could have survived Stalin's purges in Moscow.²⁷ (Thien relies heavily on Hong Ha, without acknowledging Hanoi's interest in maintaining the myth of communist infallibility.) A drawback of Khanh's book is that he makes too rigid a distinction between Moscow-trained 'proletarian' communists and what he sees as the local brand of revolutionary nationalists. His allegation that from 1935 until 1941 'the strategies, tactics and revolutionary activities of the ICP were decided more often by non-Vietnamese communists than by the Vietnamese revolutionaries'²⁸ is not supported by Comintern evidence.

The Primary Sources

With the opening of the archives of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1992, it has become possible to sketch in more of the facts of the pre-1945 period in Ho's career. My thesis covers his years of political activism, from 1919 when he first emerged in Paris using his pseudonym, Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot); to 1941, when Vietnamese contacts with the Comintern effectively ended. It is based on archival research in what was formerly the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow, now the Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History, as well as research in the Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence. I have limited my study to what we can discover in these documents, without trying to create a seamless narrative. I augment these archival sources with Vietnamese memoirs and, where possible, compare the official Vietnamese version of communist party documents with those versions available in the Russian and French archives. It should be noted that for the period up to 1941, with the exception of memoirs, almost all the communist party documents in the Vietnamese archives and those reprinted in *Van Kien Dang [Documents of Party History]* and *Ho Chi*

²⁶ Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit.

²⁷ Ton That Thien, op. cit., pp. 67-72. Thien also uses two anecdotes from the memoirs of former Comintern staff members which refer to Nguyen Ai Quoc, but neither of them is accurate in my opinion.

²⁸ Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit., p. 188.

Minh Toan Tap [Ho Chi Minh's Collected Works] have been collected from the French and Russian archives. (See Bibliography for details.)

The most important documents on Vietnam in the Russian Center Archives are the record series of various secretariats and committees of the Comintern, collection no. 495. From 1920 to 1935-6, the main repository of documents on Vietnam is the record series (*opis*) of the Eastern Secretariat, no. 154. This body was formed in a March 1926 reorganization to replace the Eastern Section (Vostochnyi Otdel), but the 495/154 series incorporates documents from both bodies. After the Seventh Comintern Congress, personal secretariats replaced those organized on a geographical basis. Thus Vietnamese documents from 1936 to 1940 can be found in the record series of Georgy Dimitrov's Secretariat, no. 74, and Dmitry Manuilsky's, no. 10a. I had the good fortune to do preliminary research in the Moscow archives in 1992 and again in early 1994, before the files of Manuilsky's and Dimitrov's Secretariats were closed to researchers at the end of that year.

In addition, I have made use of the collections of some of the organizations which worked parallel to the Comintern, such as the Krestintern and the Profintern. There are also separate record series for individual Congresses and Plenary Sessions. Comintern personnel files for Vietnam are kept in a special inventory (201), but these are only available on special request, which may well be refused. (I obtained some biographical information on Vietnamese communists from this inventory in 1992.) A valuable source on the Comintern in China are the five volumes of documents jointly published in Russian and German editions by the Russian Center, the Institute of the Far East in Moscow, and the Free University of Berlin. These documents have been selected from the Comintern and Soviet party archives. They cover the years 1920 to 1931, and further volumes are planned. (See Bibliography for full information.) The book *Organizational Structures of the Comintern* (in Russian) by Grant Adibekov et.al. is another useful source on the personnel and dates of the ever-changing committees within the Comintern bureaucracy.

One would like to think that it is now possible to sweep away the politicized history and propaganda associated with the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc. But every document presents its own new problems of interpretation. On the positive side, the events mentioned by the Comintern documents are often confirmed or illuminated by documents in the French archives. But on the other hand, the Comintern documents are not always easy to identify in terms of author, point of origin or date. Party members writing from the field back to Moscow, Nguyen Ai Quoc in particular, tried when possible to avoid using names in their

reports. Sometimes it is possible to tell both when a document was written and when it was received in Moscow, but this is by no means always the case.

Then there is the issue, not unique to Russia, of which documents are being made available to researchers. There is no way of knowing how much documentary material remains in classified files which once belonged to the NKVD-controlled departments within the Comintern. It would be over-confident to claim, based on files currently available in Moscow, that 'we now know' the full truth of the Comintern's relations with the Vietnamese communists. We have no documentary evidence, for example, of a Comintern investigation into Nguyen Ai Quoc's actions in China up to his 1931 arrest. Yet we know from collateral documents that he was excluded from the 1935 Seventh Comintern Congress and that he was 'politically inactive' during his 1934-38 stay in Moscow. Thus one can surmise that there was some sort of investigation and that somewhere a classified record of the proceedings exists. In his own statements to the Comintern Nguyen Ai Quoc gave partial, sometimes contradictory, information about his background. On enrolling in the International Lenin School in 1934, for example, he supplied the minimum of facts, listing his professional speciality as, 'none'. In 1938 he listed his birthdate as 1903 on a biographical questionnaire, taking approximately ten years off his age.²⁹

The organization of the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence has been described in many other works. However, the collection of the *Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire* (SPCE) has been less used than some of the others (SLOTFOM and GGI), in part because many of its files have only been declassified in the 1990s. The SPCE kept files, mostly based on *Sûreté* documents, on individual communists and nationalists. This material includes several valuable '*déclarations*' or confessions made to the French police by imprisoned communists, as well as the reports of police informers. While both types of source need to be treated with scepticism, I have opted to make use of them. One can take advantage of the candour which disillusioned communists sometimes demonstrated when captured by the French and often it is possible to cross-check versions of events from two different confessions. This is especially true in 1930 and 1931, when dissension over tactics in the communist party seems to have reached an acute level. As for paid informers, they may well exaggerate the importance of their contacts and inside knowledge to their employers. But those who retained the trust of the *Sûreté* over a number of years must have been judged to have supplied more accurate information than otherwise.

²⁹ His personnel forms are in 495/201/1. The most likely date for his birth is 1892 or 1893, supplied by his sister when she was questioned by the French in 1920. (SPCE 364, Note conf. 711, Hue, 7 May 1920.) Ho's official Hanoi birthdate is 1890.

One of the most successful *Sûreté* informers, Nguyen Cong Vien aka Lam Duc Thu, proved his worth by not only supplying monthly reports on Quoc's activities in Canton from early 1925 onwards, but by also frequently passing on original documents and letters. Much of the value of his reports for historians derives from the fact that he was covering relationships among communists and non-communists which, by the 1950s, had become politically dangerous to both sides, and thus were rarely even hinted at by either left or right. He presents a picture which is quite different from the Cold War-era view of rigid divisions between communists and non-communist activists in southern China in the 1920s.

Thesis Goal and Structure

The object of this study is not to destroy Nguyen Ai Quoc's reputation, but to define, in as factual a way as possible, what he actually did accomplish in his years with the Comintern. I have chosen to focus on his role in transmitting communist doctrine to Vietnam because his career is the connecting thread of Vietnam's relationship to the Comintern. My study covers a full cycle in this relationship, from the period when the Comintern first attempted to foster nationalist revolutions in the colonies, through the era of internationalist class struggle from roughly 1928 to 1935, and back to an emphasis on nationalist resistance at the start of World War II. Quoc's years of greatest influence were those when nationalist united fronts were the order of the day. He spent much of the 1930s in the political wilderness, however, and for this reason I will devote some space to those leaders who eclipsed his authority, including Tran Phu, Ha Huy Tap, Tran Van Giau, Le Hong Phong, and Nguyen Van Cu. All except Nguyen Van Cu studied in Moscow. In order to better understand the interplay between Moscow's policies and events in Vietnam, I have tried to re-examine some of the key debates and documents which formed Comintern policy for colonial countries. The most important of these was the discussion of Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* in 1920, the year that Nguyen Ai Quoc joined the French Communist Party. Another key debate took place from 1928 to 1929, one which the literature on Vietnamese communism generally misinterprets. This concerned the change to more radical policies for the world communist movement, which overrode the tactics for colonial countries which Lenin had set out in 1920. In order to analyze the radicalization of Vietnamese communism in the late twenties, it is necessary to establish the chronology of the Comintern's switch to the 'class-against-class' policies of the so-called 'Third Period' of post-1918 capitalism.

In Chapter I (1919 to mid-1923), I address the problem of who Nguyen Ai Quoc actually was when he turned to communism in Paris. It seems important to clear away some of the misapprehensions created by later portrayals of Quoc as a simple working man when he first came to the *Sûreté's* notice. His family ties and friendships had a great influence on his political career. Chapter II (late 1923 to late 1924) covers his arrival in Moscow to attend a peasant conference and his subsequent assignment to work in Canton. I use this chapter to discuss the development of Comintern policies for colonial countries, which grew out of Lenin's 1920 *Theses on National and Colonial Questions*. Chapter III (November 1924 to mid-1927) tells the story of Quoc's work in Canton with the CCP-GMD united front, and the beginnings of the Vietnamese communist movement in the Thanh Nien training courses.

Chapter IV (mid-1927 to the end of 1929) covers the change of policy which began at the Comintern's Sixth Congress in the summer of 1928, and which was cemented by the removal of Bukharin and his allies from the Comintern by the summer of 1929. Nguyen Ai Quoc's role in these years is far from clear, but is perhaps less central than has often been assumed. For this reason I discuss some of the other influences on Vietnamese communism which came into play at this time, in particular the role of the Nanyang Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. In Chapter V (1930 to mid-1931) I cover the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party and Nguyen Ai Quoc's role in reorganizing the communist movements in Malaya and Thailand. His relation to the political upheaval of 1930-31, in particular the Nghe Tinh Soviet movement, is one of the main issues discussed in this section.

Chapter VI (mid-1931 to autumn of 1938) covers the longest period. This was a period when Quoc remained outside the leadership of the Vietnamese party. It stretches from his 1931 arrest in Hongkong and his return to Moscow in 1934, to his return to political activity in the autumn of 1938. Important events in the life of both the Vietnamese party and the Comintern occurred in the intervening years, so I give some space to the continued development of the relationship between the Comintern and the Vietnamese communists, as well as to the change of policy which occurred at the Seventh Congress in 1935.

Chapter VII, the final chapter (autumn of 1938 to the end of 1941), is the story of Quoc's efforts to regain his leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party. In this chapter I discuss the nature of the alliance between the Chinese and Soviet governments from 1938 to the summer of 1941, as well as the political developments within Vietnam which led to the uprisings in the autumn of 1940, both in north and south Vietnam. The coalition

between nationalist and communist Vietnamese created in Guangxi province in 1941 and the acceptance of that policy at the ICP's Eighth Plenum that May are the final topics of this chapter. Although the Comintern would continue to exist until 1943, after 1941 it no longer had a real guiding role in Vietnamese communism.

CHAPTER I

Paris: The Emergence of Nguyen Ai Quoc (1919 – 1923)

1. 1919: *The Path to the Paris Peace Conference*

In the summer of 1919 the French security police started sending urgent appeals for information to their colonial administration in Hanoi.¹ A mystery agitator had appeared in Paris, just as France was catching its breath after four gruelling years of war. He seemed to have a wide circle of acquaintances among the disparate community of Vietnamese -- intellectuals as well as workers and soldiers conscripted from Indochina during the war. He was a complete enigma: no one had any idea who he was or where he had sprung from. His name could not be found among the immigration records for entering Indochinese. While the relentless security police, the *Sûreté Generale*, were awaiting information from Indochina, the Ministry of Colonies wasted no time in assigning its own agents to investigate the newcomer to the Paris political scene.

He signed himself '*Nguyen Ai Quoc*', 'Nguyen the Patriot', or literally, 'Nguyen who loves his country', usually with the designation, 'for the Group of Vietnamese Patriots'. He behaved with considerable aplomb for a young man who could not have been more than 30 -- he called unannounced on deputies to the French parliament, delegations to the Paris Peace Conference and newspaper editors. In September 1919 no less a dignitary than the Governor General of Indochina, Albert Sarraut, recently returned from the colony, gave him an audience.²

What was most shocking to the French authorities was his message. He was sending out an official-sounding petition, 'The Demands of the Vietnamese People' to participants in the Peace Conference, a political forum of 27 delegations which was to carve out a new world order. Although very few non-French participants would have known precisely where Vietnam was, it seems that many delegations at least took the time to acknowledge receipt of the petition. An aide to Woodrow Wilson's representative, Colonel House, sent a polite note on June 19 to that effect, as did a Nicaraguan diplomat.³ The Peace Conference had attracted a fringe of political activists from around the world, from Ireland to Korea, all promoting their own claim to nationhood. Although the French were surprised by the Vietnamese initiative, it is not difficult to see why the Vietnamese nationalists thought the

¹ AOM, SPCE 364, e.g. tél. officiel, Saigon, le 22 juillet 1919/Chef *Sûreté* à Directeur S.G., Hanoi.

² AOM, SPCE 364, envoi 25 S.R., 19 janvier 1920, NAQ letter of 7 Sept. 1919 to Sarraut.

³ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi no. 270 S.R. Paris du 29 novembre 1921 (cumulative report).

time for change had come. The Russian and Habsburg empires had already crumbled; President Wilson was promising an end to the old world of secret diplomacy, in which European royalty and heads of state could decide the fates of distant peoples.

The Vietnamese Demands called on the victorious Great Powers to honour their promise of a new era of 'law and justice' for subject peoples. They appeared in a brief article on page 3 of the socialist newspaper *l'Humanité* on 18 June. From our vantage point, these demands appear to have been far from extremist. They called for:

1. General amnesty for all native political prisoners;
2. Reform of Indochinese justice, by granting the natives the same judicial guarantees enjoyed by Europeans;
3. Freedom of press and opinion;
4. Freedom of association;
5. Freedom of emigration and foreign travel;
6. Freedom of instruction and the creation in all provinces of technical and professional schools for indigenous people;
7. Replacement of rule by decree by rule by law;
8. Election of a permanent Vietnamese delegation to the French Parliament, to keep it informed of the wishes of indigenous people.

They were signed, 'for the Group of Vietnamese Patriots, Nguyen Ai Quoc'.

As soon became clear, the French Republic and its colonial authorities had no thought of renouncing their power over the lives of Algerians, Cambodians or Vietnamese. After a war which had drained the treasury and laid waste much of northern France, the resources of the colonies would play a larger role than ever in French economic planning. The French were thus caught off balance by the audacity of this native, one of their own subjects, who had appeared so unexpectedly in the midst of their victory celebrations. It did not seem to occur to them to treat his appeal for Vietnamese rights as anything other than subversion. They referred to it in their bureaucratic communications as 'libel'.⁴ They were concerned enough to stake out his residence and tail him throughout Paris for the rest of 1919 and off-and-on until 1923, as their reports in the French Overseas Archives amply demonstrate. In reaction to the beginning of the campaign for Vietnamese rights in June, the body overseeing Vietnamese troops in France set up a *Service de Renseignements*

⁴ AOM, SPCE 364, Pierre Guesde, note pour m. le Ministre, pièce annexe no. 2, Paris le 12 octobre 1920

politiques, (S.R.), under Pierre Arnoux.⁵ Their informers infiltrated Nguyen Ai Quoc's circle of acquaintances and reported on his conversations.⁶ They confiscated letters and articles which he tried to send to Vietnam. In doing so, they convinced the youthful activist that the only way to deal with the colonial power was by subterfuge.

By the autumn of 1919, French intelligence gathering was producing an initial picture of the mysterious Vietnamese. A cable sent from Hanoi to regional centers on 8 September 1919 passed along the following, only partially accurate, information from the Parisian police:

Nguyen Ai Quoc claims to be from Nghe An's Nam Dan region, lives with Phan Van Truong, seems to have completed studies in England, where he lived for ten years, runs a group of Vietnamese patriots in existence for a long time but with no legal basis, has replaced Phan Van Truong and Phan Chu Trinh in this function. Please communicate information you may possess or gather on this native.⁷

Another Vietnamese informer in Paris code named 'Edouard' provided the clue that Quoc's real name was Nguyen Van Thanh, which was close to the name he had received from his father on reaching maturity: Nguyen Tat Thanh, 'Nguyen who will succeed'. But the rest of what Edouard told the police turned out to be disinformation, probably spread by Quoc himself. (His claims that Quoc came from Danang and lived on money provided by his wealthy family proved to be false.)⁸ By December 1919 the French had mounted a daily watch on number 6 Villa des Gobelins. This was an apartment on a quiet, residential cul-de-sac in southeastern Paris, where the man calling himself Quoc had been living with the lawyer Phan Van Truong and the exiled scholar Phan Chu Trinh.

In Vietnamese anti-colonial circles these two men were already respected figures, even venerated in Trinh's case. Phan Van Truong had been imprisoned at the outset of the war in 1914, on charges of coordinating support for anti-French uprisings in Indochina. Phan Chu Trinh was also implicated in these plots and contacts with the Germans, for which he was held in the Cherche-Midi Prison in central Paris. The charges against the two men had to be dropped for lack of evidence after a year, when the key Vietnamese witness suffered or staged a mental breakdown and entirely ceased speaking.⁹ But at least one French official continued to believe in their guilt.¹⁰ In Phan Van Truong's case, this belief may

⁵ See *Historique de AOM, SLOTFOM* in C.A.O.M.

⁶ These reports form the bulk of AOM, SPCE files 364 and 365

⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, tél. officiel Hanoi 8 septembre 1919, no. 869 S.G.

⁸ AOM, SPCE 364, S.R. decembre 1919, Paris

⁹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, 'Les Dossiers rapportant à la question Allemagne'.

¹⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, 28 decembre 1920: Pierre Guesde felt it was 'regrettable' that the case ended in a *non-lieu*.

have stemmed from the reputation which his family had as hard core rebels. Two of his brothers had been sentenced to exile and hard labour for their involvement in the 1913 bombing plot which killed two French army commanders in Tonkin. (The plot was one of several attributed to Phan Boi Chau's partisans around this time.) Truong's trips to England in 1913, where he was believed to have been in contact with a Joseph Thanh, an emissary of the royal pretender Cuong De, contributed to the suspicion.¹¹ The French also feared Truong's formidable intellect – trained as an interpreter in Hanoi, he had mastered the art of blistering political argument during his legal studies in Paris.

Phan Chu Trinh had come to Paris in 1911 after being amnestied for his purported role in encouraging the 1908 tax revolts in Central Vietnam. He had spent much of his first years in Paris working to release his comrades still in prison on Poulo Condor. His *Complete Account of the Peasants' Uprising in the Central Region*, an expose of the heavy-handed French reaction to the revolt, had been translated into French by Commander Jules Roux. (Roux, an active socialist, intervened on Trinh's behalf during his imprisonment.)¹² The French were wary of Phan Chu Trinh's influence among the forty-odd Vietnamese students in pre-war Paris, and had hoped to isolate him from the 'reformist' Asians who used to gather in the Latin quarter.¹³ Their efforts failed, however. In 1912 Trinh and Phan Van Truong started a Vietnamese club which met in cafes and Chinese restaurants in Montparnasse. They may have indulged in little more than exile talk – Trinh always maintained his innocence with regard to the anti-French conspiracies of Phan Boi Chau and Cuong De. To prove his loyalty he had even handed over to the Ministry of Colonies a letter he received from Cuong De in 1913.¹⁴ The testimony against him could have been fabricated by the military government then administering Paris. But his own interpreter testified in 1915 that 'Phan Chu Trinh received funding directly from Germany from the German government, which was brought to him by two emissaries of Cuong De, Truong Duy Toan and Do Van Y.'¹⁵ Had an uprising occurred in Vietnam, the Germans were expected to contribute more funding via their consuls in China, the informer said. One suspects, though, that the characterization of Trinh as a talker and writer rather than as an organizer of plots was closer to the truth of the matter. The Administrative Director of the Indochinese Instruction Group in Paris, of which Phan Chu Trinh was formally part, made the following prophetic comment in a report to his superiors: 'One might ask what would

¹¹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Gouvernement Militaire de Paris, Procès Verbal d'Interrogatoire, pièce 56, p.4

¹² AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, letter of Ct. Roux, 20 Feb. 1915

¹³ AOM, SPCE 372, 1911-2, see letter of J. Foures

¹⁴ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Déclaration de Cao Dac Minh, 22 mai 1915, p. 5

¹⁵ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Procès Verbal d'Interrogatoire de Nguyen Nhu Chuyen, p. 3

happen, if among the students or pupils in Paris there were a young Indochinese, a man of action as Phan Chu Trinh is a man of the word, and if this young Indochinese had relations with the Chinese or Japanese ... or with some Indian reformer, a partisan of extreme methods.’¹⁶

The true nature of Phan Van Truong and Phan Chu Trinh’s involvement in anti-French plots remains extremely ambiguous. The case against them ended in a *non-lieu* when the informer fell mute. After his release from prison in July 1915, Phan Chu Trinh’s government stipend was cut off – he was forced to start earning his living as a retoucher of photographs. These experiences and continued harrassment by the French police left him with a deep bitterness towards the ruling elite of the mother country.¹⁷ Phan Van Truong was conscripted to work as an interpreter at the Toulouse Arsenal, and after his demobilization in 1918 he started a legal practice. Towards the end of the First World War the two men started a new Vietnamese grouping, this time named the ‘Vietnamese Patriots’ Association’.

Nguyen Ai Quoc’s relationship to these two older men was puzzling to those outside their inner circle. The man using that name was young enough to be Phan Chu Trinh’s son and lacked his distinguished scholarly credentials. Compared to Phan Van Truong he was an unpolished provincial . With hindsight, later observers have drawn the conclusion that Quoc was the messenger and front-man for the two better-known activists. The Trotskyist intellectual Ho Huu Tuong wrote in his memoirs that Phan Chu Trinh was responsible for the ideas put forth by the Group of Patriots, while Phan Van Truong and later others translated them into French. Nguyen Ai Quoc, he said, then passed the articles on to the newspapers. Tuong himself had not had any contact with the original group, however.¹⁸ But one Vietnamese informer had come to a similar conclusion in 1919. ‘Agent Jean’ told Inspector Arnoux that Quoc was, ‘no more than an intelligent figure-head whom they surround with mystery to make him appear more venerable. Because Phan Van Truong and Phan Chu Trinh have already been pursued by the law, Quoc is now given the leading role.’¹⁹

¹⁶ AOM, SPCE 372, folder 1911-1912, letter of J. Foures 5 Aug. 1911.

¹⁷ see AOM, SPCE 371, note de l’Agent Désiré, 21 fevrier 1924

¹⁸ Quoted from Ho Huu Tuong, *Bon muoi mot nam lam bao (Forty-one Years in Journalism)*, by Dang Huu Thu in *Than The va su nghiep nha cach mang Nguyen The Truyen*, (Melun, France: 5 Boulevard des Carmes, Melun, 1993), p. 29.

¹⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, Déclaration de Jean, 3 nov. 1919

Yet most French police records depict the enigmatic Quoc behaving as a social and intellectual companion of his two elders, certainly as more than an errand boy. The Controller of Indochinese Troops in France, Pierre Guesde, remained convinced of Quoc's importance as a political activist by the close of 1919. The records compiled by Guesde and his informants show Quoc to have been a dedicated campaigner for Vietnamese rights, whose sense of mission made up for what he lacked in formal education. They reported that he had frequent contacts with Irish, Chinese and Korean nationalists who had come to Paris to lobby the Peace Conference. Notes on his conversations with fellow Vietnamese show that he was well-informed about the issues facing his homeland, albeit strongly influenced by the views of Phan Chu Trinh. In December, for example, Agent Edouard, apparently a Vietnamese official of the Ministry of Colonies, turned in an eleven-page report on an evening spent at 6 Villa des Gobelins. The first part documents a tête-à-tête with Nguyen Ai Quoc. They discussed the newly-returned Governor General of Indochina, Albert Sarraut, soon to become Minister for Colonies, and his plans for reform.

'Quoc by and large approves of M. Sarraut's policies in Indochina,' Edouard wrote, 'especially the development of French language education and the extension of the railway system, which will permit the forests of Annam and Laos to be exploited.' He continued his paraphrase of Quoc's comments:

M. Albert Sarraut, Quoc says, has created a university and a lycee in Hanoi. This is very well, but it is only the beginning of an immense task. For the 20 million inhabitants of Indochina, we need not just one lycee, but 20 or 30 lycees, even more. They need compulsory primary education, to allow the masses to become educated, because it is the mass of the population which composes the people and not the elite... People have always cited the lack of credits to explain the problem of educational development in Indochina. They will use this reason again to prevent M. Sarraut's successors from continuing the work he has begun.²⁰

When Phan Chu Trinh turned up to join the conversation, he and 'Edouard' continued to discuss the future of colonial policy in Indochina and what the natives could 'demand' of the new Governor General, Maurice Long. Nguyen Ai Quoc intervened to complain that the natives would never get anywhere by asking for concessions. 'Why have our 20 million compatriots done nothing to force the Government to give us our human rights? We are men and we should be treated that way. All those who refuse to treat us as their equals are our enemies. . .', he told them.²¹ Phan Chu Trinh rebuked Quoc for being hot-headed: 'What do you want our unarmed countrymen do to against the Europeans and their

²⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, Paris, 20 dec. 1919, pp. 1-2

²¹ AOM, SPCE 364, loc. cit., p. 6

weapons. Why should people die uselessly without any result?' he asked.²² Trinh's point of view, inherently critical of Phan Boi Chau's conspiracies, is one which Quoc eventually adopted as his own, like his mentor's views on modern education and economic development. Trinh's remedy, to demand their human rights, 'gently, but firmly and with the greatest possible tenacity' was one which Quoc would soon leave behind, however.²³

To come to a balanced picture of who the future Ho Chi Minh was when he turned up in Paris, in my view one must start with this contemporary evidence which the *Sûret* provided. One can then work backward through the sparse information which is available for the missing years in his early life, from his 1911 departure from Vietnam until his emergence in 1919 as Nguyen Ai Quoc. After weighing this evidence, I believe that there is a case to be made that Quoc had already gained considerable political experience by 1919, that he had been consciously preparing himself during those years to play a role in liberating his nation from French rule. While Phan Van Truong was clearly the author of the French text of the Demands submitted to the Peace Conference, and probably did much of the writing of articles submitted to the French press in 1919 in the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, Quoc himself may well have been one of the moving forces behind the campaign for Vietnamese rights which was launched that June. This is, in fact, the explanation given in Nguyen Ai Quoc's purported autobiography: the idea of presenting the Demands was his, the author says, but Phan Van Truong composed the French text, as Quoc himself could not yet write fluently in French.²⁴ Nguyen Ai Quoc seems already to have been introducing techniques of political organizing to the Vietnamese community which went beyond the writing of open letters and manifestos.

One of the best clues as to Quoc's pre-1919 experience is his contacts with the Korean delegation at the Peace Conference. Agent 'Jean' reported that Quoc had taken many of his ideas from the Korean independence movement.²⁵ The Korean National Association based in the United States had started its pro-independence campaign as soon as Woodrow Wilson announced his Fourteen Points in January 1918. Their petition for liberation from Japan was submitted on 12 May 1919, a bit less than a month before the Vietnamese appeal appeared in Paris. A Chinese newspaper published in Tianjin, the *Yishibao*, printed an interview with Nguyen Ai Quoc in Paris on the 18 and 20 September 1919, which explained that Quoc had exchanged ideas with the Korean delegate during a trip he had

²² AOM, SPCE 364, Paris, 20 dec. 1919, p. 6

²³ AOM, SPCE 364, loc. cit., p. 6

²⁴ Tran Dan Tien, op. cit., p. 32

²⁵ AOM, SPCE 364, *note de Jean*, 1 Jan. 1920

made to America.²⁶ The article, which seems to have been written by a US-based Korean or Chinese, identified Quoc as the Vietnamese delegate to the Peace Conference, who had come from America. The introduction to the interview read:

The American correspondent relates that , on the recommendation of Kin-Tchong- Wen and Kim-Koei-Tcho, representatives of the provisional Korean government, he was able to obtain an interview with Nguyen Ai Quoc. The latter is a man of thirty, with a bold and youthful appearance; he knows English, French and Chinese; knows characters well enough to be able to converse in writing. When he was put in touch with the Korean delegate Kim during his time in America, he was thus able to speak about the question of independence and to convince himself that, as the situation is different in the two countries, they could not have identical action programs.²⁷

In this interview Quoc makes clear that the publication of the Vietnamese Demands was the beginning of a publicity campaign rather than a single approach to the Peace Conference. The French summary of the interview says: 'His demarches at the Conference having failed, he continued his efforts by approaching various political figures, and managed to interest a number of deputies in his cause.'²⁸ And further, Nguyen Ai Quoc is quoted as saying: 'Besides the demarches I have made to members of parliament, I have tried to gather support from all over. The Socialist Party has shown itself to be unhappy with Government actions and has willingly given us its support. This is our only hope in France. As far as our action in other countries goes, it is in your country (America) that we have had the most success...'²⁹

The French *Service de Renseignements* in Beijing had forwarded translations of these articles to Paris, along with the following explanation:

In my note no. 9 of 5 June I brought to your attention the Chinese newspaper *Yi Che Pao*, [*Yishibao*] which in its multiple forms has for several years waged a campaign damaging to French interests and to those of Indochina itself. Last April it published some Vietnamese manifestos. Moreover, during the recent anti-Japanese incidents in Beijing caused by the negotiations over Tsing-Tao, this paper published several articles announcing that France was linked to Japan by secret agreements concluded since the war....³⁰

The extent of the Vietnamese connection to *Yishibao* can be judged by the fact that Cuong De himself had published various articles there, which were similar in tone to the

²⁶ Thu Trang Gaspard quotes extensively from this interview in *Ho Chi Minh à Paris, 1917-1923*, (Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1992).

²⁷ AOM, SPCE 372, note no. 12 du S.R. de Pekin

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3

²⁹ Ibid., p. 4

³⁰ Ibid. This French note mentions that the Beijing edition of *Yishibao* was 'under the direction of American missionaries' until it was closed down.

Vietnamese Demands. Copies of these articles were found on the walls of the Chinese workers' barracks in Marseille in June 1919.³¹ Nguyen Ai Quoc told Agent 'Jean' that he had an arrangement with the Korean delegation in Paris to send copies of his (or Phan Van Truong's?) writings for publication in the Tianjin paper.³² There seems to have been a degree of coordination between what was happening in Paris and the Phan Boi Chau-Cuong De circle in China.

One of the difficulties with this view of Nguyen Ai Quoc as an experienced political activist in 1919 is that, according to most chronologies of his early years, he had arrived in Paris from London in 1917 and lived there unremarked by the authorities until the Peace Conference campaign. He was not known to have played an early role in the Group of Vietnamese Patriots. Another probable reason why doubt has been cast on his importance within the Group of Patriots is the fact that his family history and links to Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Boi Chau were little known until 1992. It seemed highly unlikely that the kitchen boy and manual labourer which communist propaganda has created of the early Ho Chi Minh could metamorphose so quickly into a spokesman for the patriotic cause. I will discuss these issues below.

As far as his date of arrival in Paris goes, there is no better or more convincing record than that of the French police, who decided that he had arrived in June 1919 from London.³³ Their note says that Quoc arrived in 1919 from London on the 7 of June; that he first lived at 10 rue de Stockholm, then at 56 rue M. le Prince, then at 6 Villa des Gobelins. One can assume that if the Korean press account of his meeting in America is accurate, it was unlikely to have occurred during his one documented stopover in New York when he was still working as a ship-board cook. That was in December 1912, when he wrote to the *Résident Supérieur* in Hue in an attempt to send money to his father. Although the letter was postmarked New York, he gave his address as the *Poste restante* in Le Havre and described himself as a sailor.³⁴ At that point Quoc had not yet had time to learn English and had only been out of Vietnam for a year-and-a-half. In my opinion it is more likely that the encounter with the Korean representative in America occurred in 1917 or 1918, when Korean nationalist groups in America were becoming increasingly active. For while

³¹ AOM, SPCE 364, Note pour M. le Ministre, pièce annexe no.2, Paris 12 octobre 1920, signé: Guesde

³² AOM, SPCE 364, envoi 49/SR, 12 March 1920

³³ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi de SR 19, Jan. 1920. Thu Trang and most other Vietnamese authors accept that Quoc settled in Paris in 1917. The evidence from Michel Zecchini which she cites seems to be transposed from 1921, as Zecchini talks about helping Quoc move to Impasse Compoint, which happened in 1921. (Gaspard, op. cit., pp. 71-75).

we have no concrete proof that he was in France in those years, Quoc himself told the Comintern in 1938 that he had worked for a wealthy family in Brooklyn in 1917 and 1918. This Comintern document gives his date of arrival in France as 1919. This information might seem suspect, since other dates which he provides in this questionnaire are clearly wrong -- he gives his own birthdate, improbably, as 1903 and his mother's death as 1910.³⁵ Yet he may have been camouflaging an element of truth amidst a collection of false statements. A remark made to the US peace activist David Dellinger in 1969 reinforces the notion that his stay in America came after 1916. Ho Chi Minh told Dellinger that when he was in America, he heard Marcus Garvey speak in Harlem.³⁶ Garvey, the leader of the 'return to Africa movement', did not arrive in the U.S. from his native Jamaica until 1916. In 1917 and 1918 he spoke frequently in Harlem on issues of racism, which had flared up in the US following the 1915 reappearance of the Ku Klux Klan. Nguyen Ai Quoc published an article about the Ku Klux Klan in 1924 which described the practice of lynching in the American South -- his information could have been drawn from Garvey's speeches or the US press of the time.³⁷

If Nguyen Ai Quoc had been seeking out Korean nationalists in 1917 or 1918, the question arises: was he simply involved in the casual political tourism of a young man, in search of new experiences as he made his way around the world? Or had he gone abroad with a purpose? Was he, in 1911 or 1917, already part of an organized movement to gain autonomy for Vietnam? For the French authorities, these questions were partially answered when in the spring of 1920 they finally tracked down his brother and sister. They began to sketch in the picture of someone whose past and family connections made him highly suspect.

His sister and brother had both, it transpired, been sentenced to hard labour during the War for abetting Phan Boi Chau's partisans. His sister recalled learning in 1915 that Quoc had gone to London.³⁸ His brother mentioned that Quoc had been enrolled at the prestigious Quoc Hoc School in Hue in 1909, but that he had dropped out that same year, after his father lost his post as a district chief. Quoc had then gone south to Phan Thiet, where he worked as a teacher (*tro giao*) at the private Duc Thanh school, founded by a colleague of

³⁴ AOM, SPCE 15, 1-2; printed as Document No. 9 in appendix to Daniel Hémery, 'Jeunesse d'un colonisé, genèse d'un exil, Ho Chi Minh jusqu'en 1911', *Approches Asie*, no. 11, 1992.

³⁵ 495, 201, 1, p. 132. His mother's death occurred in 1901.

³⁶ David Dellinger, 'Conversations with Ho', *Liberation*, Oct. 1969, pp. 3-4

³⁷ *Inprecor*, no. 74, 1924, pp. 827-828.

³⁸ AOM, SPCE 364, Note conf. 711, 7 May 1920

Phan Chu Trinh.³⁹ Both brother and sister remembered that Quoc had injured one ear in a childhood accident. (The scarred upper portion of Quoc's left ear would become the French key to his identity over the years.)⁴⁰

Having established the connection between their mystery agitator and the family of Nguyen Sinh Huy, the French were able to dig out other, pre-1919, reports which shed light on Nguyen Ai Quoc's evolution. Both he and his brother had been singled out for reprimands from the Director of the Quoc Hoc School, because of their hostile attitude towards the French during the disturbances in Hue of 1908.⁴¹ This fit with the intelligence supplied by Agent 'Edouard', who had told the *Sûreté* that Nguyen Ai Quoc had been in Hue during 1908 and seemed unable to forgive the French their actions then. 'He claims that with his own eyes he saw the Vietnamese coming empty-handed to the *Résidence Supérieure* to protest against the heavy labour contribution.... and that the crowd was fired on to disperse it.'⁴²

These reports also establish the importance of his father's career in Nguyen Tat Thanh's/ Nguyen Ai Quoc's development. Although his father had achieved the rank of *Pho-bang*, a second-rank laureate, in the national examinations of 1901 at the same time as Phan Chu Trinh, he had had no overt involvement in the ferment which led to the tax revolts in 1908. In 1909 he was appointed District Chief in an area being opened for agricultural development in Binh Dinh province.⁴³ But within only a few months he became involved in a scandal. He was accused of caning a man in his jurisdiction who died some time later, ostensibly from injuries received during the beating. In September 1910 Nguyen Sinh Huy was demoted four grades in rank by a provincial commission, which left him without a source of income. Huy himself claimed that the man's death was unconnected to the beating.⁴⁴ But the *Sûreté* in Hue reported that Huy was guilty of brutality under the influence of alcohol.⁴⁵ By January 1911, when Huy requested permission to travel to Saigon-Gia Dinh to make his living, the *Sûreté* refused, on the grounds that he was 'strongly suspected of complicity with Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chau Trinh and others.' Their representative in Hue, noted: 'His son, who two years ago was living in a compartment in Dong-Ba [in Hue], disappeared suddenly. He is believed to be in Cochinchina. Nguyen Sinh Huy may be going to join him and to confer with Phan Chau

³⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, Déclaration de Nguyen Tat Dat à la *Sûreté* de Hue, March 1920

⁴⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, e.g. Extrait d'un cablegramme, 5 Dec. 1919.

⁴¹ AOM, SPCE 364, note conf. 291, Hue 13 Feb. 1920

⁴² AOM, SPCE 364, note conf. – Edouard, 17 Nov. 1919, p. 3.

⁴³ Daniel Hémerly, *op cit.*, p. 116.

⁴⁴ AOM, SPCE 364, lettre de Nguyen Sinh Huy au Résident Supérieur de l'Annam, Jan. 1911

Trinh.⁴⁶ Rather than wait for his request to be turned down, however, Huy went directly to the Vietnamese mandarins in Hue for a laissez-passer and managed to sail from Danang on February 26. The Resident Supérieur in Hue claimed to have information from the Court, 'that his [Huy's] reasons for going to Cochinchina were not pure. He is believed to have gone there as a messenger, carrying news from his daughter's friends. What gives his voyage an even more serious nature is the fact that it follows immediately trips to Hue and Quang Ngai made by this woman, known as Miss Bach Lien, who has lived for years in a village in Nghe An.'⁴⁷

Whether Nguyen Sinh Huy had sympathies with the reform movement of Phan Chu Trinh, or the more violent resistance of Phan Boi Chau, before his disgrace in 1909-10 is not known. We do know that he maintained a clean dossier with the French until that time. Nor do we know how strongly his disgrace affected his youngest son. As Daniel Hémery has pointed out, however, it narrowed the choices open to Nguyen Tat Thanh, bringing his elite education in Hue to a halt.⁴⁸ The fact that Tat Thanh went to teach at the Duc Thanh school, patterned on Phan Chu Trinh's ideas of modern education in French and *quoc ngu*, would seem to show that he was already involved with the reformist movement in 1909. The school's founder had even established a fish sauce factory alongside the school, in line with Phan Chu Trinh's prescription for indigenous commercial development. By going to Duc Thanh to teach, the future Nguyen Ai Quoc was identifying himself with the philosophy of Phan Chu Trinh, who had been deported as a criminal. His father, who had witnessed the growing impotence of the Chinese-educated scholars under French rule, may well have influenced his son's decision to follow this path.

By early 1911, Nguyen Tat Thanh had moved south to Saigon, where his brother claimed he enrolled in a school for training mechanics.⁴⁹ If French suspicions were correct, his father arrived in March and may have met Phan Chu Trinh before the latter sailed for France at the end of the month. The amnestied scholar would have brought welcome news of the scholars detained on Poulo Condore, a group of whom came from Nghe An. Both Daniel Hémery and Thu Trang Gaspard suggest that Nguyen Tat Thanh and his father may

⁴⁵ AOM, SPCE 364, note de Délégué à l'Intérieur De la Susse.

⁴⁶ AOM, SPCE 364, note de la Sûreté de l'Annam, 8 March 1911

⁴⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, Note 571 S, Hue, 5 May 1911, signed H. Sestier; there was a small group of activists in Quang Ngai which maintained contact with Phan Boi Chau's partisans via Siam, see David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 232.

⁴⁸ Hémery, op. cit., p. 118

⁴⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, Déclarations de Nguyen Tat Dat, March 1920

have discussed with Phan Chu Trinh a plan to send the young man abroad to study.⁵⁰ Tat Thanh had to make his way to Europe as a kitchen boy on the *Latouche Treville*, since his father was in disgrace and he had no hope of getting government sponsorship for the trip, as Phan Chu Trinh had. But there is no reason to believe that Quoc went abroad planning to spend the next years as a sailor and manual labourer.

In September, after Nguyen Tat Thanh's July arrival in Marseille, he did something which was entirely consistent with the behaviour of a follower of Phan Chu Trinh. He sent a formal letter to the French President, requesting admission to the 'Colonial School', an elite training institution in Paris which had been established to turn out colonial administrators. 'I am completely without resources and eager to learn. I would like to become useful to France in relation to my compatriots, and would like at the same time to help them profit from the benefits of Instruction,' he wrote, clearly with the aid of a Francophone.⁵¹ One can read his 'desire to become useful to France' as ambition to become a 'Confucian mandarin, expressly serving the interests of the colonial power,' as does Nguyen The Anh.⁵² On the other hand, this desire is redolent of Phan Chu Trinh's tactics of critical collaboration, which called on Vietnamese to master the best of France's cultural and democratic traditions for their own ends. At this stage the future Nguyen Ai Quoc seems to have hoped that he could appeal to the noblest instincts of the French administration, and that he might be judged on his own merits, rather than as the son of a disgraced mandarin. But the request was referred back to the new *Résident Supérieur* in Hue, who pointed out that the would-be scholar had not exhausted the educational possibilities of the colony.⁵³

This rejection did not end Quoc's quest for an education, but changed the way in which he would obtain it. We do not know for certain whether he was able to enroll formally in some other institution, in England for example, or whether he picked up his knowledge of English and colonial politics via informal contacts. The imperative to earn a living seems to have left him with no recourse but to sail the seas for the next few years. By October 1911, he was sending money to his father from Ceylon.⁵⁴ The letter cited above from New York was sent in December 1912. At that time he wrote to the Resident in Hue, saying

⁵⁰ Hémery, op. cit., pp. 118-9; Thu Trang Gaspard, *Nhung Hoat Dong cua Phan Chu Trinh tai Phap 1911-1925*, (Paris: Sudestasia, 1983), p. 91

⁵¹ Daniel Hémery, op. cit., printed as Document no. 6, from *Fonds de l'Ecole Coloniale*, carton 27 dossier 11, letter of 15 Sept. 1911

⁵² Nguyen The Anh, 'How Did Ho Chi Minh Become a Proletarian? Reality and Legend,' *Asian Affairs*, vol. 16, part II, p. 165

⁵³ Hémery, op. cit., Document no. 8, Fonds de la Résident Sup. De l'Annam, r. 28, 6971, 25 May 1912.

that he would like to send a monthly payment to his father, but that he had no idea what his address was. 'I don't know what to do, beyond turning to you, the obliging protector of our country,' he said.⁵⁵ The tone taken towards the French administrator seems to have been dictated in part by the Confucian self-abasement required in a petitioner, but also by prudence. In view of notes which he wrote not long afterwards to Phan Chu Trinh, one can assume that his gratitude to France was feigned.

In 1913 or early 1914 Nguyen Ai Quoc appears to have given up seafaring and settled in England. He reported in an undated postcard to Phan Chu Trinh in Paris, that he 'had found a place to study their language and for a month-and-a-half had been working only with Westerners, speaking their language all the time.' 'Living here is not any different from France,' he wrote, 'and I hope that in four or five months when I meet Uncle I will speak and understand a lot of English.'⁵⁶ He gave his London address as the Drayton Court Hotel, West Ealing, London, an inn located at the junction where the Great Western Railway left London. It is easy to suppose that he was able to find work as a helper in the kitchen of a busy railway hotel. (There is no contemporary evidence that he worked as an assistant to l'Escoffier at the Carlton Hotel, as is claimed in the Tran Dan Tien book.) In another card, this time addressed from 8 Stephen St., Tottenham Court Rd., London, he showed that he was keeping up with current events in Asia. 'The five great powers are in a struggle. Nine countries are making war. I am reminded suddenly of what I said to you a few months ago, about the storm that was threatening. Destiny is saving more surprises for us and it is impossible to say who will win this. The neutrals are still undecided and the belligerents cannot guess their intentions. In these circumstances, if someone sticks his nose into the business, he will be forced to choose sides... We should stay calm.'⁵⁷ By this time, apparently before Phan Chu Trinh's arrest in August 1914, Nguyen Ai Quoc had learned enough English to feel that he could offer opinions about world politics as seen from London.

⁵⁴ AOM, SPCE 364, Lettre de Nguyen Tat Thanh au Résident Sup. De l'Annam, 31 Oct. 1911

⁵⁵ See note no. 34

⁵⁶ Copy of postcard on display at Ho Chi Minh Museum, Saigon; Thu Trang Gaspard cites this card in *NAQ à Paris*, pp. 57-8, giving Hong Ha (*Thoi Thanh Nien cua Bac Ho*) as her source; she translates the word *Tay* (literally, 'Westerner') to mean Frenchmen, whereas in the context I assume it refers to Englishmen.

⁵⁷ Thu Trang Gaspard, *Ho Chi Minh à Paris*, p. 60. This letter apparently comes from the French archives, but as Thu Trang did her research before the colonial archives had been organized in their present system she does not always give coherent references. She mentions in her earlier work, *Nhung Hoat Dong cua Phan Chau Trinh tai Phap*, (Paris: Sudestasia, 1983), p. 100 that she 'presented' this letter to Hong Ha. Alain Ruscio in *Ho Chi Minh: Textes* gives source as AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, p.21.

A portion of another note was quoted during the interrogation of a Vietnamese witness during Phan Chu Trinh's trial. The witness, Cao Dac Minh, said that it was a letter written by Tat-Thanh in answer to a letter from Phan Chu Trinh. The note may have been written after Trinh's arrest. As the witness explained: 'After deploring the evils suffered by his countrymen, Tat Thanh assures Phan Chu Trinh that, 'after him, he will continue his work.'⁵⁸

During the French investigation of wartime Vietnamese-German links, other information came to light which showed that not only Tat-Thanh, but Vietnamese known to be linked to Cuong-De, had been living and studying in London in 1914. One known as Joseph Thanh, later identified as Lam Van Tu from Cochinchina, sailed from Hongkong to Singapore in 1913 with Cuong De and two other southern Vietnamese, who later turned up as the Prince's couriers in Europe. One of the southerners, Truong Duy Toan, was the former editor of a mildly nationalist publication, *Luc Tinh Tan Van* (*News of the Six Provinces*). He was said to have stayed with Phan Chu Trinh during his trips to Paris.⁵⁹ The other courier, Do Van Y, a school teacher from My Tho, settled in France and was in regular touch with Joseph Thanh in 1914, when the latter was living in England. The French authorities confiscated at least four undated letters from Joseph Thanh to Do Van Y written in 1914, two of them sent from Gower St.⁶⁰ Other letters were addressed from Constantine Rd. in Hampstead and 3 Conquest Rd., Bedford. They show that Joseph Thanh was expecting to receive money from Cuong De. As we have seen, Phan Van Truong was implicated in the activities of this circle at his trial.⁶¹

Spurred by the French to investigate Joseph Thanh and his contacts, the British Home Office reported to Paris that Joseph Thanh and Tat-Thanh were brothers aged 18 and 19, and that Tat Thanh was living and studying in Bedford. The two had been enrolled at the Regent St. Polytechnic, where they had made the acquaintance of a student named Gourd, an Englishman whose parents lived at 12 Constantine Rd., Hampstead. The report noted that Tat Thanh 'is on friendly terms with a daughter of the Gourd family' and that as a result Mrs. Gourd helped him find an apprenticeship at the Igranic Electric Company in Bedford. '...Nothing in their outward habits would give rise to the suggestion that they are

⁵⁸ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Procès Verbal d'information (interrogation de Cao Dac Minh), 22 May 1915.

⁵⁹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Procès verbal d'interrogation, 8 April 1915, Interrogation of Nguyen Nhu Chuyen, p. 3

⁶⁰ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Gouvernement Militaire de Paris, Traductions d'Extraits de lettres et de carte-lettres.

⁶¹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, Interrogation of Nguyen Nhu Chuyen, p. 4

engaged in any conspiracy,' the document concludes.⁶² Later the *Sûreté* decided that the 'two brothers' were surnamed 'Lam', and reported that Lam Van Tu or Joseph Thanh had returned to Cochinchina.⁶³ Without the network of Vietnamese informers which the French later developed, one has room to doubt that the Home Office got very far in establishing the exact identity of these men and what they were doing in England. There is no reason to suppose that Joseph Thanh and Tat-Thanh were brothers, as 'Thanh' was part of Tat-Thanh's personal name, not a family name. But it seems unlikely that there were two different Tat-Thans in England. This convoluted web of interconnections leaves one with the strong suspicion that Nguyen Tat-Thanh was part of an informal group which was the western equivalent of the Eastern Studies movement. In his supposed autobiography one of the 'narrators' claims that Quoc and he, as well as other Vietnamese in England, were part of a secret organization (presumably Vietnamese) known as the 'Overseas Labour Association' (*Hoi Lao-dong Hai-ngoai*).⁶⁴ As long as he sailed the seas, his brother and sister's links with the conspiracies of Phan Boi Chau would have made him a natural candidate for liaison agent of Cuong De. Was Cuong De in 1914 using money raised from Vietnam (and perhaps the Germans) to support Vietnamese students in the West? Was it pure coincidence that Nguyen Tat Thanh showed up in London around the same time as Joseph Thanh and the Prince?

Towards the end of 1916, Nguyen Ai Quoc's 'autobiography' relates that he returned to France to meet Phan Van Truong and Phan Chu Trinh. Another attempt at rebellion had just failed – the flight of the young emperor Duy Tan had ended in his exile to the island of Réunion. 'Now that King Duy Tan has risen up, as well as the people of Thai-Nguyen and many other places, what should we do?,' Quoc asked his compatriots, in the book's simplified language. The writer continues: 'But after that no one knows what Anh Ba (Quoc) did next.'⁶⁵ The last years of the war would have been a logical time for an English-speaking Asian nationalist to try to build contacts in the U.S., however. Both Chinese and Korean nationalists were receiving support from influential people there. Still, in spite of the evidence from *Yishibao*, Nguyen Ai Quoc's passage to America in 1917-18 remains in the realm of conjecture -- the next confirmed sighting of Nguyen Ai Quoc/Nguyen Tat Thanh is in Paris in 1919.

⁶² PRO: FO 372/668F; this document is cited by Nguyen The Anh, op. cit.

⁶³ AOM, SPCE 364, Paris 19 Nov. 1919, Note 2157: Note fournie par M. Petette de la S.G.

⁶⁴ Tran Ngoc Danh, *Tieu su Ho Chu tich*, (Paris: Chi Hoi Lien Viet tai Phap, 1949), p. 24

⁶⁵ Both the 1949 and subsequent versions of this book include this reference. See Tran Dan Tien, op. cit., 1994 ed., p. 29. As the Thai Nguyen rebellion did not begin until August 1917, the author seems to be telescoping events for dramatic effect.

This excursion through the French archival records should offer some ideas of how the person who emerged as Nguyen Ai Quoc at the Paris Peace Conference arrived on the political scene. When he told Agent 'Jean' in January 1920 that he had undertaken a study of colonial policies of the Americans, the English, the Spanish and the Italians, his claim does not seem entirely far-fetched.⁶⁶ His ties with both Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Van Truong probably dated back before the War; one can guess that the three men's affinity was in part due to the fact that they all had friends and relatives languishing in French prisons or exile. While Phan Chu Trinh and Nguyen Ai Quoc would have political disagreements over the next years, these never destroyed the bond of responsibility which the two showed towards each other. And as for Phan Van Truong, his relationship with Quoc seemed stronger than ever by the time they separated in 1923.

2. The Radical Solution (1920-1923)

The Paris Peace Conference closed in January 1920, with the inauguration of the League of Nations. Nguyen Ai Quoc and his compatriots were not among those who had cause to celebrate: it was the end of their hopes that the western democracies would recognize their claim to independence. With the collapse of their campaign at the Conference they seem to have lost some of their cohesion as a militant group. As 1920 wore on, money became scarce. For a time Quoc was apparently supported by an inhabitant of 6 Villa des Gobelins known as Khanh Ky, who had set up a small business trading in photographic supplies in the occupied Rhineland. (The French guessed that he may have been engaged in currency speculation.) Phan Van Truong set up a legal practice in Mayence in the latter part of 1919, and defended both Vietnamese and French soldiers who were being tried in military courts. His money was reported to have come from his legal work in commercial disputes between French and Germans.⁶⁷ Phan Chu Trinh also contributed to the group's funds by earning 30 francs a day as a retoucher of photographs.⁶⁸ But an employee of the Ministry of Colonies, a Mr. Phu Bay who was probably Agent 'Edouard', reported at the same time that these men were almost all suffering from bronchitis or tuberculosis, as 'they lack the means to lead a healthy or comfortable life'.⁶⁹ He did not view them as a serious threat to the peace of Indochina.

Nguyen Ai Quoc was revealing frustration in his conversations with the informers who sought him out. In early January 1920 he complained that Indochina was unknown in other

⁶⁶ AOM, SPCE 364, notes de Jean, 4 May 1920

⁶⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi du 12 mars 1920, signed Jean

⁶⁸ AOM, SPCE 364, rapport de Jean, 8 Jan. 1920

nations. When he spoke with international political figures, he said, he discovered that they either had no knowledge of Indochina or supposed that it was a small frontier province between India and China. 'We need to make a lot of noise in order to become known,' he told Agent Jean; 'Korea is now well-known to all nations, because the Koreans have raised their voices.' He added, though, that he would wait a while to see what sort of policies the new Governor General Maurice Long would implement.⁷⁰ He tried to raise the cause of Vietnamese freedom at a meeting critical of the peace settlement in the Orient, at which the socialist deputy Marius Moutet spoke, along with Professor Felicien Challaye and representatives of the Korean and Chinese communities. Inspector Pierre Arnoux himself was in the audience of around 1,000, which included a large number of Chinese. He reported that Nguyen Ai Quoc had distributed copies of the 'Vietnamese Demands' in the hall, but had failed to be recognized by the chairman when he requested the right to speak. 'Nguyen Ai Quoc's attitude, ... his way of insisting on taking the floor, seem to have provoked a mixture of good-will and mockery among the audience and the speakers,' Arnoux wrote smugly.⁷¹ Soon after, Quoc organized a meeting where he spoke in the name of the 'Group of Vietnamese Revolutionaries'. His talk, titled 'The Social Evolution of the Far Eastern Peoples and the Demands of the Ancient Nation of Annam', attracted around 70 people, who applauded enthusiastically at the end.⁷² But the absence of Vietnamese discouraged him from repeating his effort. When Jean suggested to him that the mention of a group of Revolutionary Vietnamese had frightened his compatriots away, he grew defensive. It appears that there was not an official group with that name, but that Quoc had hoped to gain publicity by using it. 'We need fights and foolishness to get attention,' he told the ever-present Jean.⁷³

Quoc was reported at this time to be spending long hours in the Bibliotheque St. Genevieve next to the Pantheon. Part of his publicity campaign included the intention to publish a book on the French record in Indochina, which he planned to call *Les Opprimés*. In order to give the work more weight, he had decided to use long extracts from French authors. The *Sûreté* compiled a list of thirteen books on Indochina which they believed he had consulted, including Phan Chu Trinh's report on the events of 1908 as well as works on agriculture and the financial regime established by France.⁷⁴ He spoke of raising the money to print his book by finding a socialist to hire him as domestic help, but as of

⁶⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, rapport de Jean, 8 Jan. 1920

⁷⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, Notes de Jean, 4 Jan. 1920

⁷¹ AOM, SPCE 364, 9 Jan. 1920, signed P. Arnoux

⁷² AOM, SPCE 364, Notes de Jean, 16 Jan 1920

⁷³ AOM, SPCE 364, Notes de Jean, 21 Jan 1920

⁷⁴ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi 34/S.R., 13 Feb. 1920

September, he was still looking for funding and hoping that Marcel Cachin at *l'Humanité* would take care of the printing.⁷⁵ His political activity was interrupted by a hospital stay in August, when he received treatment for an abscess on his right shoulder.⁷⁶ Whether this was the first sign of a tubercular infection is unclear. By the next year, however, he was being turned out of his job in a photographic shop on the grounds that he had tuberculosis.⁷⁷

As the French grew more certain that Nguyen Ai Quoc and Nguyen Tat Thanh were one and the same, they began to strategize as to how best to control him. In France they could minimize his contacts with other Vietnamese, and by the autumn of 1920 they had determined to keep him there. The Director of the Indochinese *Sûreté* in Hanoi, René Robin, requested that Nguyen Ai Quoc be denied a passport. He suggested that the authorities overseeing the Indochinese in Paris persuade Quoc to admit his true name, by telling him that he could only obtain a ticket for passage to Vietnam by producing authentic proof of his identity. But Quoc would not succumb to the *Sûreté's* pressures: he had already been summoned to the Prefecture of Police on 20 September, where he had been photographed and interrogated. After the questioning he went straight to the Human Rights League to complain of police harassment.⁷⁸

The Hanoi authorities were convinced that Quoc would not risk returning to Indochina, where he would be subject to the the penalties of the Annamite code against clandestine immigration. But they feared that he might try to go to another country, where he 'would completely escape us and we would have to expect surprises from such a determined individual...' 'A Nguyen Ai Quoc unmasked and kept under surveillance by the Metropolitan police – we can not wish for better than that,' wrote a M. Lacombe to Paris.⁷⁹ Pierre Guesde, who relished his role as 'General Controller of Indochinese Troops in France', took a particularly hard line on Nguyen Ai Quoc and his immediate circle. By the end of 1920 he had opened 250 files on suspect Vietnamese in France, but he considered the group from 6 Villa des Gobelins to be the most dangerous.⁸⁰

Why Guesde found Quoc and his circle so threatening is at first difficult to understand. The *Sûreté* had already frightened away the less determined adherents to his cause, he was almost destitute and his health was beginning to trouble him. Yet by November of 1920 it

⁷⁵ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi 113 S.R., signed Devèze, 17 Sept. 1920

⁷⁶ AOM, SPCE 364, 10 August 1920

⁷⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, signed Devèze, 14 Nov. 1921

⁷⁸ AOM, SPCE 364, Guesde note pour M. le Ministre, 12 Oct 1920,

⁷⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, Note au sujet du tél. no. 1466 du Contrôleur Général des Troupes Indochinoises au sujet de NAQ.

was becoming clear that some of the Vietnamese were making common cause with the more radical faction in the French socialist party. That month Quoc and a Tran Tien Nam attended a meeting organized by the Socialist Revolutionary Party to celebrate the third anniversary of the Soviet Republic. On November 3, Phan Chu Trinh, Quoc and three others then living at Villa des Gobelins went to a meeting of the 'Committee for the Third International' organized by the Socialists of the 13th arrondissement. Then on the 19th of the month Quoc received an invitation to a meeting from the 'extremist fraction' of the 13th Section of the Socialist Revolutionary Federation of the Seine. At this meeting a vote was taken on whether the Federation should join the Third International based in Moscow.⁸¹ The *Sûreté* did not report the result of that vote, but it seems fairly certain that Quoc's mind had been made up on this issue by the time he boarded a train on 24 December 1920 to journey to Tours for the Congress of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. He was representing the 13th Section, his neighbourhood branch, as well as the 'Indochinese Socialist Group'.⁸² It was at the Tours Congress that a majority of the delegates formalized their decision to join the Russian Bolsheviks in the Third or Communist International, to leave behind the Second, Socialist International whose reputation had been tarnished in the eyes of many radicals by its weak response to nationalist chauvinism during the First World War. Quoc's participation at this Congress made him one of the founding members of the French Communist Party.

An article which Quoc wrote for *l'Humanité* before the Congress gives some idea of the strength of his views at the time. (This may, again, have been written with Phan Van Truong's help. All the same, a friend in the 13th Section said his draft required some stylistic improvements. Whether the ornate version in the French archives is the edited version is unclear.) Quoc called his article 'Colonial Policy'. It reflects his exposure to Lenin's 'Theses on National and Colonial Questions', which had been unveiled at the Second Comintern Congress in July 1920 and printed in *l'Humanité* on the 16th and 17th of that month. Lenin's analysis of imperialism, inherent in these Theses, provided Quoc with a theoretical framework for his visceral hatred of colonialism.

The hydra of western capitalism has for some time now been stretching its horrible tentacles towards all corners of the globe, as it finds Europe too restricted a field of

⁸⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, 28 Dec 1920

⁸¹ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi no. 160 S.R. Paris, 15 Jan 1921

⁸² Branko Lazitch and Milorad Drachkovitch say in their *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), p. 150., that NAQ became a militant in the 18th Section of Socialist Youth in Paris, and then joined the Ninth Section of the SFIO, whose members were newspapermen. After his move to Impasse Compoint in July 1921, he seems to have joined the 18th Section, but I have seen no archival evidence for the other affiliation.

action, and the blood of the European proletariat insufficient to satisfy its insatiable appetite. English, German and French capitalists are all equal, as are their crimes, but for the fact that the capitalists of other countries at least have the modesty not to dress up their egoism with the pompous phrase of 'Civilizing Mission'. But behind the three colours of liberty, equality and fraternity, France introduces alcohol, opium and prostitution to all of her colonies and sows misery, ruin and death along with her ill-gotten riches.

In the face of these hateful practices, does the Socialist Party have a colonial policy which is truly socialist? No, not yet has the party tried to aid any of the colonies to free itself by revolutionary means. This inactivity would have carried on if the rightist war had not laid bare the lies and hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy and if the Russian Revolution had not violently stirred up the energies of the Proletariat of the Universe.

Since the majority of the Party decided to join the Communist International and Lenin presented his Colonial Theses to the Second Congress, our comrades have begun to talk about the colonies...⁸³

Quoc's intervention at the Tours Congress was less heavy-handed, but raised the same criticism of the Socialist Party. When Deputy Jean Longuet tried to protest that he *had* spoken out on the colonial question, Quoc asked him not to interrupt. Still, he sounded a more diplomatic note than in his *Humanité* article. In closing his short speech, he called on all members of the Socialist Party, right-wing as well as left-wing, to come to the aid of Indochina. He got a warm response from the hall, where cries of 'Down with the colonial sharks!' could be heard among the applause.⁸⁴

Quoc's speech is less well-known than the picture snapped of him by one of the delegates. It shows a smooth-faced Vietnamese looking like a well-dressed schoolboy in suit and tie, standing among the seated, bewhiskered French delegates. One right-wing press account described him as a prize circus attraction presented by the P.T. Barnum of the Tours Congress, Deputy Marcel Cachin. But Quoc's contemporary Paul Vaillant-Couturier, gave him a glowing review: 'his intervention was admirable in its concision, describing the agony of a nation of 20 million people,' he commented.⁸⁵ In later years Quoc would apparently make a point of keeping a low profile during doctrinal debates in the Comintern. But it seems unlikely that, as he later claimed, he came to Tours Congress without a clear understanding of what the issues separating the radical and moderate socialists were. After all, he had been attending political meetings and reading the left-wing press in Paris for a year-and-a-half by the time he arrived in Tours.

⁸³ AOM, SPCE 364, 13 Dec. 1920

⁸⁴ AOM, SPCE 364, *signé: Devèze*, 12 Jan. 1921

⁸⁵ AOM, SPCE 364, Josselme report of press coverage of Tours Conf., 12 fev. 1921

At Tours Nguyen Ai Quoc gave his allegiance to a force which would dominate the rest of his life. The world communist movement would become both his family and his chief employer. But in the winter of 1921 it did little to alleviate his personal problems or raise the spirits of his Vietnamese collective. From the 14 of January until the 5 of March Quoc was in the Cochin Hospital to have his shoulder abcess removed. When he left hospital, he refused to pay for his treatment on the grounds that he had no income.⁸⁶ At 6 Villa des Gobelins he found Phan Chu Trinh in deep depression. His only son, Dat, recently returned to Vietnam from France to cure his tuberculosis, had died. Trinh's friends reported that he was not the same after this tragedy.⁸⁷ He himself would not get permission to return to Vietnam until 1925. At the same time, some of the habitués of Villa des Gobelins claimed to be unhappy with Quoc's high-visibility radicalism. Khanh-Ky and Tran Tien Nam blamed the problems they were having with the police on Quoc's behaviour, a *Sûreté* report said. Tran Tien Nam was reported to have said that only Phan Van Truong, Phan Chu Trinh and a Vo Van Toan shared Quoc's extremist opinions. He also claimed to be unable to comprehend why these men would 'give their entire confidence to a compatriot of whose true name and origins they were ignorant'.⁸⁸ Meanwhile Khanh-Ky, the group's main breadwinner, complained that he could not pay off the rent which had been allowed to accumulate during the last years of the war.⁸⁹ Both Phan Chu Trinh and Quoc started to look for new living quarters after this. As a result, Quoc had no alternative but to cut back his political activities and start earning his own living. In July he moved across the Seine to northwestern Paris, a hotel at 9 Impasse Compoint. He found work as a photo retoucher next door to the hotel at 40 francs per week, the wage paid to apprentices. With his frugal life style, this was enough to cover food and his 40 francs monthly rent. At the end of July the *Sûreté* reported that he was leading a quiet life, going out only rarely to visit his friends at Villa des Gobelins.⁹⁰

Quoc's journalistic efforts seem to have been receiving only luke-warm support from his socialist friends. The draft pamphlet on French colonialism which Quoc had completed in 1920 was still without a publisher. Marcel Cachin gave evasive replies about the possibility of having it published by *l'Humanité* – he explained that the paper's circulation had dropped since the Socialist schism at the Tours Congress and that he could not afford to pay an advance.⁹¹ Still Quoc did publish the odd article: one in Charles Rappoport's

⁸⁶ AOM, SPCE 364, Devèze, 28 March 1921

⁸⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, Pierre Guesde to Gov. Gén. in Hanoi, Feb. 1921

⁸⁸ AOM, SPCE 364, signed Devèze, 27 Dec. 1920

⁸⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, Devèze, 29 April 1921

⁹⁰ AOM, SPCE 364, note of 29 July 1921.

⁹¹ AOM, SPCE 364, Devèze, 12 Jan. 1921

monthly *Revue Communiste* of 14 April 1921, and another in *L'Action Coloniale* of 10 June. The first of these, buried on page 133, was a variation on what was to become his constant refrain – the failure of communist parties to act on the colonial question. This inactivity was astonishing, he wrote, ‘especially now that there is no longer an internal debate in the purified party...’. His article in *Action Coloniale* made a comparison between the relatively liberal colonial policy of Japan in Korea and French policies in Indochina. The Japanese had decreed in August 1919 that their colony would have autonomy and that her citizens would enjoy equal rights with Japanese. ‘The French government’, Quoc wrote, ‘still has the naiveté to believe that in Indochina, to win the attachment of the natives, it is enough to dupe them indefinitely with official discourses...’

In the summer of 1921, as the Group of Vietnamese Patriots seemed to be drifting apart, M. Devèze’s informers reported frequent, noisy discussions at 6 Villa des Gobelins. In early July, the two Phans and Quoc held a ‘violent discussion’ from 9 in the evening until the early morning hours.⁹² In September more of these exchanges were recorded. In October Phan Chu Trinh moved out to rue Pernéty. We have no way of knowing what the group discussed or whether there were major political disagreements among them. The break-up of their communal living arrangement and their future political course must have provided plenty of meat for arguments, however. But it was clearly not the case that Nguyen Ai Quoc had a serious falling out with his two colleagues, as has often been assumed in the past.⁹³ Although Phan Chu Trinh’s letters of 1922 and 1923 make clear that he disagreed with Quoc’s attachment to Marxism, he maintained an open-minded interest in Quoc’s activities and often attended political meetings with him. Phan Van Truong seems to have taken greater offence at Trinh’s behaviour, which became somewhat erratic after his son’s death.⁹⁴ But Truong himself remained, in the eyes of the *Sûreté*, a political extremist. As late as February 1922 they still suspected that Nguyen Ai Quoc may have been acting on his behalf, as his ‘conscious or unconscious agent’.⁹⁵

The topics of debate among the Vietnamese activists probably included the invitation to join an Intercolonial Union, from a Malagasy lecturer at the School of Oriental Languages, with the elegant name of Stéphanie Oju Oti.⁹⁶ Stéphanie was already involved with the journal *Action Coloniale*. The Union held its inaugural meeting in October 1921, after several months of preparation. A number of the other members were supporters of the

⁹² AOM, SPCE 364, Devèze, 13 July 1921

⁹³ See, e.g., Kobelev, p. 39; Fenn, op.cit., p. 25.

⁹⁴ AOM, SPCE 365, note de l’agent Désiré, 25 Sept. 1922, on Truong’s letter to Ng. The Truyen

⁹⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, rapport établi par la Dir. De la Sûreté Générale, Paris, 21 Feb. 1922

⁹⁶ AOM, SPCE 364, invitation was received 7 March 1921.

Third International, and the Union was openly affiliated with the French Communist Party. The new organization defined its function as the study of colonial politics and economics, but it also came to play the role of a mutual aid society. Quoc attended the first meeting with Phan Van Truong and a nephew who had moved into 6 Villa des Gobelins. He spoke with his usual vehemence against French colonial policy and bureaucrats. (The *Sûreté*, also true to form, had an anonymous informer there, most likely Nguyen Van Ai known as Agent de Villier.)⁹⁷ Quoc joined the executive committee, along with six others, lawyers and small businessmen, from Réunion, Dahomey, Guadeloupe, the Antilles, Martinique and Guyana. He was made one of the treasurers who collected the members' dues every four months. The Union was soon dependent on him to man their office in the heart of the Latin Quarter at rue du Marché des Patriarches. The group also relied on him to get out their newspaper, *Le Paria*, which started to appear in April 1922.⁹⁸

The Intercolonial Union became Quoc's new base, replacing the Group of Vietnamese Patriots and the perhaps non-existent 'Revolutionary Group of Vietnamese'. (The Group of Vietnamese Patriots joined the Union en masse.) Aside from the communist party, he now had an officially recognized organization, one with legal statutes and dues-paying members, to back his journalistic efforts and even to provide an office. *Le Paria* began with a subscription list of 103 names⁹⁹, and soon reached a print run of 2,000 copies. (In April 1923 it had to be temporarily cut back to 1,000 copies and a single sheet, as advertising revenues were nonexistent.)¹⁰⁰ By June 1922, Quoc claimed to have found 150 Indochinese subscribers – but three of these belonged to the *Service de Renseignements* in Marseille.¹⁰¹ Some issues of the simple, mimeographed paper did get back to Vietnam -- two subscriptions came in from Vietnamese interpreters at the *Résidence Supérieur* in Hanoi. Quoc suspected, however, that these too were from the intelligence services.¹⁰² He was soon spending less time on photo-retouching, and more on his journalism and political life. In 1922 he chose to ignore his current employer's threats and attended a May Day demonstration, with the result that he lost his job.¹⁰³ After that he made some money by painting decorations on fans and window blinds, but he may also have received a subsidy for his work at the *Paria*. Journalism would become both his profession and cover during his years as an underground communist agent.

⁹⁷ AOM, SPCE 364, Guesde, 9 Nov. 1921

⁹⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, note conf. no. 315 S.R., 23 Jan. 1923; this note explained that *Paria* was formed as a cooperative society, as the propaganda organ of the Intercolonial Union.

⁹⁹ Gaspard, *Ho Chi Minh à Paris*, p. 204

¹⁰⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, note de l'Agent de Villier, 27 March 1923

¹⁰¹ AOM, SPCE 365, lettre 217 de l'Agent Jolin, Marseille, 6 June 1922

¹⁰² AOM, SPCE 365, Agent de Villier, 25 Dec. 1922

¹⁰³ AOM, SPCE 365, Contrôle général des Indochinois en France, note conf. no. 389 S.R., 16 May 1922

By 1922 Nguyen Ai Quoc had become a full-time communist publicist, with colonial questions and Indochinese independence as his fields of interest. He attended the French CP's First Congress in Marseille in December 1921, as well as the second, held in Paris in October 1922. On the latter occasion he may have been noticed by one of the guests from Moscow, Dmitry Manuilsky.¹⁰⁴ In April 1922 he attended a meeting of the newly-formed Committee for Colonial Studies which the French CP had established at its First Congress.¹⁰⁵ He may by this time have developed friendships with Chinese student activists in Paris, where in 1921 Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping collaborated to publish a Chinese language paper known as *Youth* from a flat near the Place d'Italie, not far from Villa des Gobelins. Quoc is said to have introduced some of the better French speakers among the Chinese into the French CP, including the two sons of CCP leader Chen Duxiu.¹⁰⁶ We do not know if Quoc belonged to their Communist Youth League at this point. By 1921 the Chinese communists in France had established their own links to Berlin and Moscow. As a large proportion of the two-thousand Chinese students in France were involved in work-study schemes, many lived in the provinces or in working-class suburbs of Paris such as Billancourt.¹⁰⁷ Quoc, on the other hand, was heavily involved with his fellow colonial subjects and French CP activities.

How effective Quoc was as a propagandist is difficult to judge. There is little evidence regarding the circulation of *Paria* within Vietnam, especially before 1925. Getting his message out to his countrymen was becoming increasingly complicated. The number of Vietnamese troops and workers in France was dropping off – by June 1920 there were 19,000 Indochinese left, down from 60,000 the previous July. By 1926 there would be only 2,670 officially resident in France.¹⁰⁸ The Ministry of Colonies and its Marseille watchdog, Léon Josselme, had become adept at intercepting mail which went by sea (although they could be deceived by items hidden inside other publications). Quoc's audience was more and more one of left-wing Europeans and colonial fellow-travellers. Thanks to Albert Sarraut's image as a reforming Governor General, some Frenchmen who might otherwise have been sympathetic to Quoc's exposés felt that his criticisms of French policy were over-stated. In November 1921, a search of Quoc's room by the Service de

¹⁰⁴ see Ton That Thien, 'Vérités et mensonges', pp. 51-2; or Kobelev, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁰⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, note conf. no. 389, S.R., Paris 16 May 1922, Guesde.

¹⁰⁶ Hoang Tranh, *Ho Chi Minh voi Trung Quoc, [Ho Chi Minh and China]*, (Vietnamese trans. of Chinese work), (Beijing: New Star, 1990), p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ MAE, Asie: Chine 492, Agitation Révolutionnaire Chinoise en France à Paris, 1922-1929 lists 8 suspected communists in France; Han Suyin, *Eldest Son*, 1994, mentions Zhou and Deng's activities, p.55.

¹⁰⁸ From the Introduction to AOM, SLOTFOM Inventaire, CAOM

Renseignements produced a revealing (but undated) letter from an official of the Human Rights League, Gabriel Seailles. He was writing to acknowledge a copy of the 'Vietnamese Demands' which had been sent to the League's Central Committee. Their response was based on consultations with Sarraut's office. 'They say that you haven't taken into account the reforms accomplished by M. Sarraut,' Seailles wrote. 'There must be a misunderstanding here. Your proposals are formulated in too general a manner. It would be in your interest to communicate your complaints with more precision.' In any case, the writer believed, reform of the colonial justice system had already been carried out; liberty of the press had been granted; liberty of education was something which Sarraut was occupying himself with.¹⁰⁹ In reality Sarraut's reforms were slow to take shape, and the freedoms which Vietnamese enjoyed remained those of second-class citizens. In March 1926 a list of demands presented at a public meeting in Saigon by Nguyen An Ninh repeated several of the key points from the Group of Patriots' 1919 petition.¹¹⁰

Phan Chu Trinh, himself frustrated at being unable to return to Vietnam, came to the conclusion in early 1922 that it was time for Nguyen Ai Quoc to return home. Trinh had been given employment as a photographer at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille, thanks to his supporters in the Socialist Party. But the letter which Trinh wrote to Quoc in February 1922 reveals that he had no rosy illusions about French intentions towards his country, or about his own potential to bring about change. Quoc's knowledge would be wasted, the old scholar believed, if he remained in France. The time had come to take the lessons of Marxism-Leninism back to Vietnam to try them out. He wrote in a spirit of reconciliation:

Because of our disagreements you have called me a 'conservative and backwards Scholar'... I'm not the least bit angry about this label, because I read French poorly and I can't understand perfectly the works produced in this civilized land. I am an exhausted horse who can no longer gallop; you are a fiery stallion... But I'm sending this letter because I hope you will listen and prepare your grand design. From East to West, from Antiquity to the present day, no one has acted as you have, in staying abroad on the pretext that your country is full of traps... To awaken the people, so that our compatriots will engage in combat against the occupiers, it is indispensable to be there... Following your method you have sent articles to the press here to incite our compatriots to mobilize their energy and spirit. But this is vain. Because our compatriots can't read French or even *quoc ngu*; they are incapable of understanding your articles!¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ AOM, SPCE 364, envoi no. 270 S.R., Paris, pièce no. 57, 29 Nov. 1921.

¹¹⁰ AOM, SPCE 371, note de Sûr. Gén. on meeting held 21 March 1926.

¹¹¹ Marseille, letter of 18 Feb. 1922. I have a Vietnamese translation of this letter, originally in Chinese, from the Ho Chi Minh Museum, Ho Chi Minh City; it is printed in French in Gaspard, *Ho Chi Minh à Paris*, pp. 181-187. Thu Trang discovered it in the archives of the Ministry of Colonies before these were transferred to Aix-en-Provence and gives no precise reference.

Whether the old-fashioned Phan Chu Trinh had any influence on Quoc is hard to tell – but one senses that after his criticism, Quoc worked harder than ever to keep the colonial issue in the public eye. Intelligence reports in 1922 describe him as ‘indefatigable’. ‘Nguyen Ai Quoc is engaged in active communist propaganda in Vietnamese circles in Paris,’ Pierre Guesde wrote to Hanoi in July; ‘and he is putting all his energy into attending meetings in the capital and the suburbs.’¹¹² Guesde noted that Quoc had been admitted into the Freemasons. He listed the meetings which Quoc had attended within the last week:

1. Two meetings of the Directing Committee of the Socialist Party-Communist;
2. A public meeting organized by the Communist Party in Bagnolet, to support the Russian revolution;
3. Two meetings of the Club du Faubourg, Salle Printania, Ave. de Clichy;
4. An evening at the Masonic Lodge at 94 Ave. de Suffren.

In addition, he made approaches to the editorial offices of various newspapers, notably *l'Humanité*, *Journal du Peuple* and *La Bataille Syndicaliste*.

Not long afterwards the Vietnamese activists and Quoc started to examine ways of approaching the non-intellectual members of their community. Articles in *Paria* and *l'Humanité* were a means to draw in educated Vietnamese, but Phan Chu Trinh was right to point out that these would reach only a small proportion of their potential supporters. The views of the Comintern and the French communist party on mass organizing may also have influenced their actions. In February and May 1923 the core group of Vietnamese activists began to discuss new initiatives. They had been joined towards the end of 1921 by a young northern intellectual named Nguyen The Truyen, who quickly became one of Quoc's closest collaborators. The son of a district official from Nam Dinh, Truyen had received a French diploma in chemistry, but clearly had a stronger interest in writing and journalism. In 1922 he had become the latest resident of 6 Villa des Gobelins and at the end of the year began to work on *Le Paria*.¹¹³

In February 1923 Phan Van Truong, Quoc and Tran Tien Nam discussed recreating the old ‘Fraternal Association’ which Truong and Phan Chu Trinh had started in 1912. The goal would be to unite the poorer Vietnamese manual workers in France, who as Truong said,

¹¹² AOM, SPCE 365, note conf. no. 409 S.R., Paris, signé Pierre Guesde, 7 July 1922

¹¹³ Dang Huu Thu, *Than The va Su Nghiep Nha Cach Manh Nguyen The Truyen*, [*The Life and Times of the Revolutionary NTT*], (Melun, France: 5 Blvd. Des Carnes, 1993), p. 42.

'were badly paid, badly nourished, badly housed and sometimes scorned by their employers...'.¹¹⁴ Phan Van Truong was advised not to take the presidency of the group, as his political notoriety might scare off potential members who would be frightened of reprisals. At a recent gathering of the Intercolonial Union, in fact, Truong had given a talk on Vietnam, in which he stated that 'national liberty of self-determination could exist only when all peoples had understood the necessity of communism, which would end the exploitation of man by man and place all races on an equal footing.'¹¹⁵ At an April meeting, Phan Chu Trinh was proposed as president, but Phan Van Truong protested, saying that he categorically refused to work with his former collaborator.¹¹⁶ How this difficulty was solved is not clear.

In May Quoc himself sent out a subscription advertisement for a new *quoc ngu* bi-monthly newspaper, to be called *Viet Nam Hon* (*The Soul of Vietnam*). His announcement promised 'Asia, Europe, India and America all summarized in one paper. Women and children will be able to understand.' It would be a paper 'in our language, which my brothers will be able to read.' The first issue was to be 100 copies. The subscription forms were to be returned to 3 rue du Marche des Patriarches, the offices of *Le Paria*.¹¹⁷ This may be a sign that Quoc had taken to heart the reproaches of Phan Chu Trinh regarding his elite-oriented journalism. He seems to have run out of time for this new project, however. On 13 June 1923 he would suddenly disappear from his home in Paris, and would not be spotted again by the French authorities until the autumn, when his name would appear in the Moscow press. Nguyen The Truyen would become the editor of *Vietnam Hon*.

How his voyage to Moscow was organized and who was the instigator is not known. The idea that he was spotted by a Comintern talent scout such as Manuilsky at the French Party's 1922 Congress is plausible, but it does not appear, as the next chapter will show, that he went to Moscow as someone who had already been picked out for long-term Comintern service. It is equally plausible that he and the members of the Intercolonial Union desired direct contact with the Comintern so that they could provoke more action within the the FCP on colonial issues. Quoc himself may have initiated the trip in order to explore ways of getting back to Indochina with Comintern support. (The next chapter will explore Quoc's early contacts with the Comintern.) But it would appear that the Vietnamese patriots in France were preparing some kind of concerted action. By June the *Sûreté* had heard that Phan Chu Trinh was trying to return to Paris from Castres, where he

¹¹⁴ AOM, SPCE 365, Note de l'Agent de Villier, 27 Feb. 1923

¹¹⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, Note de la Préfecture de Police, 18 Feb. 1923

¹¹⁶ AOM, SPCE 365, note de l'Agent de Villier, 4 April 1923

had gone after his unannounced departure from the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille.¹¹⁸ Trinh wrote to Quoc to ask for a loan of 340 francs to pay for his travel and living expenses until he could find work in Paris. But as Quoc himself was short of money, and none of the other Vietnamese was inclined to advance this sum, it may be that Quoc and Trinh missed this last chance to meet.¹¹⁹

Quoc's departure from Paris was a carefully organized operation. In early June he put out the word that he would be going on an eight-day holiday in the Savoie region with the Club du Faubourg. He had confessed to the concierge at 6 Villa des Gobelins that he would have liked to go to the Swiss Alps, but that he didn't want to face the humiliation of being refused a passport. Then on 15 June, Agent 'Désiré' reported that on the 13th Quoc had left his residence without any baggage. His friends seemed to think that his holiday would be a brief one. The office hours at the Union were covered by Monnerville from Martinique; at a meeting of the *Paria* group at the end of June, none of the six people present, including Phan Van Truong and Nguyen The Truyen, volunteered to get the paper ready for the printer. 'They decided to wait for the return of Nguyen Ai Quoc for that,' reported Désiré.¹²⁰ At the end of the summer Phan Chu Trinh wrote to Nguyen Van Ai, a.k.a. Agent de Villier, to accuse him of foul play in Quoc's disappearance. (Ai had become a vital member of the *Paria* collective, but his role of informer had somehow become known to Trinh.)

Even though Nguyen Ai Quoc is young and he doesn't act on mature reflection, this is not important because he really has the heart of a patriot. He left his family and travelled to Europe and America, working miserably to educate himself, without any help from anyone... If he makes mistakes or not, that is not the question, because all the Vietnamese respect his ardent heart... Let those who want to follow him follow, and those who don't can leave him alone to get on with his work.

Why did you betray him, with your cowardly and underhand methods? He trusted you like a brother... why did you try to make trouble for him? I ask you for the truth, where did you incite him to go?¹²¹

It was Albert Sarraut himself who signed the secret telegram to the Governor General in Hanoi sent October 11 1923, to inform him that Nguyen Ai Quoc's trace had been picked up in Moscow. Bloncourt, his colleague from Dahomey, had paid his passage with funds from the Intercolonial Union, an informer revealed.¹²² By November the rumour began to

¹¹⁷ AOM, SPCE 365, envoi S.R. Paris no. 695, 30 May 1923

¹¹⁸ AOM, SPCE 372, télégramme n. 244, De Guesde, 20 March 1923.

¹¹⁹ AOM, SPCE 365, envoi S.R. Paris 728, 14 June 1923

¹²⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, notes de Désiré, 15 June and 6 July 1923

¹²¹ AOM, SPCE 372, signé Trinh, envoi du S.R. Paris, 5 Sept. 1923

¹²² AOM, SPCE 365, Paris, Colonies à Gouverneur Général à Hanoi, signé Sarraut, 11 Oct 1923

get around that Quoc would soon be returning to Paris.¹²³ Phan Van Truong was booked to return to Vietnam in mid-December, but he put off his departure once in the hope that Quoc would return with news from Moscow, the French believed. Finally on 23 December, apparently having given up waiting, Truong sailed, carrying with him a number of issues of *Le Paria*¹²⁴. Quoc and the two Phans had seen the last of each other.

In Nguyen Ai Quoc's new political life opening before him in Moscow, the basic elements would remain those which had served him in his months of campaigning in Paris. One of these was the Marxist-Leninist framework for his attack on colonialism. I will discuss this in detail in the next chapter. But one should remember that alongside this radically modern outlook he retained the ethos of Confucian patriotism and duty which had driven his father's contemporaries to oppose the French. Quoc was moving into the Comintern world of internationalism, yet he remained rooted in the traditions of Vietnamese nationalism – the family and regional ties which linked him to Phan Chu Trinh, to Cuong De and Phan Boi Chau in China and perhaps, still, to his father, who had become an itinerant eccentric, wandering from pagoda to pagoda in Cochinchina.¹²⁵ When he left Paris his ties to the leftists Phan Van Truong and Nguyen The Truyen were as strong as ever, and he would rely on such connections when he became a Comintern agent based in Canton.

Was the Nguyen Ai Quoc of 1923 someone with firmly fixed political ideas? I would argue that in many respects his world view was already formed by his teenage experiences with the French, his failures at the Paris Peace Conference, and his early exposure to Lenin's theories on imperialism. Yet he had also begun to demonstrate the tactical flexibility of a pragmatic politician. Although he joined the Freemasons, for example, in an effort to broaden his contacts in influential segments of French society, he later accepted the Fourth Comintern Congress recommendation that party members cut their links to the Masons and the French League of Human Rights.¹²⁶ This lack of ideological rigidity, which some would come to see as a Machiavellian streak, was a trait which undoubtedly helped Nguyen Ai Quoc survive his long years with the Comintern.

¹²³ AOM, SPCE 365, note de l'agent Désiré, Nov. 1923

¹²⁴ AOM, SPCE 365, folder 1923, no. 992/S.R., Paris, 26 Dec. 1923

¹²⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, Saigon 13 Nov. 1923

¹²⁶ AOM, SPCE 365, note conf. no. 479 S.R., folder 1922

CHAPTER II

The Comintern Recruit (1923 – 24)

1. First Contacts in Moscow

Nguyen Ai Quoc reached Petrograd (now once again St. Petersburg) by ship on 30 June 1923 from the North Sea port of Hamburg. In Berlin the Comintern network had provided him with a Russian travel document in the name of Chen Vang.¹ He was coming to Russia at a time when the first revolutionary illusions of the Bolshevik leaders had passed. The command economy of war communism had led to widespread peasant discontent in 1921; all attempts to ignite a revolution in more developed European countries had failed. When a second effort at German revolution was made in October 1923, just months after Quoc's arrival in Moscow, it was met by indifference among the German working class.

Trotsky's stirring promise of 1919, that the 'hour of the proletarian dictatorship in Europe' would be the hour of liberation for the 'colonial slaves of Africa and Asia',² may have sounded somewhat hollow to impatient colonial activists by the end of 1923. Moreover, Lenin, the undisputed leader and prophet of the October Revolution, had been incapacitated by a stroke in December 1922. So it was that Quoc arrived in the communist capital when fundamental assumptions about the path to world communism were being questioned and a leadership crisis was just beginning. This period from the end of the Civil War in 1921 until Stalin's consolidation of power in 1929 became what Stephen Cohen calls 'the great discussion period in party history'.³

The official reason for Quoc's invitation to Russia was the first International Peasants' Conference, which opened in the Kremlin's Andreyev Hall on October 10, 1923. This conference marked the founding of the 'Peasant International' or Krestintern, a body which was to bring together leaders of left-wing agrarian parties and peasant associations from Europe, Asia and America. It was designed to function as a legal organization including non-communists, but its Moscow connection was never very well-disguised. Listed among the speakers bringing greetings of solidarity on the second day of the meeting was a 'Miguel-al-Kvak' from Indochina.⁴ (The Russian transcription of

¹ Photostat copy in 495,201,1, Ho Chi Minh's personal file.

² Leon Trotsky, *Manifesto of the Communist International*, in John Riddell, ed., *Founding the Communist International, Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress*, (New York: Pathfinder Book, the Anchor Foundation, 1987), pp. 227-8.

³ Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 124.

⁴ *Kooperativnoe Delo*, [*Cooperative News*], Moscow newspaper, 14 Oct. 1923.



Vietnamese names does not always convey the Vietnamese sounds closely, but this one is particularly fanciful.) Quoc did not waste his speech of greeting on formalities: he launched directly into a quick exposition of the situation of the peasants of the French colonies. 'You are peasants and farmers of Europe and America. You are exploited as proletarians,' he told the delegates. 'But we others in the French colonies are doubly exploited, as proletarians and as conquered races,' he said. 'A white owner can come and make a request to the government, and whole villages will be expropriated, villages which our fathers and ancestors inhabited and which we still cultivate.'⁵ He made sure that the anti-war resolution passed by the Congress raised the issue of colonial oppression, by writing an amendment which demonstrated that, 'the peasants of the colonies constitute a very important factor in questions of war and peace....'⁶ Quoc was elected to the Krestintern Presidium of 11 people at the opening session, along with one other Asian, the Japanese Ken Hayasho.⁷

The Krestintern's founding reflected the turn towards compromise with the Russian peasantry which was at the heart of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). Instituted in March 1921, the NEP replaced grain requisitioning with a tax in kind and gradually came to encompass a return to market forces and capitalism in agriculture, trade and small scale manufacturing. By August of 1923 the policy had succeeded to the extent that the Russian capital managed to host a well-publicized agricultural exhibition to demonstrate the country's return to economic normalcy. Foreign left-wing leaders who attended the exhibition were invited to stay on for the peasant conference.

The Krestintern's creation was also a direct result of the evolving united front policy of the Communist International. The reaffirmation of the worker-peasant alliance in Russia which the NEP signalled was accompanied by a gradual change in the Bolsheviks' attitude towards allies abroad. The European working class having proved to be a disappointment, the Russians were prodding the Comintern to look to the 'world peasantry' as comrades in the march towards the socialist future. At the Bolsheviks' Twelfth Party Conference in April 1923, Bukharin had advanced the idea that the peasantry of colonial countries was a 'gigantic reservoir of revolutionary infantry'.⁸ The Comintern had formed an Agrarian Commission in 1923, following its IV Congress at the end of 1922. The Commission's task was to 'oversee and concretize the slogan of the worker and peasant government

⁵ RC, 535,1,2, p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 68-9.

⁷ RC, 535,1,1, p. 45.

⁸ Stephen Cohen, op.cit., p. 149.

within the various parties'.⁹ This slogan signified the Bolsheviks' acceptance of reality: in a hostile world socialist Russia needed more allies than just the proletariat of the capitalist West. Although the workers were still seen in classic Marxist terms as the leading force of revolution, it was now acceptable to revise Marx's injunction and to call on 'Peasants and workers of the world' to unite.¹⁰ The Comintern's Agrarian Commission organized the International Peasants' Conference in October which brought Nguyen Ai Quoc to Moscow.

Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Russia expecting to remain for three months. 'For one reason or another, my departure was put off from week to week, and then from month to month,' he wrote in 1924 to an unnamed comrade.¹¹ His immediate goal when he arrived in Moscow seems to have been to draw attention to the failures of the French Communist Party's Committee for Colonial Studies, which later became its Colonial Commission. He in fact made a detailed report on these failings in July 1923 to the Indonesian Commission of the Comintern's Eastern Section, which I will discuss below.¹² Composed of Grigory Voitinsky, Voja Vujovic, and Boris Souvarine, the Indonesian Commission seems to have been thought the most appropriate to consider the affairs of a colony neighbouring Java.¹³ Voitinsky helped to found the Chinese Communist Party in 1920¹⁴ and would become the Comintern representative in Shanghai in April 1924.¹⁵ Like Mikhail Borodin, he had lived for several years in exile in the United States. Quoc maintained a cordial relationship with Voitinsky until at least 1927, when both had to leave China.

From Quoc's communications with the Comintern in Moscow it is clear that he requested help in returning to Indochina via China as soon as he arrived in the Russian capital. In a rather bad-tempered letter which he addressed to anonymous '*camarades*' in March 1924 (the handwritten date is unclear, but his reference to a nine-month stay would make the date roughly March), he wrote, '...it was decided when I arrived in Moscow that after a stay of three months I would leave for China to try to establish contacts with my country. But here it is the ninth month of my stay and my sixth month of waiting, and a decision about my departure still has not been made.' He continued: 'I don't think it is necessary to

⁹ G.M. Adibekov, E.N. Shakhnazarova, K.K. Shirinya, *Organizatsionnaia Struktura Kominterna*, [*The Organizational Structure of the Komintern*], (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997), p. 79.

¹⁰ This slogan was printed on the Krestintern's stationery.

¹¹ RC, 495,154,594, p. 4; letter of 11 Sept. 1924.

¹² The written version of this report is in 495,154,594.

¹³ Adibekov et al., op. cit., p. 73.

¹⁴ Hans J. Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1991), p. 61.

¹⁵ C. Martin Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, *Missionaries of Revolution: Soviet Advisers and Nationalist China, 1920-1927*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), p. 6.

speak here of revolutionary and nationalist movements, old or recent; of the existence or non-existence of workers' organizations, of the agitation of secret and other societies, because I have no intention of submitting a thesis to you; I want only to make you feel the necessity of studying EVERYTHING in a precise manner, and if NOTHING should exist, to create SOMETHING.' (emphasis in original) Among the four goals of his trip he listed 'to establish relations between Indochina and the International', and 'to try to organize a base for information gathering and propaganda'. He requested a budget of one-hundred U.S. dollars per month to cover local travel, correspondence, subscriptions, food and lodging; in addition he asked for the money for his voyage from Russia to China.¹⁶ It would not be until after the Fifth Comintern Congress in June 1924 that a concrete recommendation would be made to send Quoc to Canton.¹⁷ There are probably several reasons why the Comintern and its Eastern Section were slow to assign Quoc a specific task. For a start, the form which Russian aid to Sun Yatsen would take was only gradually worked out following Mikhail Borodin's arrival in Canton in the autumn of 1923. The military officers who would become instructors to the Guomindang army did not arrive in China until June, July and October of 1924.¹⁸ Moreover, as the buildup to the Fifth Congress began, Comintern decision-makers were obviously preoccupied with the post-mortem of the German uprising, and as was often the case, had more pressing matters than Indochina to deal with. It is also likely that the Comintern bureaucracy used Quoc's extended stay in Moscow to size him up and investigate his political links.

2. The Development of Comintern Policy for Colonial Countries

By the time Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Russia, the Comintern had grown from a loose federation of communist and other left-wing party representatives into a permanent bureaucracy selected in Moscow, one increasingly influenced by internal Russian politics. Starting with the Fourth Congress (5 November to 5 December 1922) the Comintern Executive Committee was chosen by its own congresses instead of by member parties. The aim was to turn the Comintern into a 'truly centralized, united party'.¹⁹ At its founding in 1919, the Russian comrades had been less obviously dominant in decision-making, even though of the fifty-two activists attending that meeting, only seven were able to come from outside Russia. Three east Asian socialists living in Russia attended the First Congress: Liu Shaozhou and Zhang Yongkui of the Alliance of Chinese Workers, and a

¹⁶RC, 495,154,594, letter numbered 26, 353e, date illegible.

¹⁷ See letter of 11 Sept. 1924 in 495,154,594, discussed below.

¹⁸ Wilbur and How, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁹ Adibekov et al., op. cit., pp. 63-4.

Korean known as Comrade Kain representing the Korean Workers League.²⁰ There was also a group of central Asians representing territories of the former czarist empire. Bukharin pointed out in a *Pravda* article that support for the oppressed colonies in their liberation struggle was one of the things which distinguished the new Communist or Third International from the Second, socialist democratic one. 'It is no accident that at the first congress of our Communist International for the first time we heard a speech in the Chinese language,' he wrote.²¹ Yet the three East Asians, all resident in Russia, were only allotted consultative votes, while the 'United Group of the Eastern Peoples of Russia' collectively received just one full vote.²² The Asians' junior status at the 1919 congress reflected the belief that revolution in Europe was imminent and therefore more important than the colonial liberation struggle. As Trotsky said in his Comintern Manifesto, addressed to the 'proletariat of the entire world': 'The liberation of the colonies is possible only together with the liberation of the working class in the imperialist centers. The workers and peasants, not only of Annam, Algeria and Bengal, but also of Persia and Armenia, will gain the possibility of an independent existence only when the workers of Britain and France have toppled Lloyd George and Clemenceau and taken state power into their own hands.'²³

The first programme for what the Comintern called the 'colonial and semi-colonial countries', was drawn up at its Second Congress in 1920. This programme, drafted by Lenin, became the *Theses on National and Colonial Questions*. (The early draft was what Quoc would have read in *l'Humanité* in July 1920.) It was hotly debated in the colonial commission at the Congress but eventually accepted, with extensive revisions, as the official Comintern line. Since this programme embraces the key political issues of Nguyen Ai Quoc's communist career, it seems important to explore the debate it provoked within the Comintern. This debate, in various forms, would recur at intervals within Asian communist parties until at least the 1970s.

The Lenin who drafted these theses had grown more cautious than the Lenin of 1917. Although his programme was not a precise set of guidelines for action, it was the source of the theory of the united front, which was successfully put into practice by both Chinese and Vietnamese communists at the start of World War II. It was after reading the Theses in the summer of 1920 in *l'Humanité* that Nguyen Ai Quoc claims to have become a

²⁰ Riddell, op. cit., pp. 204-6 and 221-2.

²¹ *Pravda*, 6 March 1919, cited in Riddell, op. cit., pp. 307-8.

²² Riddell, op. cit., pp. 180-1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

convinced Leninist.²⁴ When they were published in their amended form after debate in the Congress's Colonial Commission, accompanied by a somewhat contradictory set written by the Indian communist Mahendra Nath Roy, they left plenty of room for differing interpretations. Yet they would remain an important element of Marxist-Leninist dogma over the years. Although a new, more radical programme for colonial countries was put forward by Otto Kuusinen at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, he still felt the need to claim that his theses were an outgrowth of Lenin's 1920 programme, which he said still had full validity as 'the guiding line for further work of the communist parties'.²⁵

Lenin's theses establish the importance of the colonial countries in the world scheme of revolution. They are a logical development of his analysis of world capitalism, *On Imperialism*, published in 1917. As the source of raw materials and cheap labour for western capitalism, the colonial countries were crucial to its power, Lenin theorized. If the western working class could ally with the oppressed people of the colonies to help them achieve independence, he reasoned, they would strike an important blow against the enemies of communism.

A second key aspect of the Theses was the idea that during a first, national bourgeois stage of the colonial revolution, communists would have to work with and even within the nationalist parties, as there was not a large enough colonial proletariat to bring about revolution on its own. Only after the goals of the bourgeois revolution had been attained – national independence and an end to feudalism in the countryside – could the socialist revolution begin, led by the working class. Lenin allowed that if the workers in the newly-liberated colony were aided by developed states where communism had been established, they might be able to by-pass the capitalist stage of development and move directly to socialism. This would seem to be an echo of the 'separate path' theory of the Russian Populists.

There were both Asians and Europeans at the Second Congress who were uneasy with the idea that communists should work with bourgeois nationalists in their countries' independence movements. The social democrats of the Second International were looked on as unreliable reformists, too willing to compromise with the capitalist ruling classes. Their support of their governments' war aims during the First World War was seen by the

²⁴ See 'Comment J'ai Choisi le Leninisme,' 'How I Chose Leninism', in *Ho Chi Minh: Action et Révolution*, ed. Colette Capitan-Peter, (Paris: Union Generale d'Editions, 1968) – article written in April 1960 for the Soviet journal, *Problems of Asia*.

²⁵ Jane Degras, *The Communist International, 1919-1943, Documents*, vol II, (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 530.

more radical socialists who formed the Third International as a betrayal of internationalist ideals. Eventually the delegates persuaded Lenin to change the phrase, 'bourgeois nationalist movements' to 'national revolutionary movements'.²⁶ Other phrases were inserted into the final version of the Theses to soften Lenin's united front tactics enough to make them palatable to the delegates. For example, in article 11a, which calls for communist parties 'to support with deeds' the revolutionary liberation movement in 'the states and nations that have a more backward, predominantly feudal, patriarchal, or patriarchal-peasant character', the following condition was added: 'The form the support should take must be discussed with the Communist Party of the country in question, if there is such a party.'²⁷ Yet there was no disguising the fact that Lenin had made it acceptable for communists to dispense, albeit temporarily, with Marxist class warfare in these 'backward' nations. The Dutch communist 'Maring' (Henk Sneevliet) seems to have been instrumental in swaying the delegates. His experience of organizing in Java during the First World War, when radical socialists joined the nationalist *Sarekat Islam* party to fight the Dutch, became a model for Comintern tactics in China. His approach was purely pragmatic: bourgeois and communist forces *had* to work together in colonial countries, because the communists would be insignificant on their own.²⁸

The Supplementary Theses on National and Colonial Questions written by M.N. Roy were also accepted by the Second Congress's Colonial Commission in amended form. The emphasis of Roy's theses on differences between the colonial bourgeoisie and working class is in open contradiction to Lenin's platform; Lenin apparently preferred to leave a degree of latitude for differing interpretations, rather than alienate a valuable ally from Britain's largest colony. Roy's distance from Lenin is clear from his article 7: 'There are to be found in the dependent countries two distinct movements that grow further apart from each other every day. One is the bourgeois-democratic nationalist movement, with a program of political independence under the bourgeois order, and the other is the mass action of the ignorant and poor peasants and workers for their liberation from all sorts of exploitation. The former endeavors to control the latter and often succeeds to a certain extent. But the Communist International and its affiliated parties must struggle against this and help to develop class consciousness in the working masses of the colonies.' In some versions of this article the following sentence is included as a compromise: 'For the

²⁶ See Riddell version of the Theses, article 6, in *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!, Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, vol. 1, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), p. 285.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 287-8..

²⁸ Allen S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China, 1917-1924*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 53.

overthrow of foreign capitalism, the first step toward revolution in the colonies, the cooperation of the bourgeois-nationalist revolutionary elements is useful.’²⁹

Maring, who chaired the Colonial Commission at the Congress, was able to smooth over what might have been viewed as a glaring contradiction. He claimed that Comrade Lenin’s and Comrade Roy’s theses ‘mean the same thing’. ‘The difficulty lies only in finding the correct approach to the relationship between the revolutionary-nationalist and socialist movements in the backward countries and colonies,’ he said. ‘In practice this problem does not exist. It is essential there to work together with the revolutionary-nationalist forces, and we are doing only half the job if we deny this movement and pose as doctrinaire Marxists.’³⁰ The pragmatic Maring was, however, ignoring the problems inherent in his solution. Allen Whiting points out that this compromise only papered over the cracks which would later destroy the united front in China: ‘The complicated verbiage of the prolific resolutions served as a convenient screen, covering the conflict between Lenin’s tactics for revolution and the Asian’s hatred of those they considered their native exploiters. With this conflict unresolved, the “united front” tactic in China faced not only suspicion from the Right but confusion on the Left.’³¹ Inevitably united fronts based on Lenin’s Theses would be only temporary phenomena. They did not erase the philosophical differences between those who saw the development of communism as an organic process which would take time to complete and those who, like Lenin in 1917, wanted to force the pace of change.

3.. *Nguyen Ai Quoc and his Place in the Comintern*

In spite of the Comintern’s increasing attention to the peasantry, when Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Moscow in July of 1923, his report on anti-imperialist activities in France was highly critical of the organization. While China’s republicans were being courted by Russian diplomats and special envoys, the more distant colonies of France had clearly not attracted Russia’s interest. In the end, Quoc’s Comintern-sponsored return to Asia became possible as a result of and within the framework of the Russian mission to Republican China. To all appearances, when he arrived in Moscow Quoc was speaking still as a representative of the Intercolonial Union in Paris, and may have composed his report jointly with his colleagues there. He complained that the Second Congress *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* had stirred up the expectation in the colonies that the

²⁹ Riddell, *Workers of the World.*, vol. 1, p. 220-1; see his note 6 on various renditions of this article.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 258.

³¹ Allen S. Whiting, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

Third International would bring about their emancipation. But so far these Theses were just 'decorations on paper', he wrote. On the other hand, the Theses had caused the imperialists to redouble their efforts in propaganda, obscurantism, and repression, he reported, without producing any action on the part of the French or British parties.³² Opportunities to support colonial movements such as a strike in Martinique and a revolt in Dahomey had passed without any action, he said. 'It is not without irony and not without sadness that my unfortunate Dahomian brothers, in the darkness of their civilizing prisons, read the eighth of the 21 Conditions [for Comintern admission], which states that "Each party undertakes to carry out systematic propaganda in its country's army against the oppression of the colonial population; and that it must support the liberation movement in the colonies with actions as well as words."'"

The death of Lenin in the bitterly cold January of 1924 opened the way to a period of factional struggle in the Comintern. Joining the crowds who waited hours in the cold to view the dead leader, Quoc suffered from frostbitten fingers and nose.³³ This show of devotion can not have harmed his political fortunes. In the next months and years he managed to avoid being identified as an acolyte of Leon Trotsky, whose influence in Kremlin politics had begun to wane as Lenin withdrew from active political life. Many of Quoc's colleagues and patrons in the French party, including Boris Souvarine of the Comintern's Indonesian Commission and Jacques Doriot, who later became Quoc's patron when he ran the FCP's Colonial Commission, would not fare so well. Quoc should have learned a valuable lesson about political survival from his first autumn in Moscow, when he would have witnessed Trotsky's last successful political campaign. This was the campaign for Workers' Democracy.

Lenin himself had begun to advocate the democratization of the party in 1921 at the 10th Party Congress. But the sailors' revolt at Kronstadt, the start of the NEP and his own illness all conspired to torpedo his project. Trotsky began to promote this course in an October 8 1923 letter to the Central Committee in which he decried the practice of appointing party secretaries from above. His initiative received the backing of 46 well-known party members, who wrote a letter supporting his initiative to the Central Committee. Faced with wide-spread support for an idea which was clothed in Lenin's mantle, the ruling triumvirate of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Josef Stalin consented to the formation of a committee on workers' democracy. Trotsky was one of the authors of the final resolution which appeared in *Pravda* on December 7, 1923. The text

³² RC, 495,154,594, hand-written report of July 1923.

called for an end to the 'bureaucratization' of the party, and for free discussion and open election of governing officials.³⁴

Within the Poliburo, however, Trotsky was isolated. The 'Workers' Democracy' campaign never went beyond resolutions (until it suited Stalin to revive the idea of electing party secretaries); by the time the Fifth Comintern Congress was held in June of 1924, Trotsky was becoming an invisible man. Although he was once again elected to the Presidium (but as a candidate member) and contributed an eloquent manifesto on the 'Tenth Anniversary of the Outbreak of War',³⁵ this founding member of the Comintern barely made an appearance during the course of the Congress. Boris Souvarine, who had been instrumental in publishing Trotsky's pamphlet on workers' democracy, *The New Course*, in French, would be voted out of the French party at the close of the Congress. Perhaps it was at this stage that Quoc developed his reputation for abstaining from doctrinal debates, which the German communist Ruth Fischer recalls in her memories of Comintern life. She told Jean Lacouture that, 'he was temperamentally far more inclined toward action than toward doctrinal debates. He was always an empiricist within the movement.'³⁶ Fischer's reminiscences, like those of other Comintern veterans who wrote about Quoc after his rise to power, should be viewed cautiously, however. In her book *Von Lenin zum Mao*, she claims that Quoc arrived in Moscow in 1922 to attend the Fourth Comintern Congress. As there is no documentary or other evidence to support this, we can assume that she has got her facts wrong.³⁷ In any case, as early as 1924 Quoc would have learned that to be on the wrong side of an ideological wrangle could mean not only the end of his career as a communist, but also of any hope of winning support for Vietnam's independence. His already well-developed secrecy probably made it easy for him to conceal his feelings about issues which didn't directly concern Vietnam.

Quoc's response to the political pitfalls of Comintern life was to put his head down and charge towards his own carefully circumscribed objective. He concentrated on his efforts to goad the Comintern into greater action on colonial issues. In February and again in March 1924 he wrote to Zinoviev requesting an interview. In 1920 the latter had become the chairman of the Comintern Executive Committee's 'Small Bureau'. (At this point Quoc was not working in the Comintern offices, he wrote, because of his frostbitten

³³ RC, 495,18,282, p. 5a, letter of 5 Feb., 1924.

³⁴ Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died*, (London: The Labour Publishing Company, 1925), pp. 37-8.

³⁵ Jane Degras, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 107-113.

³⁶ Jean Lacouture, op. cit., p.44.

³⁷ Lacouture, op. cit., pp. 42-3, citing Ruth Fischer, *Von Lenin Zum Mao*, (Dusseldorf: Diedrichs, 1956).

fingers and nose.)³⁸ Apparently Zinoviev passed on these requests to the new head of the Eastern Section, Fyodor Petrov (F.F. Raskolnikov), who had been named to replace Karl Radek on 8 March 1924.³⁹ (Radek was made a scapegoat for the failure in Germany, but became head the Sun Yatsen Academy until 1927.) On 20 May 1924 Quoc addressed a three-page typewritten proposal to Petrov. His proposal outlined the rationale for a Federation of Asian Communists. The weakness of the eastern peoples, he wrote, was caused by their isolation from one another.

'How useful for the Annamites to learn how their brother Hindus are organizing to struggle against English imperialism, or how the Japanese workers unite to combat capitalism, or how the Egyptians are making sublime sacrifices to demand their liberty,' he enthused. 'The eastern peoples are generally sentimental; and one example is more valuable to them than one hundred propaganda lectures,' he noted. Quoc suggested that the University of the Toilers of the East, where Asians of 62 different nationalities were studying, should become the base for the creation of a Federation. He was eager to organize a preparatory commission before the next Comintern Congress, which was to open in June.⁴⁰

His ideas do not seem to have been acted upon, at least until he himself went to Canton and helped to organize the League of Oppressed Peoples in 1925.⁴¹ The Comintern must have viewed its own structures in Moscow as sufficient for bringing Asians into contact with each other. Thus Vietnamese communists, without their own communist party, remained in an ambiguous position, with several directions in which they could look for guidance.

Vietnamese resident in France could join the French Communist Party; French communists seemed to assume that the Vietnamese communists would look for direction to the French party's Colonial Commission, in spite of the fact that it worked in a half-hearted way. Within the Comintern's bureaucracy, however, from 1923 until 1926 Indochina was grouped in the confusingly named 'Middle Eastern Section' of the Eastern Section, which also included India and Indonesia. As the Vietnamese communist movement developed, there would be continued confusion about who was responsible for guiding it. As it turned out, the rapid growth of communism in China between 1923 and 1927 became perhaps the major source of inspiration for Vietnam's embryonic communist

³⁸ RC, 495, 18, 282, pp. 5a, 5b and 21b, letters of 5 Feb 1924 and 15 March 1924.

³⁹ Adibekov et al., *The Organizational Structure of the Comintern*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ RC, 495, 18, 282.

⁴¹ The Comintern did hold a Conference of the Toilers of the Far East from 21 Jan. – 2 Feb. 1922, with participants from 40 nationalities, but no obvious follow-up. See Riddell, *Workers of the World*, vol. 1, p. 494, n. 20.

movement, as it did for communist movements in the rest of Southeast Asia. A number of Vietnamese exiled in China would become members of the CCP before the Vietnamese party was founded.

One can surmise that informal contacts among Comintern workers and students at the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow became a forum for exchanging information and ideas. But with the exception of Quoc, the Vietnamese did not have this opportunity before 1925 or 1926, when the first Indochinese students, sent from Paris, were formally enrolled.⁴² Founded in 1921 to train communist cadres, the University by 1924 was educating Asians from within the borders of the Soviet state and growing numbers of foreigners. An enrollment list of East and Southeast Asians for that year showed 67 Koreans, 109 Chinese, six Malays or Indonesians, and 16 Mongolians.⁴³ There is no formal record of Nguyen Ai Quoc having studied there before 1936, although Russian author Yevgeny Kobelev cites a 15 March 1924 interview with Quoc from the Italian communist newspaper *L'Unita*, in which Quoc describes his studies at the University.⁴⁴ M.N. Roy also claims that Quoc studied at the school.⁴⁵ As Quoc's first formal attachment in Moscow was to the Krestintern, it is possible that he received some sort of training in peasant organizing during his first stay there.

Nguyen Ai Quoc received a pass as a 'non-staff worker' for the Comintern offices in April, 1924.⁴⁶ One of his main occupations in Moscow was preparing reports on Vietnam and writing short articles for the communist press. He may have revised the manuscript which he had begun in France, which was at last published as *Le Procès de la Colonisation Francaise* by the *Librairie du Travail* in Paris in 1925. The typewritten French manuscript of what appears to be another brochure by Quoc on Indochina is in the Comintern archives, but there is no sign that it was published. It included a brief section on Vietnam's history and geography, as well as chapters on the confiscation of Vietnamese land by the unscrupulous French administration.⁴⁷ Another of Quoc's journalistic efforts in Moscow was his 1924 article, 'Lenin and the Peoples of the East'. He wrote one version, an eight-page article explaining Lenin's views on imperialism and colonial liberation,

⁴² Anatoly Sokolov, 'Podgotovka Vietnamskikh Revolyutsionerov v Kommunisticheskikh Vuzakh Sovetskoi Rossii v 20-30 godakh', ['Training of Vietnamese Revolutionaries in the Communist Institutes of Soviet Russia in the Twenties and Thirties] in *Traditsionnyi Vietnam, [Traditional Vietnam]*, (Moscow: Vietnamskikh Tsent, M.S.U., 1996), p. 145.

⁴³ RC, 532,1,12

⁴⁴ Yevgeny Kobelev, *Ho Chi Minh*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), p. 69.

⁴⁵ M.N. Roy, *The Men I Knew*, (Bombay: Lalvani Pub., 1968), p. 138.

⁴⁶ RC, 495,201,1

⁴⁷ RC, 495,154,595, draft brochure is only document in file.

which has far more substance than the emotional paean which was printed under this title in *Pravda* on 27 January 1924 following Lenin's death. But the condensed version gives a faithful reflection of Quoc's obsessions at this stage of his life. 'Accustomed to being treated as backwards and inferior beings, they [the Asian peoples] see in Lenin the personification of universal brotherhood,' he wrote. '...They feel veneration for him which is akin to filial piety.'⁴⁸ Lenin's *Theses* and the Comintern's promises to colonial peoples were perhaps the first sign which Quoc had seen that anyone in the West would take his views of French oppression seriously.

4. *The Fifth Comintern Congress*

When the Fifth Comintern Congress opened in Moscow in June 1924, Quoc felt obliged to maintain his pressure on the West European communists to pay more serious attention to their colonies. All three of his recorded interventions at the Congress are narrowly focused on the need for more action on colonial issues. Quoc apparently retained the passion and self-assurance of his early years in Paris. He was, however, given only a consultative vote.⁴⁹ Barely thirty years old, he was not shy about lecturing the elite of world communism on their shortcomings – he intervened at length during the extended debate on national and colonial questions. He was harsh on the English and French parties: 'All that our parties have done in this domain is equal to zero,' he chided. 'In French West Africa military conscription is carried out via completely unbelievable methods of compulsion, and our press says nothing about this. In Indochina the colonial powers have become slave-traders and sell the natives of Tonkin to planters in the Pacific Islands; they have raised the length of military service for indigenous people from two years to four; they are handing over a large portion of the colony to a consortium of sharks... and our press maintains a stubborn silence.'⁵⁰ He suggested several measures which, he said, could be immediately implemented -- a colonial forum in the newspaper *L'Humanité*, intensified propaganda and recruitment among colonial peoples, sponsorship of colonial students at the University of the East in Moscow, organization of the colonial workers in France, and obliging party members to take an interest in the colonial question.⁵¹

⁴⁸ RC, 495,154,596, the longer version is pp. 14a-22; the condensed is pp. 23-5.

⁴⁹ RC,495,154,577, p. 36. Undated report on ICP apparently prepared by Vera Vasilieva before the VIIth Comintern Congress.

⁵⁰ *Pyatyi vsemirnyi kongress III Kommunisticheskovo internatsionala, [Fifth World Congress of the III Communist International]*, vol. 1, (Leningrad: Stenograficheskii Otchet, 1925), p. 655: 22nd Session, 1 July 1924.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 657

Quoc's final intervention, during a debate on the agrarian question, was obviously carefully planned. He spoke as a specialist on the peasants of the French colonies, not just on Indochina. His own research and articles by his Parisian colleagues for *Le Paria* were probably the basis for his speech. He did not waste time with the ideological niceties: such questions as percentages of poor, middle or rich peasants and landlords. In his view, the 95% of the French colonial populations who were peasants were 'absolutely exploited'.⁵² Land confiscation by French capitalists was at the root of their exploitation. In Vietnam, he said, 'When the French conquered this colony, the war drove peasants out of their villages. As a result, when they returned home, they found their land had been occupied by concessionaires, following the victorious army. They handed out land which for centuries had been populated and worked by the natives.'⁵³ He painted a dark picture of abuse, worst of all for the peasants of Equatorial Africa, where 'the old folk, women and children are imprisoned, mistreated, tortured, starved, martyred and sometimes murdered'.⁵⁴ Quoc equated liberation from the colonial yoke with the proletarian revolution. 'It is up to the International to help these miserable peasants to organize. It is up to them to show the path to proletarian revolution and emancipation,' he implored.⁵⁵ One wonders how much his memories of Central Vietnam in 1908 influenced his view of French oppression – the injustice which he had witnessed as a teenager must still have motivated him, as it had in Paris. In fact, when he reported to the Profintern in July, 1924 about the situation of the Vietnamese proletariat, he spoke of the 'brutal repression and bloody cruelty' of the French in 1908.⁵⁶ The timing of the bourgeois-democratic revolution or relations between workers and peasants do not seem to have overly concerned him in 1924.

The Fifth Congress, while it marked Quoc's real debut on the Comintern stage, was not itself a major forum for debate on colonial issues. The widening rift between Trotsky and the ruling triumvirate in Russia, along with the post-mortem of the aborted 1923 revolt in Germany, overshadowed other issues. And as the dangers of factionalism within the Comintern grew, increasing attention was paid to 'bolshevik discipline'. The slogan of 'Bolshevisation' made its first appearance at this congress – the Comintern's member parties were now required to become disciplined parties, 'permitting no fractions, tendencies or groups'.⁵⁷ They were to be restructured on the model of the Russian Bolshevik party. The central organs of the member parties of the Comintern would be

⁵² Ibid., 25 Session: 3 July 1924, p. 759.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 759.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 761.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 762.

⁵⁶ See discussion below of report to the Third Profintern Congress, RC, 534,1,40.

⁵⁷ Jane Degras, op. cit., p. 154..

answerable to their own rank and file, but also to the ECCI. The ECCI would be responsible for vetting their programmes and all programmatic documents.⁵⁸

Signs of the conflict within the Russian party surfaced in the Congress discussion on the tactics of united front, which Zinoviev called 'the most debated question in our ranks'.⁵⁹ Zinoviev himself gave a bleak appraisal of the tactic and its origins, yet he left no doubt that it was going to remain the Comintern line, as well as that of the Russian party. 'The tactic of the United Front remains correct,' he said flatly. But he added the proviso that 'the question should be put concretely, for every country separately, in accordance with the prevailing conditions.' He made it clear that he saw this tactic, which was returning Russia itself to relative economic normalcy, as a retreat:

Looking back on the road that has been traversed, we can see that to the Communist International as a whole in 1921-22, the tactics of the united front meant the realisation that we have not yet won a majority of the working class; secondly, that social democracy is still very strong; thirdly, that we are on the defensive and that the enemy was attacking ... fourthly, that the decisive fight is not yet on the order of the day. Hence we advanced the slogan: 'To the masses!' and later to the tactics of the united front...

For the European parties, the Fifth Congress constituted a move towards the left. Karl Radek, who had been advising the German party, had to bear the blame for the failure of the 1923 uprising there. Both he and, indirectly, Trotsky were castigated for interpreting united front tactics as 'an organic coalition with social democracy'.⁶⁰ Yet it should be noted that, as Radek and the German party leader Brandler maintained, this coalition had been approved by the Comintern in 1923.⁶¹ The insistence of the Comintern and Russian leadership on laying the blame for failure on the local executors of policy foreshadowed what would happen after the breakup of the united front in China. It should also be noted that Trotsky was by no means a proponent of cooperation with social democrats. In his 'Manifesto of the Fifth Comintern Congress on the Tenth Anniversary of the Outbreak of War', he criticized the German social democrats for their role in the failed 1923 uprising: '...it is precisely at such critical moments, moments of life and death for the bourgeoisie, when the future of the workers is at stake, that the social-democrats maliciously destroy the united front of the proletariat, bring irresolution into the workers' ranks, promote discouragement, isolate the communist party, and become the pace-makers of capitalist

⁵⁸ Adibekov et al., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁵⁹ *Inprecor*, (*English version*), no. 41, 16 July 1924, p. 405: speech of 20 June, Third Session.

⁶⁰ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 47.

⁶¹ Jane Degras, *The Communist International*, vol. II, p. 96.

reaction...'.⁶² This point of view would in a few years become firmly set in Comintern thinking and widely propagated by Stalin by 1928-9. In Trotsky's case in particular, one should remember that his policies were rarely the real cause of the campaigns against him. Rather it was his closeness to Lenin and envied status as the founder of the Red Army which motivated the ruling triumvirate to isolate him.

French delegate Albert Treint's comments on the united front seem to sum up the view which prevailed at the congress: '... The united front is a tactic for the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses and not an organised alliance with the social democratic leaders... Labour governments and Left Blocs result in bourgeois democracy finding an echo within our own parties... to fight against the bourgeoisie means more than ever a fight against social democracy, exteriorly (sic), and a fight against the right within the International.' In his closing remarks he stated: 'We are also: Against the debolshevisation of the Russian party; For the Bolshevisation of the fraternal parties, For the realization of the world Bolshevik Party which the Communist International, animated by the spirit of Lenin, must become.'⁶³

Dmitry Manuilsky, a French-speaking Comintern operative from the Ukraine who would become identified as a spokesman for Stalin's viewpoint, did make a pitch at the Congress for the united front tactic in the colonies. He raised the fact that the CCP had criticized those of its members who had entered the Guomindang for 'class collaboration'. He admitted that communists had to steer a fine course between taking advantage of the united front tactics which, he said, 'are revolutionizing the East,' and losing their independent class identity. He wondered aloud whether Asian communists should be willing 'not only to collaborate with petty-bourgeois parties but to take the initiative in organizing them in backward countries.'⁶⁴ (To judge by a letter which he wrote from Canton in 1925, Nguyen Ai Quoc had no qualms about this tactic of collaboration or infiltration. In a post-script to this letter, written to the French delegation to the Comintern, he requested that they approach the Colonial Study Committee of the French Party in Paris, to find out whether Nguyen The Truyen had joined the communist party. If he had, Quoc requested that he be given the order, 'to enter the newly organized Constitutionalist Group in Paris, in order to infiltrate it (*pour la noyauter*).)⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., p. 108.

⁶³ *Inprecor*, vol. 4, n. 42, 17 July 1924, session of 20 June, p. 416.

⁶⁴ *Pyatyi Vsemirnyi Kongress*, 20th Session, 30 June 1924, p. 593.

⁶⁵ RC, 495, 154, 594, p. 28-back.

On the whole, however, Manuilsky was careful not to go too far in endorsing united front tactics. The bulk of his intervention concerned the problems of self-determination for the Balkan nations and Central Europe. His effectiveness must also have been decreased by the sniping of M.N. Roy, who as in 1920, openly disagreed with the Soviet evaluation of the nationalist movements in colonies. Roy felt the Comintern should be paying more attention to the revolutionary workers and especially peasants in colonial countries.⁶⁶ As he became a full voting member of the ECCI at this congress, his opinions must have carried some weight. Quoc's intervention in this debate, from which I have quoted above, came in the session following Roy's and Katayama's, the 22nd. It was unambiguously in favour of Comintern action in the colonies, but did not deal directly with the united front controversy. He shared with Roy the conviction that the revolution in Europe depended on the development of liberation movements in the colonies, and seemed to be willing to finesse a discussion of how or to whom this support should be offered. His target was the inaction of the French communists. He went so far as to warn that the colonial population was 'turning towards democratic and liberal groups such as the League of Human Rights..., which make an effort on their behalf, or at least give the appearance of doing something.'⁶⁷

Following the Fifth Comintern Congress, Nguyen Ai Quoc also participated in the Third Profintern Congress in July. (The Profintern, The Red International of Trade Unions, was founded in 1921.) Again, his overarching theme was the desperate plight of his nation and the need for the French comrades to support their long-suffering brothers in the colonies. In his five-page report to the Congress, he made the case that there was a growing proletariat in Vietnam just waiting to be organized. 'There are enterprises where respectable numbers of workers can be found,' he said: 3,000 at a textile mill in Tonkin, 4,000 in the mines of Halong Bay; 8,000 railway workers and 30,000 employees of the Portland Cement Company. These workers toiled in appalling conditions, according to Quoc. They worked 12 to 14 hour days, with longer days on the plantations. There was no question of pensions or compensation for accidents; the workers had no right to strike.⁶⁸ Worse still was the fact that there existed in Vietnam three categories of forced labour which Quoc described as 'three categories of slavery'.⁶⁹ First were the prisoners who were loaned to factories or plantations – they worked handcuffed and yoked at the neck. Next were those eligible for the *corvée* or labour contribution – all Vietnamese from 18 to 60. The number of days of free labour to be furnished was fixed only in theory, Quoc said; 'in

⁶⁶ Charles McLane, op. cit., pp. 38-9.

⁶⁷ *Pyatyi Vsemirnyi Kongress*, 22nd Session, p. 655.

⁶⁸ RC, 534,1,40, p.34, report delivered at 15th session of Congress, 21 July 1924.

practice it is indefinite'. 'When there is a canal to be dug or a road to build or repair, there is a general mobilization which can last several months,' he explained. Third were the labourers recruited to be sent to work in France's Pacific colonies, where Quoc claimed they were sold to planters and European factory owners.

The workers' situation was 'deplorable', but not hopeless, Quoc told the Congress. 'With the aid of revolutionary organizations and principally the Profintern, we can work to wear down and then break the yoke of oppressive capitalism.' But the French comrades had to make a 'real undertaking to give effective, practical assistance, and not just with words alone'. Quoc drew up a formal resolution, calling on the French unions to support the indigenous peoples' right to unionize and to send at least two permanent organizers to Indochina.⁷⁰ The French delegate, Reynaud, claimed to be well-disposed towards these proposals, but did not offer formal support for Quoc's resolution, as his union had no money to send organizers to Vietnam.⁷¹

5. The Comintern and the United Front in China

The Comintern pendulum was swinging away from what had become known as 'united fronts from above', those organized by negotiation among party leaders, to 'united fronts from below', those created by attracting non-communist workers and peasants to support communist actions and programmes. It is ironic that the Russian party and state were at this very moment implementing Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* by helping to create a united front entirely from above between the Chinese nationalists in the Guomindang and the CCP. This policy was probably not submitted for debate to the Comintern; Charles McLane points out that it was a 'multi-level policy' involving a number of Soviet party and government branches.⁷² As Comintern debates were still printed more or less in full, it must have been deemed politic not to stage an open discussion of China policy. The Russian Foreign Ministry was not eager to publicize Borodin's advisory role to Sun Yatsen, for fear that it would derail the normalization of relations with the western democracies. (Recently published Russian documents show that Borodin was formally attached to the Russian Foreign Ministry's Beijing mission. Leo Karakhan even considered withdrawing Borodin at the end of 1923, as he feared that Sun

⁶⁹ RC, 534,1,40, p. 35-6.

⁷⁰ RC, 534,1,40, p. 38.

⁷¹ RC, 534,1,40, p. 66.

⁷² Charles McLane, op. cit., pp. 44-5.

Yatsen's indiscretions regarding Borodin's advisory role would embarrass the Foreign Ministry.⁷³)

Comintern structures with responsibility for work in the East had undergone constant organizational changes from 1919 onwards. To avoid confusion about where and what the various Eastern and Far Eastern bureaux and secretariats were, I will give a brief explanation of these changes up to 1924. An Eastern Section (*otdel*) of the Comintern was established in December 1919 by a decision of the Executive Committee (ECCI), but what it accomplished is not clear.⁷⁴ In July 1920 a section of Eastern Peoples was created, attached to the Siberian Bureau of the Russian Communist Party in Irkutsk, while an Eastern Bureau of the ECCI was also set up in May 1920 in Vladivostok.⁷⁵ Then in January 1921 a step was taken towards unifying Russian party and Comintern structures responsible for the Far East. The Section of Eastern Peoples in Irkutsk was converted into the 'Comintern representation in the Far East in the form of a Secretariat'. By March of 1921 sixty-eight people were working there, including the future Mongolian leader Choibalsan.⁷⁶ By the end of 1921 this secretariat had four sections: a Mongolian-Tibetan, a Chinese, a Korean and a Japanese.⁷⁷

But at the Fourth Congress in December 1922, a report revealed that the Eastern sector's work followed no plan and was 'completely unsystematic'.⁷⁸ Again a reorganization was decreed. A single, all-embracing structure was created, again called the Eastern Section (*otdel*) with Karl Radek named as its head in May 1923. His deputy was Grigory Voitinsky. Three divisions were created within the Eastern Section: the Near Eastern Section, composed of Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Persia; the Middle Eastern Section, including British India, Indochina, and Indonesia; and the Far Eastern Section of Japan, Korea, China and Mongolia.⁷⁹ Indecision or perhaps competition for control seems to have caused rapid changes in how Far Eastern activities were handled. Immediately after the Fourth Congress, in December 1922, a new Vladivostok Bureau of the Comintern's Eastern Section had been designated, composed of Voitinsky, Sen Katayama and Maring. But in January of the following year the ECCI's

⁷³ Go Henryu, M.L. Titarenko et al., *VKP(B), Komintern I Kitai, Dokumenty, [The Soviet Communist Party, the Comintern and China, Documents]*, Vol. I, (Moscow: RTsKhIDNI, 1994), pp. 349-51. Hereafter references to all volumes of this collection will use the shortened title: *Comintern and China*.

⁷⁴ Adibekov et al., *The Organizational Structure of the Comintern*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-3.

Organizational Bureau proposed the creation of a Far Eastern Secretariat directly answerable to the Executive Committee itself, not to the Eastern Section. The Far Eastern Secretariat was given broader powers than the Vladivostok Bureau, which was officially wound up in June 1923. The new secretariat took over the Bureau's personnel: Voitinsky, Katayama and Maring. Although this secretariat was apparently based in Moscow, Voitinsky and Maring spent considerable periods in China.⁸⁰ Conceivably, the change in the line of command was deemed necessary by the Russian Politbureau, which by 1923 had decided to take a close interest in Russian and Comintern aid to China. It was, for example, the Politbureau and probably Stalin himself who in 1923 chose Mikhail Borodin to lead the mission to Sun Yatsen.⁸¹ The ECCI was even in Lenin's day becoming closely controlled by its members from the Russian party.⁸²

The Comintern became involved in advising the Chinese communist movement in the spring of 1920, when Voitinsky first travelled to Shanghai and helped Chen Duxiu to produce the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) manifesto, which appeared that November.⁸³ Maring and another Comintern envoy, Nikolsky, were on hand at the Chinese party's First Congress in July 1921 -- Maring's own report shows that he raised the issue of a communist-Guomindang alliance during this visit, but that it was rejected by the congress.⁸⁴ Thus the sections of Lenin's 1920 Theses which advocated alliances with nationalist movements in pre-capitalist countries remained a declaration without any tangible results. In August 1922, however, Maring persuaded five of the CCP's top leaders to accept what became known as the 'Bloc Within' policy.⁸⁵ This policy called on all CCP members to join the Guomindang (GMD), while retaining their own party structures and goals.

In 1923 the young Soviet state began to develop a programme of support for Sun Yatsen's republican government in the south of China. This policy grew out of Russia's foreign policy objectives -- the search for allies and safe borders -- and was perhaps pursued with more speed than the general membership of the Comintern would have liked. As Charles McLane points out, the Comintern was not directly involved in the diplomatic negotiations which produced the agreement between Adolf Joffe and Sun Yatsen in January 1923.⁸⁶ The Joffe-Sun Agreement sealed Moscow's offer of aid, and Sun's conditional acceptance.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

⁸¹ Wilbur and How, op. cit., p. 7

⁸² See, e.g., McDermott and Agnew, op. cit., p. 44.

⁸³ Hans Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, p. 61.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 88

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 105-7.

After that it was not just the Comintern which provided advisers to China, but the Bolshevik party's Central Committee, the Red Army Military Academy, the Profintern and the International of Communist Youth as well. After Nguyen Ai Quoc's arrival in Canton the Krestintern would also have its representative there.

The Comintern appears to have functioned in China as one branch of the Russian aid mission, with final decisions becoming the monopoly of Stalin and the Russian party's Central Committee. Comintern directives to the Chinese party up to mid-1923 show a measure of caution regarding Sun's intentions. For example, the May 1923 instructions of the ECCI to the Third Congress of the CCP decree that the communist party 'must attempt to establish a union of workers and peasants'; but continue, 'it goes without saying that leadership must belong to the party of the working class... To strengthen the CP, making it a mass party of the proletariat, to assemble the forces of the working class in unions – this is the overriding obligation of the communists...'.⁸⁷ But the reorganization of the Comintern's structures dealing with the Far East in early 1923 could be viewed as evidence that Comintern advisers would be working closely with the Russian Central Committee to implement the united front between the Chinese communists and the Guomindang. As mentioned above, it was in January 1923, the same month as the Joffe-Sun Agreement was signed, that a new Far Eastern Secretariat directly answerable to the ECCI was set up. When the CCP's Third Congress officially adopted the Bloc-within policy in June 1923, the stage was set for the beginning of Mikhail Borodin's mission to Canton. Borodin, (Mikhail Grusenber), a seasoned Comintern operative who had spent eleven years in America teaching English to immigrants and organizing Russian socialists, left Beijing for Canton in September 1923.

5. Quoc's Assignment to Canton

After the Fifth Comintern Congress, Nguyen Ai Quoc finally prodded the Eastern Section into taking action on his planned voyage to China. His assignment appears to have been so loosely defined, however, that it is difficult to believe that the Comintern leaders who dealt with his request had paid it much attention. From his own recapitulation of events in his letter of 9 September 1924, it is clear that he was leaving Moscow with very tenuous backing:

⁸⁶ Charles McLane, op. cit., p.35.

After the Fifth Congress, the Eastern Section informed me: 1) that it was going to recommend me to the Guomindang, for which I would be obliged to work, because except for the cost of the voyage, the section could not give me any financial aid; 2) that I would be there as a private person and not as a Comintern agent; 3) that I should have no relationship with our party [this seems to mean the French party, of which Quoc was still a member] while in China.

Even though all these conditions seem difficult, I accepted them in order to leave. To make up for conditions two and three, I asked my party to give me a mandate, and to send a letter to the Chinese party, asking them to help me in my work. The problem has thus been resolved.⁸⁸

Still, his departure from Moscow was delayed, this time by a flare up of the civil war in China. 'The Guomindang hasn't answered the letter from the Eastern Section. And my departure is once more adjourned to 'an indeterminate date,' he wrote.⁸⁹ None of these difficulties would exist, he continued, if it were not for the financial problem. He suggested that the Comintern simply give him the money to live in China which he was being given 'to wait in Moscow and do nothing'.

On the 19 of September Quoc wrote to Albert Treint, a French Party member who had moved into the top ranks of the Comintern at the Fifth Congress. He was a full member of the ECCI as well as on the Secretariat. In this letter Quoc made clear his reservations about having to earn a living while in Canton. 'To work for a living is not a problem, even in a country of which I know the written, but not the spoken language,' he explained. 'But in my case there are several inconveniences,' he added. Firstly, he complained, he would be living illegally in a city which was 'swarming with French spies'. Secondly, he said, he 'ought to be entirely free to do what I want to do, that is to study the situation, to see people and to organize something'. He made a final plea that Treint should put his case to the ECCI.⁹⁰ Treint then approached the Comintern Secretariat, which seems to have had the power to make quick decisions, with a request that it advise the Eastern Section to reconsider Quoc's request for financial aid. 'This is not the time, when the French imperialists are starting to intervene in China, when they are using Indochina as their base of action, for the Eastern Section to skimp on the work in Indochina – not if it has the least bit of political sense,' he wrote.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Jane Degras, *The Communist International, vol. II, pp. 25-6; directives cited by McLane, pp. 37-8.*

⁸⁸ RC, 495,154,594, letter to an un-named 'Comrade'. At top someone has written in pencil 'to Voitinsky'. Hong Ha's contention, repeated by Kobelev, that Quoc went to China as a 'plenipotentiary of the Far Eastern Secretariat' seems to be mistaken, or at least an overstatement. (Hong Ha, op. cit., p. 82.)

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ RC, 495,18,282, p. 81.

⁹¹ RC, 495,18,282, p. 80, letter dated 22 Sept. 1924.

Apparently Treint's petition was successful, because Nguyen Ai Quoc at last got to Canton on approximately 11 November 1924. When he reported his arrival to a friend in the Comintern, he mentioned that he was staying in Comrade Borodin's home with two or three Chinese comrades. He gave his address as Lou, The ROSTA Agency, Canton, China.⁹² It appears that between the 22 of September and his arrival in Canton, someone had arranged for him to work as a translator for ROSTA, the Russian Telegraphic Agency, a precursor of the Tass news service. As Borodin had left for China in the autumn of 1923, the arrangement is unlikely to have been his doing. Most likely it was thanks to Voitinsky's intervention that Quoc found this niche in Canton. Voitinsky was back in Moscow at this point, and would return to China in November 1924.⁹³ Correspondence in the Comintern archives shows that he had an agent or informant in Beijing, known as Sam Slepak, who worked in the ROSTA agency there in 1923. As Slepak had served as a Deputy Head of the Comintern's Eastern Section in 1922, one can assume that he was a regular Comintern operative and that ROSTA was already being used to provide cover for Comintern work.⁹⁴ Whether or not Quoc was directly responsible to Voitinsky while he worked in China is unclear, but Voitinsky seems to be the most likely recipient of the reports which Quoc would write in English from Canton. (Voitinsky and Slepak were both, like Borodin, fluent in English, which was a decided advantage for work in China.) But while Quoc's work as a translator and correspondent must have provided enough money for his daily needs, it does not seem to have provided him with official journalistic cover. When he first wrote to the Krestintern after his arrival in Canton, he requested that they continue to list his name in their Presidium or, if they decided to remove it, to announce that he was ill -- he did not want it widely known that he had gone to Canton, since his status there was as an illegal.⁹⁵

To summarize, one can say with some certainty that Nguyen Ai Quoc was not sent to Canton to be a direct assistant or secretary of Borodin as has been suggested in the past.⁹⁶ It is true, though, that his status and relationships within the Comintern in 1923-24 remain something of a puzzle. There is little underpinning in the Comintern archives for the idea that Quoc was a respected equal of the upper strata of leaders, such as Manuilsky, or the particular protégé of any one person.⁹⁷ M.N. Roy, an imposing multi-lingual Brahmin

⁹² RC, 495/154/594, p. 16, letter of 12 Nov. 1924.

⁹³ *Comintern and China, vol. 1*, p. 328.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-295.

⁹⁵ RC, 535/1/42, letter to Dombal of 12 Nov. 1924.

⁹⁶ Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 46.

⁹⁷ See the argument of Ton That Thien, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-54.

Bengali who had burst on the Comintern scene in 1920, was the senior spokesman on colonial issues at the Fifth Congress. It is clear that Quoc was more in tune with the united front policy for the colonies than Roy, and for that reason may have been encouraged to speak at the Congress by Manuilsky. But unlike Roy and some of the other Asians involved in Comintern work in 1924, Quoc did not yet represent an Asian communist party. Both Semaun of Indonesia and Sen Katayama of Japan were included in the ECCI in 1924, presumably because they were thought to represent sizable communist movements.

Moreover, Quoc's sympathy with Manuilsky's views does not seem to have translated into privileged treatment. In a note to Petrov, head of the Eastern Section, Quoc complained about the rent he was being asked to pay for what he considered inferior accommodation in the overcrowded Hotel Lux. 'During the months of December, January and February,' he wrote, I was in room 176, where there were always four or five lodgers. In the daytime the noise was continual, which prevented me from working. At night I was eaten by bedbugs, which prevented me from getting any rest.' Since March, he had been housed in a small single room, he said. 'Comparing the restricted space and very basic furniture in my room with the other larger rooms, more comfortable, with several lamps, telephone, bathroom, wardrobe, sofa, etc, and with a reasonable rent, the price which they want me to pay is scandalous.'⁹⁸ The tone here is one of insult – did he feel that he was getting worse treatment than the Europeans or someone of Roy's standing?

The impression created by Nguyen Ai Quoc's correspondence during his fourteen-month stay in Russia is, in fact, one of frustration with the lack of action by the Comintern. This could reflect the fact that the Comintern itself was without firm direction or that the struggle between partisans of Trotsky and Zinoviev was absorbing the full attention of the decision-makers. Quoc's membership in the French party may have complicated his position – Trotsky's influence among French communists was considerable and as late as January 1923 he had been working as the designated Comintern consultant on France, with Jacques Doriot as his deputy.⁹⁹ In this political minefield, Nguyen Ai Quoc seems to have learned to deal with whoever was in authority and to pursue his own concerns. His personal style was the antithesis of Roy's -- Roy thrived on theoretical debate, and by 1929 he was removed from the Comintern. Quoc felt able to promote his agenda with Albert Treint, a leftist supporter of Zinoviev, even though he may not have been in complete sympathy with all of Treint's views. Once he got to Canton he wrote to a French

⁹⁸ RC, 495,154,594, undated note, written after March 1924.

colleague in Moscow that Treint had 'fought hard' for his [Quoc's] departure for China.¹⁰⁰ The first sign that Quoc's political position within the Comintern was not entirely secure would come only in late 1927-1928, when he began to plan for his return to Asia from Europe. By the end of 1927 Albert Treint would be expelled from the French CP and anyone with a first-hand knowledge of the failures of Stalin's united front policy in China would find himself under suspicion.

⁹⁹ Adibekov et al., op. cit., p. 83.

¹⁰⁰ RC, 495,154,594 , p. 28.

CHAPTER III

The Canton Period and its Aftermath (November 1924 – June 1927)

Although Nguyen Ai Quoc could not yet speak Cantonese, his arrival in the tropical port of Canton must have felt like a long-delayed homecoming. Canton (now Guangzhou) had served as an out-post of Vietnamese freedom fighters since the Manchu dynasty's collapse in 1911. But the early Vietnamese hopes that republican China would back an anti-French revolt with money and weapons had quickly faded. Intensified French repression within Vietnam during the First World War coupled with the eclipse of Sun Yatsen's influence in China resulted in bitter disappointments for the leader of the anti-French movement, Phan Boi Chau. Acts of sabotage designed to attract support from Sun Yatsen's government, and then from the Germans during the war, caused Phan's *Quang Phuc Hoi* (Restoration Association) to lose many of its most faithful lieutenants.¹ Following the blowing up of two French colonels in the Hotel Hanoi in April 1913, the plot for which Phan Van Truong's two brothers were imprisoned, seven people were executed and 57 imprisoned.² Phan Boi Chau himself spent the years from 1914 to 1917 in a Chinese prison, and then retired to Hangzhou where he earned his living writing for such journals as *Junxi (Military Problems)*.³

Nguyen Ai Quoc appeared on the scene in November 1924, just as the Russian military mission in Canton was approaching its full strength of around fifty instructors.⁴ The first shipment of arms from Vladivostok had arrived in Canton on 8 October.⁵ The united front between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD) had been formalized at the first GMD Congress in January 1924, when the establishment of a military training academy on Whampoa (Huangpu) island in the Pearl River had been approved. At the same time three communists had been elected to the GMD's Central Executive Committee, while six others, including Mao Zedong, became candidate members.⁶ Quoc's stay in China, which would end in May 1927, coincided with a period of political success for the government in Guangdong. He was able to take advantage of

¹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: Univ of CA, 1971), pp. 220, 229.

² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³ Phan Boi Chau, *Mémoires de Phan Boi Chau*, trans. Georges Boudarel, (Paris: France-Asie, 1969), p. 183.

⁴ C. Martin Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, p. 7.

⁵ *Comintern and China, Vol. 1*, p. 317.

⁶ O. Edmund Clubb, *Twentieth Century China*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), p. 123.

the most fruitful months of the united front, a time when émigré Vietnamese in China could freely absorb the training and new ideas being offered by the Russian advisers, both in military affairs and political theory and organizing. The ferment in China would encourage a new wave of political activism in Vietnam, which in turn would provide fresh recruits to the population of would-be rebels in southern China. How Quoc used these circumstances to create the nucleus of Vietnam's communist party is the main theme of this chapter.

It is too simplistic, however, to look at Quoc's Canton years as the time when he arrived like a missionary from Moscow to make converts to communism. The united front was also an important learning experience for him, as well as for the other Vietnamese who lived through it. Quoc found himself in the thick of a peasant upheaval in Guangdong province, which he was expected to analyze and encourage on behalf of the Krestintern. This was his first exposure to the Asian peasantry since his youth in Central Vietnam, and must have marked a major advance in his progression from propagandist to a real organizer of revolution. The CCP- Guomintang united front was, moreover, a politically complex phenomenon which would be re-examined and criticized for years to come. When it inevitably fell apart in 1927, the recriminations became part of the intensifying battle for the soul of the world communist movement. The breakdown of the united front would become a paradigm for communists of various tendencies -- both Stalinists and Trotskyists -- who would use it as proof that bourgeois allies should never be trusted. Nguyen Ai Quoc and his compatriots who experienced this chaotic time did not all draw the same lessons from it. In particular, a number of Vietnamese students who were in China during the collapse and aftermath of the united front became some of the most radical in the Vietnamese political spectrum. The final part of this chapter will look at this aftermath and where the Vietnamese communist movement stood at the beginning of 1928.

Three main documentary sources are available on this stage in Nguyen Ai Quoc's career, each of which portrays his activities from a different vantage point. There are his reports and letters to various Comintern departments, which cover his efforts to recruit Vietnamese for a proto-communist network. Then there are his letters to the Krestintern, which give the impression that he was heavily involved with the Guangdong peasant movement, especially in 1925. The third source is the French archives, in particular the reports of the *Sûreté* agent known as Lam Duc Thu (Nguyen Cong Vien, Nguyen Chi Vien or Hoang Chan Dong).

One of Phan Boi Chau's principal lieutenants, a graduate of a Beijing military academy, Lam Duc Thu (Agent Pinot) became an early recruit to Quoc's secret group. He is now known to have been the son of Nguyen Huu Dan, fellow-student of Nguyen Ai Quoc's father at the Quoc Tu Giam Academy in Hue.⁷ His reports to the *Sûreté* include occasional insights into how Quoc operated, but he often appears to have been retailing second-hand gossip, as several of the *Sûreté* informers seem to have done. This can probably be explained by the fact that he was not accepted into the inner circle of Quoc's confidants – but there is also a possibility that he was not always forthcoming to the *Sûreté*. Some of his collaborators, including two who became Quoc's closest allies, Le Hong Son and Ho Tung Mau, apparently believed that Lam Duc Thu was passing useless information to the French in order to receive a subsidy for the Vietnamese group.⁸

On balance, however, it seems clear that the *Sûreté* reaped the greater benefit from Lam Duc Thu's services. He was, undeniably, an extremely useful agent until at least 1929. He was so sure of his worth that he made frequent requests for more money. In December 1926, for example, he complained that his salary was being paid with a long delay... 'and moreover,' he wrote, 'I never receive all that is due to me and the expense of my correspondence is ruining me.'⁹ Working as a photographer in Canton, he took pictures of many early Thanh Nien recruits.¹⁰ These would be used in 1930-31 by the French police to identify communist suspects. Yet only at the end of 1929 did the communists in southern China become convinced that Thu's allegiance belonged to the French.¹¹ In early 1925 Thu was able to warn the French that Nguyen Ai Quoc was in China and using the pseudonym Ly Thuy.¹² Quoc's careful efforts to keep his presence a secret from the French were all to no avail.

1. The First Organizational Steps

Quoc announced his arrival in Canton to his communist contacts in several letters dated the 12 November 1924. He claimed to have arrived the day before,¹³ even though he wrote as though he already had had considerable experience of events in China. For example, one of these letters purports to be a first-hand description of how Fanya Borodin, Mikhail's

⁷ Song Thanh et al, *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau, [Nguyen Ai Quoc in Quang Chau]*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1998), p. 52.

⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, annexe à l'envoi no. 208, 15 juillet 1925.

⁹ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noel, envoi n. 356, 5 Dec, 1926.

¹⁰ AOM, SPCE, box 368, envoi n. 534, 29 Oct, 1929

¹¹ AOM, SPCE 383, Mission Noel, envoi no. 537, letter of Nov. 8 1929.

¹² AOM, SPCE 365, Note Noel no. 155, 24 May 1925.

wife, was organizing Chinese women.¹⁴ He may have journeyed as far as Shanghai with Voitinsky, who returned to China from Moscow in November. In any case, he wasted little time in making contacts and setting up links for his work with the ROSTA Agency, which was to provide his main source of income during his years in Canton. The immediate preoccupation of the republican capital that November was Sun Yatsen's planned trip to Beijing, where the Guomintang president hoped to negotiate a political détente with the northern warlords.¹⁵ Quoc wrote in English in his usual laconic style to an un-named friend at the Comintern: 'I haven't seen anybody yet. Everyone here is busy about Dr. Sun going North.'¹⁶ To Tomas Dombal, the Polish Secretary General of the Krestintern, he sent his apologies for failing to inform the members of the council that he was leaving for China. 'My departure from Moscow was decided somewhat brusquely and I had no time to warn you,' he wrote in French. He went on to describe how the poor peasants were organizing, 'under the aegis of the Guomintang, but under the direction of the communists'. 'It is an excellent opportunity for our propaganda,' he said.¹⁷

Quoc wrote in the guise of a female member of the GMD named Loo Shing Yan in his account of the women's movement. He sent it with a signed cover letter, also dated 12 November, to a women's newsletter whose title he doesn't mention.¹⁸ 'When I was at the Comintern I had the pleasure of collaborating with your paper. Now I want to continue that collaboration. But since I am working here illegally I will send you articles in the form of "Letters from China", and sign them with a woman's name. I think that will give originality and variety to the pieces, and at the same time assure my anonymity,' he wrote. As soon as Quoc had assumed his duties as a translator and propagandist for ROSTA he must have begun searching out the other Vietnamese emigres scattered around southern China. In late 1924 these Vietnamese do not seem to have formed a tightly knit group. They had been absorbed into a variety of academies and local armies, in particular the army of the Yunnan general Yang Ximin, who until mid-1925 shared power in Guangdong province. Some, such as the Sino-Vietnamese rebel chieftain Tam Kam Say, lived as outlaws, consorting with heroin traders and buffalo thieves in the border country. Even before Quoc's arrival, Phan Boi Chau's pre-eminence among the emigres had become less clear than during the pre-war years. Sometime in 1923 several of them had begun to organize a new grouping, the *Tam Tam Xa* (Heart-to-Heart Society or Society of Like

¹³ RC, 495, 154, 594, p. 16.

¹⁴ RC, 495, 154, 594, pp. 12-14.

¹⁵ Clubb, Op.Cit., p. 128

¹⁶ RC, 495, 154, 594, p. 16.

¹⁷ RC, 535, 1, 42 – file containing N.A.Q's correspondence with the Krestintern

Minds), which they did not invite Phan Boi Chau to join. His reputation had been tarnished by a treatise he had written on Franco-Vietnamese cooperation in 1918 at the behest of émigré and suspected informer, Phan Ba Ngoc. The latter, son of the Nghe Tinh nationalist leader Phan Dinh Phung, had been won over by the promised reforms of Governor General Sarraut.¹⁹ Phan Ba Ngoc was assassinated as a traitor by Le Hong Son in 1922 on Cuong De's orders.²⁰

The Tam tam xa began by resuscitating some of Phan Boi Chau's fundraising networks within Vietnam, and in June 1924 carried out a bombing aimed at the visiting French Governor General Merlin, who was passing through Canton.²¹ While neither Hanoi sources nor Phan Boi Chau's memoirs emphasize the point, Le Hong Son later confessed to the *Sûreté* that a leading role in this attack was played by Nguyen Hai Than, a northern nationalist who had first joined Phan Boi Chau in 1905 as a student in Japan. He was said to have approached an anarchist Chinese, a fellow officer in the Yunnan army stationed in Canton, who helped the Vietnamese construct two suitcase bombs. One of these was deposited at a reception in the French enclave of Shameen by the recent emigre Pham Hong Thai, posing as a photographer. The bomb killed three French guests, but missed Merlin.²² Pham Hong Thai drowned in the Pearl River trying to escape and became a nationalist martyr. Ironically, this moment of glory for the Vietnamese nationalists, seen by many as the opening salvo in a new round of the battle against the French, may also have been the moment when Lam Duc Thu won the confidence of the *Sûreté*. He was believed by some of his confederates to have warned the French of the coming attack, and also to have turned over the second suitcase bomb for a reward.²³

The attempt on Merlin's life seems to have re-energized Phan Boi Chau. He arrived in Canton in the late summer, probably a few months before Quoc's arrival, to consult with the Vietnamese exiles and make contact with the Russian advisers newly installed at Whampoa.²⁴ At that point he may have helped some of his younger followers gain

¹⁸ RC, 495,154,594, p.16.; *BNTS* p. 238 says that the letter was sent to the newspaper *Rabotnitsa [Working Woman]*.

¹⁹ Phan Boi Chau, op. cit, p. 178-9.

²⁰ AOM, SPCE 367, Interrogation de Le Van Phan (Le Hong Son), 24 Oct. 1932 and following days, pp. 5-6.

²¹ See Trung Chinh, 'Tam Tam Xa la gi?' ('What Was the Tam Tam Xa?'), *NCLS*, no. 134, 1970, p. 8; although this article claims that Le Hong Son's fund-raising trip to Vietnam in 1923 was carried out on behalf of *Tam Tam Xa*, in his confession to the French in 1932, he claims to have been carrying out a mission for Cuong De., AOM, SPCE 367, Interrogation de Le Van Phan, p. 9.)

²² AOM, SPCE 367, Interr. de Le Van Phan, pp. 10-11; *Memoires de Phan Boi Chau*, p. 189-190.

²³ AOM, SPCE 367, Declaration de Le Quang Dat, 'Au Sujet de Lam Duc Thu'.

²⁴ *Mémoires de Phan Boi Chau*, p. 194.

admittance, via the good offices of the GMD leader Liao Zhongkai.²⁵ He also discussed with his fellow exiles the transformation of the *Quang Phuc Hoi* into the Viet Nam *Quoc Dan Dang* (Vietnam Guomindang or National People's party, known by its initials as the VNQDD). They formed several committees, based on the organization of the Chinese GMD, he wrote in his memoirs.²⁶ But by November 1924 Phan had returned to Hangzhou, where he would remain until the following June.

Among the Vietnamese cadets who enrolled at the Whampoa Academy in the autumn of 1924 were Le Hong Son, Le Hong Phong, and Le Quang Dat, all from Nghe An province.²⁷ But a number of the Vietnamese who would enroll in Whampoa in mid-1925 were in 1924 still cadets in the Yunnan army, probably under the command of Nguyen Hai Than. These included a Hoang Luong, Luu Bich, Ngo Chinh Coc and Lieu Khac Thanh, according to Lam Duc Thu.²⁸ Along with Nguyen Hai Than, the older emigres Dinh Te Dan and Dang Su Mac served as officers in the Yunnan army. It is worth remembering that in the autumn of 1924, Whampoa had been open for only a few months and was still in the early phases of organization. In October 1924, the CCP's Central Committee made it clear that they were not impressed with the way the school was being run. They reported to Borodin that anarchists were in charge and that even a newly formed model regiment had 'fallen into their hands'. 'They are spending your funds on the devil knows what,' their letter said.²⁹ So it is difficult to say what quality of military or political training any Vietnamese who entered the first training courses would have received.

Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Canton at a propitious moment, when the Vietnamese were just becoming aware of the potential of the Russian aid mission, but had not yet decided how to follow up the bombing attempt against Governor Merlin. Phan Boi Chau in Hangzhou was too far away to play a role in day-to-day decision making about new initiatives, even if the younger emigres had been willing to include him in their deliberations. As a member of the Russian mission, one who at first lived in Borodin's residence, Quoc had the edge when it came to winning backing for the group of nationalists which would adopt his Leninist methods of political organizing. But gaining financial support from the Soviet mission was not as easy as one might imagine. Moreover, the situation within the group of Vietnamese emigres was probably more fluid than is often assumed. Between December

²⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, Interr. de Le Van Phan, p. 12; Hong Son claims that Liao Zhongkai helped him enter Whampoa.

²⁶ *Mémoires de Phan Boi Chau*, p. 194.

²⁷ AOM, SPCE 367, Interr. de Le Van Phan, p. 12.

²⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, loc. cit.

and June 1925 Quoc was able to recruit a core group of young emigres for a proto-communist group, most of whom would remain loyal followers until his disappearance from Canton in 1927. But this process, alternately viewed as a victory for Marxist-Leninist theory and organizational techniques, or attributed to Quoc's manipulative skills and supposed betrayal of Phan Boi Chau, was more open-ended than most accounts of Vietnamese communist history have led us to believe.

In the anti-communist version of Nguyen Ai Quoc's assumption of leadership in Canton, he was forced to inform against Phan Boi Chau in order to rid himself of his only real competitor. This story has it that Quoc informed the French police of his rival's movements and then lured him to an address in Shanghai's international settlement, where the venerated patriot was arrested.³⁰ Part of the rationale for Quoc's action, in addition to his desire to be rid of a rival, is said to have been his need for the money the French had placed on Phan's head. Quoc is also said to have calculated that the protests which Phan's arrest would cause in Vietnam would stimulate resistance against the French.³¹

From Lam Duc Thu's reports, however, it appears unlikely that Quoc was involved in turning over Phan to the *Sûreté*. These reports make it clear that Thu had been informing the French of Phan's activities for some time, at least since 1924.³² So when the French decided the time had come to arrest Phan, they should not have had any difficulty in discovering his movements. He was indeed picked up in July 1925 (probably not June, as is often assumed, based on Phan's own memoirs) and shipped back to Hanoi. (Lam Duc Thu reported that Phan was planning to come to Canton at the end of July 1925; he had not yet been arrested according to this report at the end of June, 1925.)³³ In November 1925 he was sentenced to hard labour for life. The campaign against his sentence became the start of a series of student strikes and nationwide demonstrations, which in the end set many students on the road to underground activism. In fact, Phan Boi Chau's trial provided open publicity for the rebel movement in China, as one arrested activist testified in 1931.

²⁹ *The Comintern and China*, Vol. I, p. 485, refers to Comintern doc. 514/1/82, pp. 19-21, letter from CCP CC to Borodin, 'not later than 10 Oct. 1924'.

³⁰ Hoang van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism - A Case History of North Vietnam*, (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1964), p. 18.

³¹ Robert Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), pp. 8-9.

³² AOM, SPCE 354, file 'Lettre des Russes', annexe à la note no. 197, 5 Jan. 1925; the envelope from this letter addressed to Phan Boi Chau and Lam Duc Thu from the two Russian advisers was passed to the *Sûreté* by their agent Pinot.

³³ AOM, SPCE 365, annexe à l'envoi 208, 15 juillet 1925. Hue Tam Ho Tai, e.g., gives the date of PBC's arrest as 18 June 1925 in *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 140. The French *Rapport de la Commission d'Enquête sur les Evénements du Nord-Annam*, p. 9, gives the arrest date as July 1925.

Twenty-year-old Tran Van Thanh told his interrogators that, 'the trial of Phan Boi Chau revealed the existence of Vietnamese revolutionaries in China, especially in Canton. We students didn't talk about anything but the 5,000 soldiers in the Whampoa army.'³⁴ By December of 1925 the new Governor General, Alexander Varenne, would have to back down and convert Phan's sentence to life-long house arrest. But it is difficult to believe that Nguyen Ai Quoc could have foreseen the outcome of Phan's arrest and manipulated events as cleverly as his critics claim.³⁵

It is, moreover, difficult to see why Quoc would have needed to get rid of Phan, since in his own letters he claims to have made rapid progress in gaining the adherence of 'the best elements' of the Vietnamese Quoc Dan Dang to his ideas. A letter in the French archives which Phan Boi Chau sent to Quoc in early 1925 also shows that the older man did not feel that he and Quoc were competitors, but rather that Quoc would insure the continuation of the anti-French struggle in the next generation. '...Aside from you, who else is there to entrust this responsibility of replacing me to?' he asked. 'I left the country when I was almost forty,' Phan wrote, 'and I can't escape the experience of my studies --- thus my ideas now are the same as they were formerly. You have studied widely and been to many more places than Uncle -- ten times, a hundred times more. Your ideas and your plan surpass mine -- will you share one or two tasks with me?' he asked, perhaps with a touch of irony.³⁶ Phan Boi Chau was also a friend of Quoc's father from the same district in Nghe An. Phan's son-in-law, Vuong Thuc Oanh, who would become an early member of Quoc's group, came from the same village as Quoc's father. Quoc's older brother and sister had both been sentenced to hard labour for the assistance which they had given to Phan's fighters. So long as Phan Boi Chau was not actively thwarting his plans, Nguyen Ai Quoc would have had, in my view, a strong motivation to use him as a figurehead for his movement.

This is not to say that there were no rivalries among the Vietnamese in southern China. Nguyen Hai Than (also known as Vu Hai Thu and Nguyen Cam Giang), before long took a dislike to Ly Thuy, and in early 1927 would form a rival anti-French group. He and Nguyen Ai Quoc would remain competitors until 1946. But in the first heady months of republican power in Canton, when the united front seemed to answer the needs of both

³⁴ AOM, SPCE, box 371 (on Phan Chu Trinh), Interrogation of Tran Van Thanh, 31 July 1931.

³⁵ See Robert Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, pp. 8-9; and Chinh Dao, *Ho Chi Minh, Con Nguoi va Huyen Thoai, [Ho Chi Minh, The Man and the Myth]*, vol.2, 1925-45, (USA: Van Hoa, 1993), pp. 33-5.

³⁶ AOM, SPCE, 371, copy translated by Lam Duc Thu to *quoc ngu* from Chinese, Annexe n.6 à Note Noel n. 144, translation of a letter from PBC to Ly Thuy; retranslated to *quoc ngu* by Vinh Sinh for his

nationalists and communists, the differences in their political inclinations had not yet become an obstacle to cooperation. Nguyen Ai Quoc knew how to wield political influence while allowing other emigres to take the more important posts in the organizations he formed. The defeat of the Yunnanese army in mid-1925 also worked to his advantage, as we shall see, by making Whampoa and its army the main source of training and employment for the émigré Vietnamese. Overall, the evidence provided by Lam Duc Thu and Quoc's own reports to the Comintern lead to the conclusion that the Vietnamese nationalists and proto-communists had not yet formed well-delineated groups during Quoc's first stay in China. Some emigres such as Le Hong Son and Truong Van Lenh, two of Quoc's most trusted lieutenants, retained ties in both camps until at least 1928. In my view, it is a mistake to assume that the Vietnamese emigres had sharply defined views about communist aid to their independence movement in 1924 and 25. So long as Quoc had something positive to offer, including new methods of organizing and potential financial support, he had an automatic advantage over the older leaders, whose Japanese backers had always let them down. But when the Comintern was slow in responding to his requests for aid, Quoc worried that he would lose influence among the nationalists. I will discuss the evidence regarding these issues below.

On 18 December 1924, Quoc wrote to the presidium of the Comintern that he had arrived in Canton in the middle of that month. (The discrepancy between this arrival date and his earlier claim to have arrived 11 November is unexplained. Perhaps he was simply being consistent with his practice of doling out bits of the truth to different interlocutors.) In a post-script to this letter he informed the Comintern that he was posing as a Chinese named 'Ly Thuy'. Nguyen Ai Quoc glossed over the subtleties of his contacts with the Vietnamese emigres in this version of his activities. 'I have met several nationalist-revolutionary Vietnamese,' he wrote, 'among whom there is one who left Vietnam thirty years ago and who during this time has organized a number of anti-French revolts... The sole goal of this man is to avenge his country and his family, who were massacred by the French. He doesn't know anything of politics and even less of mass organizing. In our conversations, I have demonstrated the necessity of having something organized and the uselessness of agitation without any base. He is convinced...'.³⁷ If one allows for a ten-

article, 'Ve Moi Lien He Giua Phan Boi Chau va Nguyen Ai Quoc o Trung Quoc' (1924-1925), ['On Phan Boi Chau's Relations with Nguyen Ai Quoc in China (1924-1925)], *NCLS* n.3, 1997.

³⁷RC, 495, 154,594, p.17, letter 'Au Presidium du Komintern, 18 Dec. 1924; note that the Hanoi rendering of this document drops the reference to a specific émigré, and apparently changes 'he' to 'they' in the sentence about ignorance of politics and mass organizing, -- see reference to the Hanoi version in Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, p. 66 from *Ban Nghien Cuu Lich Su Dang*, Commission to Study Party History, *Chu Tich Ho Chi Minh, Chairman Ho Chi Minh* (Hanoi: *Su That*, 1970), p. 32.

year exaggeration regarding his departure from Vietnam, this description might fit Phan Boi Chau. But from Phan's letters of early 1925, it does not appear that the two met.³⁸ The other possibilities for the identity of this émigré are Nguyen Hai Than, or possibly Ho Hoc Lam, like Phan Boi Chau a native of Nghe An province, whose brother and father had both been killed by the French. But Lam, the uncle of Ho Tung Mau, appears to have remained in Hangzhou during the united front period. A 1933 French political profile of Nguyen Ai Quoc seems to show that Nguyen Hai Than is the most likely candidate. This report mentions that when Quoc arrived in Canton, 'he skillfully consulted Nguyen Cam Giang, who at the time exercised authority over his compatriots.'³⁹ The report says that with the aid of Nguyen Cam Giang, Quoc created a new group, but that later discord grew up between them and Giang started his own association, with no more than thirty members. This falling-out coincides with the description of Quoc's relationship with Nguyen Hai Than given in Lam Duc Thu's reports. Nguyen Hai Than, also known as Nguyen Cam Giang, appears to have been the heir apparent to Phan Boi Chau until Nguyen Ai Quoc appeared on the scene.⁴⁰

In his letter of 18th December, Quoc lists the tasks which he and his fellow-émigré had undertaken together. They had outlined an organizational plan; the émigré had drawn up a list of ten Vietnamese who had worked with him in the past; and Quoc had chosen five, from five different provinces, to bring to Canton. He planned to give them instruction and then send them back to Indochina after three months of study, after which another group would arrive to take their place. This was the blue-print for what would become the Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi, The Association of Revolutionary Vietnamese Youth, usually called Thanh Nien (Youth) for short. But Quoc made no mention of this name yet, and in two letters in January and February 1925 he referred to his group as the Vietnamese Guomindang. (See below) To bring the first bunch to Canton he would use the \$150 [presumably U.S. dollars] left over from his travel money from Moscow. 'But after that?...', he asked pointedly. 'I work several hours per day for ROSTA, but my salary won't allow me to maintain my "students", and when they are in Canton, it is possible that I will have to devote all or most of my time to their education; my financial situation will be hopeless. This is why I ask you to please give the order to your representatives in Canton to take care of Indochina as well.'⁴¹

³⁸ See Vinh Sinh, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

³⁹ AOM, SPCE, box 364, Feuilles et Notices, a summary of NAQ's career up to his 1931 arrest.

⁴⁰ See Dao Trinh Nhat, *Luong Ngoc Quyen*, (Saigon: NXB Tan Viet, 1957), p. 25, for Nguyen Cam Giang's identification as Nguyen Hai Than.

⁴¹ RC, 495,154,594, pp. 17-18, letter 'Au Presidium du Komintern', signed Nguyen Ai Quoc, 18 Dec. 1924.

By 5 January 1925, Quoc was able to report that, 'The Komintang (sic) of Indochina had been formed on the 3rd of this month, with three members to begin.' He wrote in English, so was quite likely writing to the English-speaking Voitinsky. 'One member will be sent to Annam and Laos. Another man (not yet member) will be sent to Tonkin to bring five men to Canton to learn how to do organization work...In the same time, I beg you to give order to our Russian comrades [sic] here to take charge also of the Indochinese affairs, because alone, I cannot do very much.'⁴² When he wrote on 10 January to the Comintern Presidium, this time in French, he was able to announce that the '*Kvak-zan-dang*' had just admitted its fourth member. But he complained that he had had to get an advance from ROSTA to pay the travel costs of his envoys.⁴³

More progress had been made when Quoc wrote again to the Comintern Presidium on 19th February 1925. This time he reported that his group, a secret one, had nine members, two of whom had been sent back to Vietnam; three were at the front in the army of Sun Yatsen, he said, while one was on a 'military mission for the Guomindang'. Of these nine members, five were candidate members of the communist party (presumably Chinese) as well.⁴⁴ Quoc mentioned names as rarely as possible in his correspondence, but we know from Vietnamese accounts that among these five were Le Hong Phong, Ho Tung Mau, Le Hong Son, and Lam Duc Thu; Le Quang Dat, one of the early students at Whampoa, was probably the fifth.⁴⁵ All but Lam Duc Thu, who came from Thai Binh, were natives of Nghe An. Nguyen Hai Than appears to have remained outside the inner circle of Thanh Nien recruits, perhaps because of his duties as an officer in the Yunnan army. By February Quoc seemed to have succeeded in co-opting the existing infrastructure of the Tam Tam xa, which in turn had made use of Phan Boi Chau's old networks: he reported that his group had a solid base-station in Siam for getting men in and out of the country. 'There are fifty farmers there who are closely united and who have rendered many services in the past,' he wrote.

Now that Quoc was gaining the confidence of his compatriots, his plans were getting more ambitious. In this letter of 19 February he estimated that the tasks to be accomplished in 1925 would cost \$5,000. He needed the money to establish a base in Canton, as well as

⁴² RC, 495,154,594, p.26. Here Quoc is possibly referring to a reorganization of Phan Boi Chau's group, or may be using QDD as a generic name for a revolutionary group which he thinks the Russians will understand.

⁴³ RC, 495,154,594, p. 17.

⁴⁴ All references in this paragraph are to RC, 495,154,594, pp. 29-31.

⁴⁵ See Quang Hung and Quoc Anh, 'Le Hong Son', p. 16 for a partial list of the key members.

communications bases in Guangxi; in the extreme south of Guangdong; in Bangkok; at the end of the railway line from Bangkok to Tich-kho (Udon Thani?), which he said was a twenty day walk from Lacfach; and lastly at Lacfach (Thakhek?), on the left bank of the Mekong River (in Laos), 15 days on foot from Annam. He also planned to send someone back to Vietnam to collect and transmit news, as well as several people to work on the ships sailing between China and Indochina. He included a neatly sketched map of Indochina at the end of the letter, with the planned bases marked .

But in an undated memo titled, 'The Indochina Question', which seems to have been written a few months later in 1925, he remained less than assured about the future prospects of his group. As it was written in English, it was probably again addressed to Voitinsky. In point 4 of the memo, which is another plea for money, he explains that, 'Without the help and counsel of our Russian comrades (sic), it will be difficult for me not to make mistakes. But I can get neither without order from you. And they can do nothing for me empty handed.'⁴⁶ The crux of the request was that Quoc needed something to show his countrymen in the way of concrete Russian assistance, so that he would retain his credibility. In point 1 he wrote: 'If you allow me to send immediately one or two students, that will enable me to make good propaganda, to tell what the Russian Revolution can do and will do for the colonial people. That will enable me also – from now until August – to gain over the good elements of the Indochinese Komintang [sic].

The *Sûreté's* reports fill in some of the missing detail about how Ly Thuy approached his task in the early months of 1925. On 4 March Lam Duc Thu informed his French contact that, 'Ly Thuy and Nguyen Hai Than are working actively to organize the association referred to in the annexe to note 121. They are working without the knowledge of Phan Boi Chau.'⁴⁷ The association's name is not given in this report or in the French summary of the tract which Ly Thuy had prepared to recruit members within Vietnam. It appears, though, that this was the first effort to develop the group which became known as Thanh Nien. The March report on Ly Thuy's activities, apparently based on Lam Duc Thu's information, was signed by Governor Merlin himself. He noted that the recruiting tract took into account the Vietnamese mentality, by requiring an oath of loyalty to the new 'party', but also departed from the usual 'grandiloquent phraseology' of the Vietnamese revolutionaries. 'Nowhere is there a mention of extreme methods,' Merlin wrote. 'One can see that for Ly-Thuy it is of first importance to organize his partisans into disciplined

⁴⁶ RC, 495/154/594, p.49.

⁴⁷ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, envoi 4 mars 1925, Note no. 127.

groups, which will obey blindly the instructions issued to them.’⁴⁸ Merlin was deeply impressed by the influence of ‘the Bolsheviks’ and their methods. His analysis of the tract could have been written by Quoc himself -- ‘The nationalists have carried out a few attacks: they have always lacked cohesion and have not been able to win over the Vietnamese masses.’ He saw that the new style of anti-French agitation could be harmful to French influence, ‘if it were permitted to develop freely’. But measures were being taken to combat it, he assured his superior in Paris.

By early March Ly Thuy had convinced the emigres to contribute money each month for a propaganda fund. Ly Thuy was giving 200 dollars monthly, Nguyen Hai Than 300, Dinh Te Dan 100, and Lam Duc Thu himself, 50. Quoc was by Thu’s account receiving from three to four hundred dollars monthly salary for his translation work.⁴⁹ Thu reported in April that Nguyen Hai Than and Ly Thuy had established a mutually agreeable working relationship. ‘Each one preserves his liberty of action. Nguyen Hai Than continues to advocate terrorist methods and Ly Thuy is carrying out communist propaganda. As they both are pursuing the same goal, they help each other when they have the opportunity,’ he explained.⁵⁰

Recruitment within Vietnam seems to have been delayed, however, while the Chinese republican government consolidated its power in the first half of 1925. The only new Vietnamese recruits who arrived from in country before the summer appear to be the five or six who attended the Peasant Movement Training Institute (PMTI) courses, and perhaps Phan Boi Chau’s son-in-law, Vuong Thuc Oanh. In order to understand the development of the Vietnamese revolutionary groups, one needs to keep in mind the key events in this consolidation process. The fortunes of the Vietnamese emigres were dependent on both the local power structure in Canton and the condition of the CCP-Guomindang alliance in general. As we have seen, many of them served within Chinese military structures. Nguyen Ai Quoc, like a number of the other Vietnamese, could devote only a portion of his time to Vietnamese affairs. As Lam Duc Thu reported at the end of 1925, Quoc worked sixteen hour days, translating for ROSTA, reporting on the peasant movement for

⁴⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, Hanoi le 15 mars 1925, Le Gouv. Gen. de l’Indo. A M. le Min. des Colonies, no. 489.

⁴⁹ AOM, SPCE 365, no. 127, 4 mars 1925.

⁵⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, Annexe no. 1 a note Noel no. 146, extrait D, compte rendu de l’entretien Pinot-Noel du 6 avril 1925.

the Krestintern, and setting up the structures which would become the nucleus of a Vietnamese communist party.⁵¹

From February until May 1925 the Whampoa cadets and Canton army waged a campaign against the warlord Chen Jiongming in the East River Districts of Guangdong. The local power broker in Guangdong, General Chen had been threatening to return to Canton to take control, while Sun Yatsen stayed on in Beijing, his health deteriorating. When Sun died in March, the struggle to succeed him carried on. The Whampoa trained troops routed the General with the support of peasant militias, who provided sabotage as well as intelligence and propaganda support.⁵² Three of the Vietnamese in Quoc's secret nine-member group joined in the fighting, as Quoc had reported in his 19 February letter. Le Hong Son served under the command of Zhou Enlai, political commissar of the First Army Corps.⁵³ Then in May the Yunnan and Guangxi generals who had joined forces with the GMD, Yang Ximin and Lau Tchawan [Liu Chenhuan], rebelled against the republican leadership. The newly-tested troops from Whampoa once again took the field, and defeated the rebel forces. This cleared the way for the formation of an independent Guomindang government in Canton at the end of June 1925, headed by Hu Hanmin. The CCP-GMD united front was now approaching its zenith of political success. The shift in local political power marked a new phase in Vietnamese organizing. For one thing, the defeat of the Yunnan army left Nguyen Hai Than without a power base. Lam Duc Thu reported on 15 June that, 'Hai Than is defeated. He has not got a single man left. He has come back to Canton, but he doesn't yet dare to show himself ... he is at the end of his resources and he seems very sad...'. The cadets from his troops were due to be 'incorporated into the Canton troops on Ly Thuy's recommendation,' he added.⁵⁴ As mentioned above, a number of them enrolled at Whampoa. Joining the new students was a pair from Nghe An, former students from the officers school of the Guangxi corps: Truong Van Lenh and Le Nhu Vong (Le Thiet Hung).⁵⁵

With its power consolidated in Guangdong, the united front gave increased attention to the peasant movement and labour organizing. The May 30th strike movement in Shanghai was quickly followed by the Hong Kong strike and boycott of British trade in Guangdong. The

⁵¹ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, annexe à l'envoi no. 226: entrevues Pinot-Noel des 29, 30, 31 oct. et 1 nov. 1925.

⁵² Fernando Galbiati, *P'eng P'ai and the Hai-lu-feng Soviet*, (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1985), p. 192; Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1951), pp. 68-9.

⁵³ AOM, SPCE 365, Annexe à Note Noel no. 213, 1 Oct. 1925.

⁵⁴ AOM, SPCE 365, M.N., annexe à Note Noel no. 201 29 juillet 1925, rapport de Pinot, 15 June 1925.

⁵⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, Annexe à l'envoi 208, 15 July 1925.

Hong Kong movement began on 21 June with a mass strike against foreign companies -- that same day Nguyen Ai Quoc brought out the first issue of the Vietnamese paper, *Thanh Nien*, a weekly which would continue to appear until May 1930. (The first issue of 60 copies contained only two articles; by October, 80 copies were being printed and distributed in Siam, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hangzhou, as well as Guangdong.)⁵⁶ On 30 June The League of Oppressed Peoples (in Vietnamese *Bi Ap Buc Dan Toc Lien Hiep Hoi*) was founded, a grouping of Vietnamese, Korean and Indian anti-colonial activists, along with their Chinese patrons. Liao Zhongkai, the new Canton governor and a leader of the GMD left, presided over the League, with a Korean and Lam Duc Thu serving as vice-presidents. Ly Thuy controlled the secretariat and the finances of the Vietnamese section. The League was the first structure within which Nguyen Ai Quoc would create an open, revolutionary group of Vietnamese in Canton.

The League of Oppressed Peoples served a double function for him. Its primary purpose was to demonstrate Asian support for the Chinese revolution, initially for the boycott of British trade in Hong Kong. The leaflet which Quoc wrote in Chinese characters for the League's founding made this clear.⁵⁷ But the League's Vietnamese section also served as the basic organization for recruiting and educating anti-French Vietnamese in 1925. Its members, including Nguyen Hai Than, were the ones who put out the newspaper *Thanh Nien*. Although June 1925 is usually seen as the founding date of the Thanh Nien association, this grouping did not come to exist as a real political party until sometime in 1926, to judge by the available evidence. It would not have a formal political programme and statutes until early 1927. Possibly Thanh Nien existed first as the youth group within the League, which according to Lam Duc Thu had responsibility for the League's propaganda.⁵⁸ A recent Hanoi history of Quoc's years in Canton maintains that the formal name, the Association of Revolutionary Vietnamese Youth, came into being at the end of 1925. It quotes from the memoirs of Vuong Thuc Oanh, who claims that a Thanh Nien Cong San Doan (Communist Youth Group) had been created in Canton, but that the title 'Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Hoi' (Association of Revolutionary Vietnamese Youth) was dreamed up by himself and Le Duy Diem, when the latter returned from Canton towards the end of 1925.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ AOM, SPCE 365, Annexe à Note Noel no. 213, 1 Oct. 1925. See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, pp. 177-178 for a discussion of *Thanh Nien*'s political orientation.

⁵⁷ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, envoi 189, 18 July 1925.

⁵⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, annexe à l'envoi 208, 15 July 1925.

⁵⁹ Song Thanh et al., *Nguyen ai Quoc o Quang Chau (1924-1927)*, (*Nguyen Ai quoc in Quang Chau*), (Hanoi: *Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia*, 1998), p. 77.

A French summary of Lam Duc Thu's reports dated 22 July 1925 makes clear the new ascendancy of Nguyen Ai Quoc in mid-1925: 'NAQ has decidedly taken charge of the Vietnamese revolutionary group in Canton. While carrying out his functions as a translator for the information service at the Soviet Consulate, he works tirelessly to prepare the revolution in Indochina. Treasurer of the Vietnamese revolutionary group, founder, editor and printer of the paper *Thanh Nien*, organizer of a League of Oppressed Peoples in Canton, affiliated to all the labour guilds and revolutionary organizations in Canton, he attends most of the meetings held in the Public Gardens and at Canton University; he visits the prestigious hosts at the Canton Cement Works, Liao Zhongkai, Sie Yng Pak and Hu Hanmin. Nguyen Ai Quoc has found a milieu in Canton which is entirely to his liking...'⁶⁰

At the end of September Lam Duc Thu informed the *Sûreté* that Quoc, Nguyen Hai Than, Ho Tung Mau, Le Hong Son and himself had decided at one of the Vietnamese section meetings to regroup the Vietnamese revolutionaries in Guangxi and to resume contact with agitators from Tonkin. Ho Tung Mau would undertake this mission in Guangxi, while Nguyen Hai Than would travel to Tonkin. 'Nguyen Ai Quoc believes that we must reorganize the revolutionary groups in the interior on the same basis as that of Canton... Questionable elements will be banished without pity, as in Canton,' Thu wrote.⁶¹

Sometime during the summer of 1925, Le Hong Son relates in his 1933 *Sûreté* confession, a group of 15 Vietnamese were escorted from Dongxing to Canton by Ho Tung Mau. Some of these may have been recruited by Nguyen Hai Than or Lam Duc Thu. In the autumn, after Le Hong Son took leave from his duties as an officer in the Canton army, he escorted seven of them back to the Vietnamese border, via Nanning and Longzhou. At the border he handed his charges over to a Chinese opium smuggler, who guided them back to Tonkin. Among the seven were Xuan (Nguyen Cong Thu, brother of Lam Duc Thu, who would become a *Thanh Nien* recruiter in Tonkin), Hoang Lun (Le Huu Lap) from Thanh Hoa, Le Duy Dung (probably Le Duy Diem) from Nghe An, and Nhan (Nguyen Ngoc Ba) from Nghe An as well.⁶² Vuong Thuc Oanh, Phan Boi Chau's son-in-law, who had already established a network for sending Vietnamese to China, had been initiated into the *Thanh Nien* core group earlier in the year.⁶³ These students would have formed part of

⁶⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, annexe no. 2 à Note Noel no. 195 du 22 juillet 1925.

⁶¹ AOM, SPCE 365, annexe à Note Noel no. 213, 1 Oct; 26 et 27 sept. 1925.

⁶² AOM, SPCE, Interrogatoire de Le van Phan dit Hong Son, p. 13.

⁶³ Quang Hung, Quoc Anh, 'Le Hong Son, nguoï chien si xuất sac thuoc the he nhung nguoï cong san dau tien o Viet-nam,' ('Le Hong Son, An Exceptional Fighter of the First Generation of Vietnamese Communists'), *NCLS* 1-2, 1979, p. 15.

the first official *Thanh Nien* training course, which Quoc would mention in a letter to the Comintern in June 1926 as being composed of ten people.⁶⁴

But more political turmoil apparently disrupted the plans for another group of trainees to come to Canton. The growing militancy of the GMD in Guangdong, along with the boycott of British trade, encouraged the development of a new coalition of interests in southern China between right-wing elements in the GMD and the imperialist powers. One of the earliest signs of this break-down in nationalist unity was the murder of Liao Zhongkai in August. The cadets at Whampoa braced themselves for another outbreak of hostilities, as Le Hong Phong wrote from the Academy to the Vietnamese in the city.⁶⁵ However, a political compromise was worked out, which forced Hu Hanmin, implicated in the murder plot, to go into exile in Europe. The leftist Wang Jingwei took over the leadership of the nationalist government, while Chiang Kaishek became the Commander of the Guomindang First Army as well as the Director of Whampoa Academy.⁶⁶ Wang Jingwei's position as successor to Sun Yatsen was to all appearances consolidated at the GMD's Second National Party Congress held in January 1926. The Congress confirmed the strength of the united front and its alliance with Soviet Russia.⁶⁷ But the loss of Liao Zhongkai undermined GMD support for the peasant movement in Guangdong and was probably at least a temporary blow to Nguyen Ai Quoc's projects as well. He had become deeply involved in his work for the Krestintern in mid-1925, but by the following spring the Comintern's attention would be re-focussed in other directions. The second *Thanh Nien* training course would finally open in the autumn of 1926, when the united front had shifted its attention to the Northern Expedition. Before examining the subsequent development of *Thanh Nien*, then, we need to look at the peasant movement and the political forces which affected it.

2. *The Guangdong Peasant Movement*

Between February 1925 and March 1926 Quoc was drawn into one of the more tumultuous manifestations of the united front, the Guangdong peasant movement, via his work for the Krestintern. Peasant organizing in Guangdong Province had begun soon after the creation of the CCP, largely inspired by the son of a wealthy family who had studied in Japan, Peng Pai. He made his first efforts to set up peasant schools and organizations in

⁶⁴ RC, 495,154, 594, pp. 43-4, letter of 3 June 1926, to 'Cher Camarade', signed 'Nguyen Ai Quac'..

⁶⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, note 205, Annexe no. 6, 20 aout 1925.

⁶⁶ Isaacs, op cit, p. 84.

⁶⁷ So Waichor, *The Guomindang Left in the National Revolution, 1924-1931*, (Hong Kong: Oxford Un. Press, 1991), pp. 18-9.

1922 and '23, but had little success in protecting the institutions he created from the wealthy gentry.⁶⁸ In the spring of 1925, however, the power equation changed in the countryside east of Canton, when GMD troops, newly trained and armed, defeated the forces of warlord Chen Jiongming. The peasant associations founded by Peng Pai became government-recognized bodies with guaranteed rights and a central place in the united front movement. They also gained the right to organize their own militias to defend themselves against the landlord-backed *mintuan* or 'popular militias' which in reality functioned as the armies of the local elite.

The peasant militias in the Haifeng and Lufeng districts on the East River were created from the training classes held in the Peasant Movement Training Institute (PMTI) in Canton. Founded in August 1924, the PMTI was Peng Pai's creation. For the first classes he did most of the lecturing and shaped a program which included weekly practical work in the villages. Fernando Galbiati writes that in the Second, Third and Fourth Classes trained at the Institute, the 'military element' of the training steadily increased. The Third Class, which may have included some Vietnamese, ran from 1 January to 3 April, 1925. It was patterned on the organization of an army company and received training in survey and propaganda work.⁶⁹ The Fourth class started on 30 April, but was disrupted by the rebellion in Canton of the Yunnan and Guangxi generals. According to Galbiati, the students dispersed to rural areas until the Institute reopened in July. Five young Vietnamese who had been studying in this course were reported to have moved to Canton University that month.⁷⁰ When only fifty students returned after this interruption, Galbiati believes that the course was filled out with new trainees who may have been Vietnamese.⁷¹ This group graduated in September 1925. The Institute's training may have been the root of the armed propaganda brigades which the Vietminh would form in 1945. The subjects covered were strictly practical – they included instruction in speech-making and in setting up Peasant Associations, as well as ways to win peasant confidence such as speaking the local language and living, eating and dressing as the peasants did.⁷² The Fifth Course at the PMTI, for which Mao Zedong became an instructor, would include 43 students from Hunan Province.⁷³ (Although Mao is sometimes credited with founding the Institute, he did not become the principal until the spring of 1926.)

⁶⁸ Hans Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, pp. 120-122.

⁶⁹ Fernando Galbiati, *P'eng P'ai and the Hai-Lu-Feng Soviet*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ., 1985), pp. 240-3.

⁷⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel, annexe à l'envoi no. 208, 15 juillet 1925.

⁷¹ Galbiati, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 241-2.

The importance of the Krestintern in guiding the peasant movement is unclear. The Russian advisers who lectured at the PMTI on survey techniques and who worked under Borodin as special advisers to the Peasant Department of the Guomindang may not have been linked to the Krestintern.⁷⁴ One of these, S.N.Belenky, who was known in the Comintern as 'Volin', was also a ROSTA correspondent, perhaps the immediate day-to-day supervisor of Nguyen Ai Quoc.⁷⁵ In the initial period of organizing, Borodin himself seems to have been closely involved in giving advice on such issues as demands for reduction of land rents and land redistribution.⁷⁶ Yet Nguyen Ai Quoc, apparently at this time the only Asian Krestintern representative (and a translator of French and English language materials), was able to follow the movement closely and participate in surveys of the Guangdong peasantry. He sent the Krestintern a report in French on the major problems of the Chinese peasantry, which they received on 2 March 1925. Along with high population density, primitive tools and natural disasters, he listed the greed of the landowners and the invasion of foreign capital as major difficulties. It is not clear whether Quoc was simply translating a report prepared by others, or whether he had had a hand in compiling it. He mentioned only briefly at the end that the peasants were forming associations with the encouragement of industrial workers and the southern government. The following groups were to be excluded from the peasant associations, he wrote: landowners with more than 100 mau⁷⁷ of land; anyone who had committed acts of extortion against the peasants; ministers or leaders of religious groups; anyone having relations with the imperialists; and gamblers and opium smokers.⁷⁸

In August of 1925 the Krestintern sent Quoc five-thousand rubles (worth around \$US 2,500 at the time) via Borodin's account in the Bank of the Far East. They requested that he use the money to 1) produce revolutionary posters and brochures on the peasant question; 2) send representatives to other provinces to start peasant unions; 3) send a trusted Chinese comrade to Moscow to work in the Krestintern; 4) and furnish regular information and documentation to Moscow on the Chinese peasant movement. Their final demand was for bi-monthly reports.⁷⁹ Quoc replied in English on October 17 that he had received all the Krestintern's letters dating from August and September (eleven in all, most of which are not in the Krestintern file with Quoc's correspondence) on the same day: 14

⁷³ Ibid., p. 243.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 251.

⁷⁵ *Comintern and China*, vol. II 1926-27, p. 953, identifies Volin only as a Tass correspondent, while V.V. Vishnyakova-Akimova identifies him as an adviser to the peasant movement – see *Dva Goda v Bosstavshem Kitae, 1925-1927, (Two Years in Revolutionary China)*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), p. 249.

⁷⁶ Hans Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*, p. 163.

⁷⁷ A *mau* or *mu* in Chinese is 3,600 sq. metres.

⁷⁸ RC, 535, 1,42, pp. 17-19.

October 1925. He promised to comply with most of their requests. But he declined to send a comrade to Moscow, 'because all our comrades are needed here now, and no-one (sic) of them understands foreign language...'. He also requested that they stop sending materials in German, because there was no one available to translate it.⁸⁰

On 5 November 1925 Quoc sent the Krestintern the results of a survey of peasant unions which had been completed for seven of the districts in Guangdong.⁸¹ In a summary of the results, he wrote that the peasants, 'agree with the CP programme when their fear of the "socialization of women" is vanished,' and that 'they are able to make great sacrifice (sic) to defend their class, or to support the revolutionary government.'⁸² Presumably his Cantonese was not yet good enough for him to have taken a direct part in the survey; he sent the reports to the Krestintern in English. Another letter written 3 December seems to show that Quoc was mainly transmitting information from Chinese peasant organizers, rather than collecting it himself. Quoc explained that his Chinese comrades had advised against his developing a formal relationship with the Guomindang Executive Committee in his capacity as the Krestintern representative, something the Krestintern had earlier recommended. 'Our comrades said that it is not necessary, because I can get all information concerning the peasant question through our C.P. comrades. (Although the chairman of the Board of Peasant Affairs is a Koumintang, all the work – organization as well as propaganda – is done by our comrades),' he wrote.⁸³

In the early hours of 20 March 1926 Chiang Kaishek moved against the communist political commissars at Whampoa, arresting around fifty men⁸⁴. The Soviet advisers in Canton were placed under house arrest. When faced with this coup de force, Borodin acquiesced to the demands of the GMD Executive Committee, which met in May and demanded a more restricted communist role within the Guomindang. Communist members of GMD party committees were from then on limited to one-third of the membership, while communists were banned from serving as heads of government departments.⁸⁵ Although the united front would continue with Soviet backing until the summer of 1927, the March 20 incident marked the beginning of the decline of the peasant movement in Guangdong, until the Hai-lu-feng Soviet of late 1927 was formed. As Nguyen Ai Quoc explained in his report to the Krestintern in June 1927, the GMD ceased helping the peasant associations as

⁷⁹ RC, 535, 1,42, p.6, letter of 19 August 1925.

⁸⁰ RC, 535,1,42, p.30.

⁸¹ RC, 535,1,42, pp. 47-63.

⁸² RC, 535,1,42, p. 32.

⁸³ RC, 535,1,42, p.64.

⁸⁴ RC, 535,1,42, p. 93.

soon as they had unified Guangdong province under their flag.⁸⁶ The peasant militias were not strong enough to protect themselves against the militias of the gentry without the support of GMD troops.⁸⁷ Nguyen Ai Quoc later claimed that the British and French had been arming these militias.⁸⁸ In the spring of 1926, when the planning for the Northern Expedition got underway, Mao Zedong took over the PMTI and the united front began to focus attention on the peasants of Hunan and Hubei.

In March 1926 the Krestintern seems to have rather abruptly lost interest in Nguyen Ai Quoc's work. He wrote them a brief note in French on 8 March 1926, to ask why all of the letters which he had sent them had failed to elicit a reply, and why they had failed to send any material for propaganda.⁸⁹ He had passed on all their correspondence to Java, Manila, India and other places, he added. Part of the explanation comes in their reply, an undated letter in which they revealed that they had received his letters. But they had begun to correspond with a new member of their Presidium, comrade Hu Hanmin, about the peasant situation in Shandong and Yunnan provinces.⁹⁰ It turned out that Hu Hanmin had gone to Moscow, after being exiled from Canton, and had been elected to the governing body of the Krestintern. At the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI in March 1926 he was received as an honoured guest.⁹¹ The conviction held by the Stalin-Bukharin coalition in Moscow, that the Guomindang was the prime revolutionary force in Asia, had led to this strange turn of events.⁹² (Bukharin would replace the leftist Zinoviev as head of the Comintern in October 1926.) The man who had been held responsible for the death of Liao Zhongkai, the protector of the Guangdong peasant movement, was suddenly the Krestintern's primary contact in China. Nguyen Ai Quoc was now presumably considered either too closely allied with the communists or simply too insignificant to deal with. After March 1926, there is no record of Quoc's interaction with the Krestintern until his return to Moscow in June 1927.

⁸⁵ RC, 535, 1,42, p. 95.

⁸⁶ RC, 535, 1,127, p. 35, 'Kratkoe Informatsionnoe Sobshcheniie o Krestianskom dvizhenii provintsii Guandun' ['Brief Report on the Peasant Movement in Guandun'].

⁸⁷ Hans Van de Ven, op. cit., p. 175.

⁸⁸ RC, 535, 1,127, p. 35, 'Brief Report on the Peasant Movement in Guandun'..

⁸⁹ RC, 535, 1,42, p. 69.

⁹⁰ RC, 535, 1,42, p.9-10.

⁹¹ Harold Isaacs, op. cit, p. 86.

3. *The Growth of Thanh Nien*

a. *Expectations of Revolt*

The progress of Nguyen Ai Quoc's attempts to organize links with Vietnam must have been slowed by the political tension within the Canton government, as well as his own financial difficulties. By April 1926, although Lam Duc Thu reported that thirty young Vietnamese were studying political and military science at Canton University and the Whampoa Academy, there was still no sign of a second intake of trainees for Thanh Nien⁹³. The Thanh Nien core group had dispersed for the time being: Le Hong Son was reported to be serving as a political agent on the staff of General Zhang Fakui on Hainan Island. In May Ho Tung Mau went with a comrade identified as 'Mr. Sau' (Luu Hong Khai or Vo Tung) to Siam, where they hoped to organize a mutual aid society.⁹⁴ Le Hong Phong, Han Rue and Dang Tu My were soon to depart for Moscow for further military training.⁹⁵ At the same time, the entente between Quoc and Nguyen Hai Than was breaking down. In April 1926 Than was accused by Lam Duc Thu of having misused money belonging to the Vietnamese section of the League of Oppressed Peoples.⁹⁶ That March the League had been reorganized, perhaps in connection with Liao Zhongkai's death and Chiang Kaishek's move to limit communist power. An article announcing the reorganization in the Chinese press noted that the League had started a new drive to recruit members.⁹⁷ The *Sûreté* passed on the above information with an appended note to its Heads of Local Administration, which opined that the exodus of Indochinese to Canton 'may not be unrelated' to the reorganization of the League of Oppressed Peoples. These new emigres may have been among the 30 Vietnamese then studying at Whampoa.

Lam Duc Thu told the *Sûreté* that Nguyen Hai Than was jealous of the influence which Nguyen Ai Quoc had over the group of revolutionary Vietnamese in Canton. 'Nguyen Ai Quoc is preparing for revolution methodically. He will move at the propitious moment. Nguyen Hai Than is a partisan of the violent method. He wants to make use of it immediately,' the informer said.⁹⁸ In a follow-up to this conversation, Lam Duc Thu expanded on his description of Nguyen Ai Quoc: 'Nguyen Ai Quoc is still attached to the

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹³ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Pinot report of April 1926.

⁹⁴ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noel, note of 11 May 1926.

⁹⁵ In an autobiography which Le Hong Phong wrote for the Comintern, he said that he had arrived in Moscow in October 1926. RC, 495/201/46. There is no record of what became of the other two Vietnamese in Moscow.

⁹⁶ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noel, envoi 290, 7 mai 1926.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, letter from Hanoi, le 22 mars 1926, 499 S.G.

Agency of the USSR. He doesn't say what he does there... he is extremely suspicious and only tells his friends what is absolutely necessary ... in all of his actions, he conforms to his ideas. To those like Hong Son who suggested that he buy some land on Hainan to start a school, he said that he would never pay to acquire land and that since it belongs to everyone it should be put at the community's disposal for free.⁹⁹

Among both the emigres in Canton and patriots within Vietnam there seems to have been an expectation that Ly Thuy would soon declare an armed revolt. By the end of March 1926 political protest in Vietnam had reached a level not seen since the tax revolts of 1908. The death on March 23 of reformist leader Phan Chu Trinh, once Nguyen Ai Quoc's mentor, was the occasion for mass funeral observances all over Vietnam. Student leaders who helped organize the funeral marches and mourning ceremonies were expelled from schools in all three parts of the country—for many this was the break with the French colonial establishment which eventually pushed them into illegal organizing. The radical southern journalist and anti-French personality, Nguyen An Ninh, was arrested on 24 March. Coming on the heels of the mass protests against Phan Boi Chau's sentencing at the end of 1925, Phan Chu Trinh's funeral and Nguyen An Ninh's arrest together created an explosive atmosphere.

In Canton, in the meantime, the Russians and Chiang Kaishek had decided to bury their differences by joining to organize a 'Northern Expedition' which would extend the nationalist government's boundaries north to the Yangtze River. Certain Vietnamese rebels clearly believed that this was the time for them to strike against the Indochinese border. The French began to get informers' reports about planned military activities on the Sino-Vietnamese border by July of 1926, just as Chiang Kaishek's Northern Expedition got underway. On the 13 July, a French doctor serving as French consul in Pakhoi transmitted to the Governor General in Hanoi the following:

A revolutionary Vietnamese named L. Soui – Lythuy alias Nguyen Ai Quoc, now a military attache with the Canton government, who has graduated from a military school in Moscow, is said to have received a secret promise from the Canton government of a thousand Russian rifles, in order to attempt a surprise attack on the Tonkin border, in the region of Moncay. This Vietnamese is said to have also sent emissaries into the Ten-thousand Mountains (the region of Na-Luong), where they are to sign up any pirate with a gun.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ AOM, SPCE, box 368, extrait d'un compte-rendu de la conversation Pinot-Noel, 6 April 1926.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Mission Noel, envoi 290, annexe: conversation Pinot-Noel, 7 April 1926.

¹⁰⁰ AOM, SPCE, 368, Consulat de France, Pakhoi et Tongking, Le Docteur P. Gouillon, 13 July 1926.

Tam Kam Say, who had led a military uprising in 1918, was reported by another French informer, 'Konstantin', to be eager to attack the northern Vietnamese town of Hongay. Konstantin at the same time passed on the information that Paul Monin, a French lawyer active in anticolonial politics in Saigon, had come to Canton to interest the Russians in supporting a revolt. (Other French sources place this visit between the end of February and 30 May 1926.¹⁰¹) The plan of attack was as follows: three-thousand Chinese soldiers guided by 100 Annamites would sail from Pakhoi and disembark at a Chinese port on the coast of Southern Annam. Konstantin, who seems to have had no access to Quoc's inner circle, thought that the attack had been approved by Quoc.¹⁰² But another note, apparently from Lam Duc Thu, reveals that Quoc had no faith in Monin's judgment and refused to support his scheme.¹⁰³ The fact that Monin worked with Quoc's Paris colleague Phan Van Truong and was highly respected in Saigon's nationalist opposition circles was not enough to sway Quoc in his favour.

According to all the old rules of Vietnamese anticolonialism the time was ripe for military action. These traditions of revolt seem to have encouraged the development of a myth of Ly Thuy as a new generalissimo. But what Quoc was actually organizing seems to have been nothing more than the nucleus, still tiny, of Vietnam's future communist party. The *Sûreté* came to believe that he had turned down a large offer of aid from the Soviets in 1926, which would have been used to launch armed attacks, because he judged that the Vietnamese rebels were not yet prepared.¹⁰⁴ In fact, his plan to create a communist-led independence movement was only just getting off the ground.

b. The Cochinchina-Cambodia Branch of the Nanyang Committee

It is possible that some groups in Vietnam were planning violent actions against French power in 1926. (The belief that revolt was imminent also existed among leftist groups in Indonesia in the summer of 1926 – but there the uprising did materialize in November.)¹⁰⁵ The organization beginning in 1926 of a branch of the Chinese CP within Vietnam may be one cause of this confused picture. In February 1927 French intelligence received a report from a source labelled '*digne de foi*' which claimed that a 'Cochinchine-Cambodge' branch of the Singapore-based Nanyang (South Seas) Provisional Committee of the CCP

¹⁰¹ Philippe Peycam, *Intellectuals and Political Commitment in Vietnam: The Emergence of a Public Sphere in Colonial Saigon (1916-1928)*, Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of London (SOAS), 1999, pp. 101, 107.

¹⁰² AOM, SPCE 368, Agent Konstantin, le 19 mai 1926.

¹⁰³ AOM., SPCE, 368, Mission Noel, note of 9 mai 1926.

¹⁰⁴ AOM, SPCE, 364, Feuilles et notices, career of Nguyen Ai Quoc up to 1933.

¹⁰⁵ Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, (Ithaca: Cornell Univ, 1965), pp. 325-8.

was already active, and that it was beginning to organize in Tonkin. The South Seas Branch Committee or Provisional Committee had been formed by Chinese emigres in 1926 as part of the Chinese CP; it was believed to have members in the colonies of Great Britain, Holland and France, as well as in Siam and Burma.¹⁰⁶ The French information was based on a report supposedly presented to an Extended Plenum of the ECCI by 'Samoyan' (probably Semaun), identified here as 'the agent for Indochina, Indonesia and the Malay Archipelago.'¹⁰⁷ I have not found corroboration of this intelligence in the files of the Far Eastern Secretariat or the Seventh Extended ECCI Plenum held in November 1926, the most likely time for such a report to have been presented. (In 1930-31, there are several references to the 'Cochinchine-Cambodge' group in the Comintern's archives.) However, a *Sûreté* report summarizing Indochinese political developments in 1926 and early 1927 shows that there were numerous ethnic Chinese workers' unions active in southern Vietnam, with ties to Canton.¹⁰⁸ In the same period violent secret societies were also being encouraged by the GMD in Saigon.¹⁰⁹ As part of the united front, these unions and societies probably contained a core of communists. By mid-1927 ethnic Chinese in South Vietnam were helping to send new Vietnamese recruits to Thanh Nien training courses in Canton, albeit under cover of the GMD.¹¹⁰

Semaun claimed that the Chinese party was active in the five districts of Indochina under French control (presumably the five territories in the Indochinese Union) and that the communist party of Cochinchina 'constitutes the most active organization, leading an energetic effort among the indigenous masses'. A diagram attached to this report showed sections within Cochinchina located in Saigon, Cholon, Tra Vinh, Sa Dec, Ca Mau and Thu Dau Mot. In Cambodia sections are listed in Kompong Cham, Kratie and Kampot, with a divisional committee of 50 members in Phnom Penh. A conference of representatives from Haiphong, Hanoi and Lao-kay was due to be held in February 1927 in Haiphong. These representatives seem to be ethnic Chinese, for example a 'Mong Vinh Hoi', referred to as one of the most active revolutionaries in the North [of Vietnam]. Semaun also mentioned an indigenous revolutionary organization founded by natives of Vinh- na Tinh (sic) in May 1926, but said that it had not yet taken a definitive form. This appears to be a reference to

¹⁰⁶ Rene Onraet, *Singapore: A Police Background*, (London: Dorothy Crisp, 1945), p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ SLOTFOM III, 116, from le Conseiller d'Etat, Directeur des Affaires Politiques, Paris, Feb. 1927.

¹⁰⁸ Christophe Giebel, *Ton Duc Thang and the Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism*, Ph.D. thesis, Cornell Univ., 1996, p. 158, n.20, quoting AOM, GG, 7F, c. 22 *Sûreté Cochinchine*, Rapport annuel 1926/27 (1 July 1927), vol.1.

¹⁰⁹ Peycam, op.cit., p. 115 mentions an *am sach dang* (assassination party), citing a *Sûreté* annual report 1926-1927, Goucoch, II/A. 45/204 (1), NA 2..

¹¹⁰ MAE, Asie, Affaires Communes, 36, p. 201: 'traduction d'une lettre en caracteres chinois', gives their names. AOM, SPCE 371, the confession of Tran Van Diep, describes their admission to the Thanh Nien training course.

the early recruiting efforts of Thanh Nien, or the Cach Mang Dang, (Revolutionary Party), discussed below. Conceivably those Vietnamese nationalists in touch with the Cochinchina-Cambodia organization were the ones most actively promoting armed revolt in 1926. Monin's plan may have been drawn up in conjunction with elements of this group – Chinese in Tra Vinh were known to have contributed generously to his journalistic efforts.¹¹¹ There was also a group in Bac Ninh province, referred to by Tran Huy Lieu as the Vietnam Dan Quoc [Republican] faction, which was planning an uprising in late 1926. (Their plans were given away when some of their homemade bombs exploded prematurely.)¹¹² At the end of 1927 they would become one of the constituent groups of the Vietnamese Quoc Dan Dang.¹¹³

c. The Second and Third Thanh Nien Training Courses

To what extent, if any, Nguyen Ai Quoc and Thanh Nien were connected to Chinese GMD/CP activity within Vietnam, is impossible to say. Both the Comintern records and the French sources give the impression, though, that Quoc was determined to avoid engaging in premature military adventures. After a gap of almost a year in his reports to the Eastern Secretariat, Quoc wrote to the Comintern on 3 June 1926 that his work was moving slowly because of his lack of funds.¹¹⁴ He was making do with his own salary, that of one of his comrades and some grants from the Russians. Another source of money for Thanh Nien may have been the funds which the Krestintern advanced via Borodin for Quoc's work in the peasant movement. This money may at least have supported those trainees who attended the PMTI.¹¹⁵ By this point Quoc may have also been receiving contributions from wealthy patriots in southern Vietnam. A *Sûreté* note of 12 August 1927 noted that Diep Van Ky, a Saigon publisher and former pupil of Nguyen Ai Quoc's father, frequently sent money to a Chinese intermediary in Canton, whenever Nguyen Ai Quoc sent him a request for funds.¹¹⁶ As early as 1925, Lam Duc Thu had reported that Quoc was considering approaching his old Paris companion Khanh Ky, now a photographer in Saigon, for money. Quoc had also mentioned Bui Quang Chieu, the wealthy leader of the Constitutionalist Party, as a potential contributor.¹¹⁷ If a southern

¹¹¹ Ho Hue Tam Tai, op. cit., p. 288.

¹¹² Tran Huy Lieu, *Cach Mang Can Dai Viet Nam*, vol. 5, (Hanoi: NXB Ban Nghien Cuu Van Su Dia, 1956), p. 22-3.

¹¹³ Hoang Van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang [The Vietnamese GMD]*, (Saigon: Xuat –Ban Giang Dong, 1965), p. 30.

¹¹⁴ RC, 495,154,594, pp. 43-4.

¹¹⁵ RC, 535,1,42, p.6, letter of 19 August 1925.

¹¹⁶ AOM, SPCE, 368, Saigon le 12 aout 1927 à M. le Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, le Directeur de la Police et de la *Sûreté Générale*, Hanoi: signed 'Striedter'.

¹¹⁷ AOM, SPCE 365, Mission Noel annexe no. 1 à l'envoi 227, 27 Nov. 1925.

funding channel was already in operation in 1926, Quoc clearly considered it unwise to reveal as much to the Russians.

Quoc claimed in this June 1926 report that since his arrival in Canton he had done the following for the Indochinese movement: 1) organized a secret group; 2) organized a peasant union among Vietnamese residing in Siam; 3) selected a group of seven 'pioneers' from among the children of peasants and workers (several of these came from Siam), who were being educated in Canton; 4) organized a group of revolutionary women with 12 members; and 5) organized a propaganda school, for students brought clandestinely to Canton from Vietnam and Siam. At this point the history of the Thanh Nien group which we have from various Vietnamese memoirs intersects with what we learn from Quoc's reports.¹¹⁸ Quoc sent this report as he was preparing for the second group of students to arrive in Canton, for the training course which eventually began in September 1926. The first course, Quoc reported, had involved ten students; he was expecting around thirty to arrive for the second.

The participants in this second Thanh Nien training course left their homes for Canton in July and August of 1926. At least three of those recruited came from a political society formed in Vinh by veterans of the 1907-8 movement who had been imprisoned on Poulo Condor. At its founding in 1925 the group took the name Phuc Quoc, 'Restoration Society', in imitation of Phan Boi Chau's organization, the Quang Phuc Hoi. Renamed the Vietnam Cach-Mang Dang (the Vietnam Revolutionary Party) in 1926, it would become known as the Tan Viet (the New Vietnam Party) in 1928. This group, based in Quoc's native region, formed mainly of Chinese-educated literati and young school teachers, would provide some of the communist party's most important leaders in its early years. The first official leader of the communist party formed in 1930 would be Tran Phu, a schoolteacher who was among the Phuc Quoc's earliest members. Another early recruit, Ha Huy Tap, a young teacher from Ha Tinh, would be the de facto party leader between 1935 and March 1938. Why the Phuc Quoc members were chosen for Thanh Nien's inner circle is an intriguing question. A combination of their trusted family connections, mixed Chinese and French education, and alienation from the colonial establishment made them the sort of recruits whom Quoc seems to have most valued. Tran Phu, for example, came from a family which had suffered under French rule. He was the son of a mandarin who, while serving in Quang Ngai province in 1908, had committed suicide, rather than force

¹¹⁸ See Nguyen Luong Bang, 'Mes Rencontres avec l'oncle Ho', in *Récits de la résistance vietnamienne (1925-1945)*, (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1966), pp. 11-13; Phan Trong Quang's memoirs in *NCLS*, cited below; Hoang van Hoan, also cited below.

the local peasants to take part in a French military sweep against the tax protests.¹¹⁹ The Phuc Quoc's younger members, disaffected youth from Vietnam's poorest region, were clearly themselves receptive to the theories of revolution which Quoc was expounding. There is little doubt that the preponderance of early Thanh Nien recruits from north-central Vietnam, including most of the Canton-based central committee, must have made the group appear to be something of a regional club.

The band of recruits was led to Canton by Le Duy Diem, a former schoolmate of Tran Phu who came from Ha Tinh. He had been selected in the second half of 1925 by the Phuc Quoc party to make contact with the Vietnamese in Canton and discuss joint action. By the time he returned to Vinh he had been converted to the Thanh Nien philosophy.¹²⁰ The same thing would happen to most of the Phuc Quoc/Revolutionary Party members who made the voyage to Canton: from the second training course, Tran Phu and his pupil Nguyen Ngoc Ba would return to Vietnam after three months as Thanh Nien members. (Le Hong Son places Nguyen Ngoc Ba in the first course, as we have seen; he may have participated in both.) In an account of the journey told by Phan Trong Quang, other men from central Vietnam joined the convoy, including Nguyen Van Loi, Le Manh Trinh, Tran Van Dac, Nguyen Van Khang, and himself. Two of the *Phuc Quoc* members, Ton Quang Phiet and Hoang Van Tung, never made it to Canton, as they were arrested when they fell behind the others at the northern border. It was not until September, after travelling by train, on foot and by ship with weeks of waiting in between each leg of the journey, that the group made it to the Thanh Nien headquarters in Canton. There they found more students from Tonkin and a group from Siam. Around twenty trainees in all were in Canton, including the future prime minister Pham Van Dong, who fell ill and had to join the following course.¹²¹

The basic training lectures on topics ranging from human evolution, world geography and Vietnamese history to Marxism-Leninism, Sun Yatsen's Three Peoples' Principles and Gandhian non-violence were delivered by Nguyen Ai Quoc. Outside lecturers were invited to talk to the trainees from time to time, among whom Phan Trong Quang remembers Zhou Enlai, Peng Pai and He Xiangning, widow of the assassinated Liao Zhongkai. Borodin and

¹¹⁹ Le Quoc Su and Pham Duc Duong, *Ke Chuyen Tran Phu, (The Story of Tran Phu)*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Kim Dong, 1969), pp. 7-9.

¹²⁰ Gouvernement générale de l'Indochine, Direction des affaires politiques et de Sûreté française, *Contribution à l'histoire des mouvements politiques de l'Indochine française, Vol.1*, (Hanoi: IDEO, 1930-35), p. 15-16; Ha Huy Tap in RC, 495, 201,45 – *Renseignements supplémentaires*, p. 6, says that Le Duy Diem became a member of Thanh Nien's Central Committee.

¹²¹ Memoir based on Phan Trong Quang, recorded by Thanh Dam, 'Lop Huan Luyen Chinh Tri Thu Hai o Quang Chau', ['The Second Political Training Course in Canton'], *NCLS* n. 265, 11-12, 1992.

a Russian woman also came to speak, Quang claimed. Much of the time was spent in political discussion or practicing public speaking. At the close of the second training course sometime in November, Phan Trong Quang reports that five of the group were secretly chosen for membership in the *Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cong san doan*, the Vietnamese Communist Youth group. These five were Tran Phu, Nguyen Van Loi, Nguyen Ngoc Ba, Phan Trong Binh and Phan Trong Quang himself, all of whom were from Annam.

The third training course started in late 1926 and ended after the Chinese New Year or Tet holiday in 1927. Hoang Van Hoan, another recruit from Nghe An who would become prominent in the communist party, writes in his memoirs that there were again around 20 students, some of whom had just taken part in a student strike in Nam Dinh.¹²² Among the northern group were probably Do Ngoc Du, Duong Hac Dinh, and Nguyen Huu Can, who would all become leaders of the Tonkin Thanh Nien group.¹²³ (Hoan does not mention the students from the Lycée du Protectorat in Hanoi, what was known as the *Buoi School*, but Do Ngoc Du and a number of later Thanh Nien trainees had been expelled from this school in 1926.)¹²⁴ Among the lecturers Hoan lists Peng Pai and Liu Shaoqi, who spoke on the workers movement. Usually Ho Tung Mau, Le Hong Son or Lam Duc Thu interpreted for the Chinese speakers, but Nguyen Ai Quoc was able to fill in competently if the others were absent, Hoan says.¹²⁵ He also recalls role-playing in improvised dramas. Quoc, known to the trainees as 'Vuong', usually played a worker or peasant.¹²⁶ Hoan does not mention how many of this group were inducted into the inner communist group, but if the figure was as low as in the previous training course, the number of communists in the Thanh Nien Association must still have been quite small. Huynh Kim Khanh gives a figure of 24 members of the Communist Youth group in May 1929, but this figure appears to refer to those members then living in China.¹²⁷

The total number of Vietnamese who would eventually pass through the Thanh Nien school is difficult to assess. I have seen concrete references to only three formal intakes of trainees; a fourth group of trainees was assembling in Canton in March 1927, but their training was disrupted by the April coup.¹²⁸ Quoc himself reported to the Comintern on his return to Moscow in June 1927 that 75 young Vietnamese had been trained at his

¹²² Ibid. p. 24.

¹²³ AOM, SPCE 367, 'Declaration de Le Quang Dat'.

¹²⁴ *Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, p. 168.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 25.

¹²⁶ Hoang van Hoan, *A Drop In the Ocean*, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1988), p. 26.

¹²⁷ Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit., p. 78.

'propaganda school' in Canton.¹²⁹ A Vietnamese memoir published in 1992, however, claims that there were ten classes with 250-300 students altogether.¹³⁰ A 1990 article by the same author, citing a document from the Guangdong Institute of History, says that altogether more than 300 Vietnamese participated in various revolutionary activities in Guangdong from 1924 to 1927.¹³¹ This would include those who did not join the communist party. The higher number may also include students from formal training classes in the second part of 1927 and in 1928, after Quoc's departure. It may, moreover, reflect the fact that there were different levels and lengths of training provided. We do not know, for example, whether there were separate sessions held for the women and 'pioneers' whom Quoc recruited, or for the less educated workers such as Nguyen Luong Bang. Hanoi historians have, in fact, become more cautious recently about advancing final numbers for Thanh Nien trainees. They cannot account for Nguyen Ai Quoc's number of 75 trainees by April 1927, even by including the names of recruits who are known to have attended courses later in 1927.¹³²

The largest group of expatriates was apparently that enrolled at Whampoa, where by early 1927 there were 53 Vietnamese.¹³³ (It was at that point that a Vietnamese language section was started at the academy – before 1927 Vietnamese seem to have enrolled as Chinese.¹³⁴) But we do not know how many of these also received the full Thanh Nien training course. As Lam Duc Thu had pointed out, 'Nguyen Ai Quoc only initiates recruits with extreme prudence and gives full instruction only to those who are known to be devoted to the revolutionary cause.'¹³⁵ It appears that during Quoc's time in Canton the northern Vietnamese who passed through his training courses were less likely to become members of the communist group than those from Annam, perhaps because the former had been recruited by Nguyen Hai Than or Lam Duc Thu.

The Thanh Nien course material, some of which was printed in 1927 as *Duong Kach Menh*, [*The Path to Revolution*], was most likely collected by Quoc during his stay in Russia, and may have been similar to the political lectures offered by the communist political commissars at Whampoa Academy before their removal in March 1926. This pamphlet became a Bible for the young communist recruits of 1926 and 1927, Ha Huy Tap would

¹²⁸ RC, 495/154/600, p.1, unsigned letter in Vietnamese to Le Hong Phong, point 4.

¹²⁹ RC, 495/154/598, p.2.

¹³⁰ Thanh Dam, op. cit., p. 72.

¹³¹ Thanh Dam, 'Cac Nha Cach Mang Viet Nam Tham Gia Khoi Nghia Quang Chau' (The Vietnamese Revolutionaries Who Took Part in the Canton Uprising', *NCLS*, no. 6 (253), 1990, p. 72.

¹³² *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau*, p. 57 (*); pp. 201-205.

¹³³ *AOM, SPCE*, box 368, Mission Noel, Canton, 16 fev. 1927.

¹³⁴ Thanh Dam, 'Cac Nha Cach Mang', p. 72.

write in 1932. 'We learned it almost by heart,' he said.¹³⁶ It contained explanations of the different types of revolutions, the different internationals, of unions, peasant unions, and cooperatives. It was deeply imbued with the concept of a two-stage revolution, as outlined by Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonial Questions*. These two stages the pamphlet defined as the national revolution and the world revolution. While the national revolution would make no distinction between classes, the world revolution would be led by the peasants and workers and bring to an end the world capitalist system.¹³⁷ By 1932, however, this concept of a two-stage revolution had been disavowed by the Comintern and Ha Huy Tap would write deprecatingly of the confusion and naivete of the *Thanh Nien* programme. In particular he would criticize the theory that 'during the period of anti-imperialist struggle, one must unite all the classes'. 'Such a theory signifies nothing more and nothing less than class collaboration...' he would say.¹³⁸

By February of 1927, Nguyen Ai Quoc's recruiting and training was at last gathering momentum. His success in converting the members of the Tam Tam Xa was being duplicated in his relations with the Phuc Quoc/Cach Mang Dang. The next step was to put Thanh Nien on an official footing, that is to get recognition from the Comintern, to draw up a programme and find reliable funding. The arrival of a Comintern delegation in Canton in February 1927 gave Quoc the opening he needed. Jacques Doriot, a communist youth activist with whom Quoc had attended the Fifth Congress in Moscow, was in the delegation together with Tom Mann from Great Britain and the American Earl Browder. Doriot had also become the president of the Colonial Section of the French Communist Party, as well as a deputy in the National Assembly. In his capacity as propagandist and translator, Quoc was able to accompany the group around Canton and gain Doriot's support for his work in Vietnam.¹³⁹ Doriot's role was certainly connected to the Comintern's decision in March 1926 to create a new Secretariat for France, the French colonies, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland. At that time the major responsibility for developing an Indochinese communist movement was formally handed to the French CP.¹⁴⁰ On 3 March 1927 Doriot, Quoc (who signed himself Lee), and Volin representing the Russian advisory group, drew up a memorandum agreeing that 'Lee' would prepare a budget request for the

¹³⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, annexe à l'envoi 226, entrevues des 29,30 et 31 oct. et du 1er nov. 1925.

¹³⁶ Ha Huy Tap in RC, 495, 201,45, p. 3 of manuscript titled, 'Renseignements supplémentaires sur l'origine des organisations communiste en Indochine'.

¹³⁷ *Cac To Chuc Tien Than Cua Dang*, [*The Precursors of the Party*], pp. 23-24.

¹³⁸ RC, 495,201,45, pp. 3-4 of Ha Huy Tap manuscript.

¹³⁹ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noel, letter of 23 Feb. 1927.

¹⁴⁰ Adibekov et al., op. cit., pp. 105-6. The regional secretariats formed in March 1926 were often referred to as lensekretariats (landersekretariats).

Comintern, while Doriot would write a manifesto to the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth along with a resolution outlining their future tasks.¹⁴¹

Doriot reported in an explanatory letter to the Eastern Secretariat that the Thanh Nien organization had already established core groups all over Vietnam: one in Cochinchina, two in Annam, six in Tonkin and four in Siam. 'Certainly, they still have numerous weaknesses,' he wrote: 'First, the lack of a programme; second, a very marked tendency to conspiracy and sectarianism. Their activity resembles that of a secret society, rather than that of a mass revolutionary organization. For example, the organization is constituted almost entirely of comrades who have been to Canton. That is to say that their links with the masses are still weak. Nevertheless,' he continued, 'some links have been established and attempts at organizing larger groups have been made among students, merchants and peasants.'¹⁴² Doriot explained that his resolution on party work raised several points: a) the need to transform the work of sects into mass work; b) to open the organization to a larger number of Vietnamese who actually lived in Vietnam; c) to become more involved in the political life of Vietnam; d) to create workers' unions, peasant unions and student associations and organizations for the other strata of the population.¹⁴³

Doriot's manifesto – a letter addressed to the 'Indochinese Revolutionary Youth' – makes it clear that he viewed Thanh Nien as a nationalist organization, with overt goals similar to those of the Chinese GMD. 'The Indochinese people – as your organization has proclaimed – can only follow one path if they truly want to change their situation: that of the struggle for independence,' he wrote.¹⁴⁴ He emphasized that the workers and peasants were the essential forces of the struggle. But he added a strong endorsement for a united front: 'Do not forget that under imperialist domination, all of the people (workers, peasants, merchants and intellectuals), with the exception of a tiny minority of profiteers, have an interest in fighting imperialism. Don't neglect any effort to attract them and organize them every day for the struggle. Do not refuse their cooperation,' he said.¹⁴⁵ Nowhere in his tract did he mention communism, although he did cite the example of the Russian revolution as a model of anti-imperialism, which had liberated the oppressed peoples of the Czarist empire.¹⁴⁶ The Comintern's desire to mold Thanh Nien as a nationalist organization is underlined by a report from Lam Duc Thu on the 17 March

¹⁴¹ RC, 495, 154, 555, p.5.

¹⁴² RC, 495, 154,555, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

1927. 'Recently the Chinese and French revolutionaries have begun encouraging "les amis" to create a party similar to the Chinese nationalist party, with a programme, policy and world-wide propaganda service and information agency. The statutes of this party will soon be completed,' he wrote.¹⁴⁷

Quoc submitted a one-year budget to the Comintern which totalled 40,000 Chinese dollars. Of this figure, half would go to cover the cost of travel to and training in Canton for 100 future propagandists. In addition he requested \$1,500 to support ten full-time propagandists for one year. Publications, communications, setting up small shops as fronts for liaison posts and other organizational tasks would absorb another \$8,500. The travel costs of another 100 men who would come to study at Whampoa would amount to \$5,000. As Quoc explained in an attached note, Whampoa had pledged to train these 100 Vietnamese if their travel costs were covered.¹⁴⁸ The final \$5,000 for 'unforeseen expenses' was to be set aside for illness or other emergencies.

By March 1927, with Doriot's support and two new groups of trainees returning to Vietnam, Nguyen Ai Quoc's organization appeared ready for sustained growth. In central Vietnam negotiations were underway for a formal union with the Phuc Quoc party, since mid-1926 renamed Cach Mang Dang. The two main sources on the negotiations for unity disagree, however, on how eagerly this goal was pursued. Ha Huy Tap, writing around 1932 in Moscow, claimed that Le Duy Diem returned to Vietnam in March 1927 with a mandate from Canton to lay the groundwork for unification. Diem attended local meetings of both parties in north and central Vietnam, which were followed by a national unification conference in Hue that July. For the first time, Tap writes, both parties received a written programme and statutes, which included regulations for workers and peasant unions, student unions and other associations.¹⁴⁹ This progression of events would have been a logical consequence of Doriot's visit to Canton. But all did not go as smoothly as Quoc might have hoped. According to Ha Huy Tap, the two parties had decided to accept the designation Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi, The Comrades Association of Revolutionary Vietnamese Youth, still known simply as Thanh Nien or by its Vietnamese initials, V.N.T.N.C.M.D.C.H. The two organizations would carry out a merger from top to bottom, combining all cells under a provisional central committee. Provisional regional committees were formed in the north and center, and all that remained was to form a regional committee for Cochinchina. But the Thanh Nien members from the

¹⁴⁷ AOM, SPCE, 368, letter from Canton, 17 March 1927.

¹⁴⁸ RC, 495, 154,555, p. 17, 'Note Explicative du Budget.

¹⁴⁹ RC, 495, 201,45, p.7 of Ha Huy Tap manuscript.

South, who had been unable to attend the Hue conference, balked at accepting the decisions of the July meeting.

By this stage, sometime after July 1927, Ha Huy Tap claims that the southern Thanh Nien membership had become the largest in the country. This was a rapid change from the situation in early 1927, when Doriot had reported only one Thanh Nien group established in Cochinchina, and must have reflected an intense effort to make the association into a mass party. Tap himself claims that he moved to Saigon to engage in political work in March 1927, after being removed from his teaching post in Vinh, where he had been organizing evening classes for workers.¹⁵⁰ A group of ten expatriates from Cochinchina or Annam, mainly workers, had arrived in Canton in May or early June 1927, Lam Duc Thu claimed.¹⁵¹ This group perhaps included labour organizer Ton Duc Thang, the future President of North Vietnam, who returned to Cochinchina from Canton in the second part of the year.¹⁵² As we have seen, a group of nine southern emigres sponsored by the GMD arrived in Canton in July. Thanh Nien growth in the south may have been facilitated by the Cochinchina-Cambodia organization attached to the CCP. Ton Duc Thang had been organizing Saigon workers since 1925, so it is quite possible that he had been in contact with this urban-based Chinese committee.¹⁵³

There is other evidence which points to the fact that Thanh Nien was making an effort to develop roots in southern Vietnam in 1927. Ha Huy Giap, brother of Ha Huy Tap, relates in his memoirs that he had moved to Saigon in 1926 to look for a way to leave for France. But in early 1927 Nguyen Van Loi and Phan Trong Binh, two of the Communist Youth Group members from the second training course, arrived in Saigon and convinced him to stay on there, as a Thanh Nien activist. The two Canton trainees remained in the south as teachers.¹⁵⁴ Giap also reveals what is a potentially important link between the southern and central activists: he claims that Nguyen An Ninh was imprisoned in Saigon in 1926 with Tu Kien, one of the Poulo Condore prisoners who was part of the original conspiracy to form the Phuc Quoc party in 1918. Both shared the ideas of Nguyen Ai Quoc, Giap says. Nguyen An Ninh is said by Giap to have passed on his 'undertakings' to Tu Kien, who was released from prison first. Tu Kien then returned to Vinh, where he was formally initiated into the Cach Mang Dang by Le Huan, his former prison mate from Poulo

¹⁵⁰ RC, 495/201/45, 'Avtobiografia Sinichkina', [*Sinichkin's (Ha Huy Tap's) Autobiography*].

¹⁵¹ AOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noel, Annexe I, Lettre de Pinot le 3 juin 1927.

¹⁵² Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

¹⁵³ Ban Lien Lac Tu Chinh Tri, *Con Dao Ky Su va Tu Lieu [Con Son Island Memoirs and Documents]*, (Ho Chi Minh: Tre, 1996), p. 163.

¹⁵⁴ Ha Huy Giap, *Doi Toi*, (T.P. Ho Chi Minh: Nha Xuat Ban T.P. Ho Chi Minh, 1994), p.47.

Condore. After that he returned to the south, ostensibly to build up the membership of the Revolutionary Party, but possibly also to work for Thanh Nien.¹⁵⁵ A *Sûreté* note of May 1928 would refer to Tu Kien (Nguyen Dinh Kien) as the liaison between the Vietnamese in Canton and Saigon.¹⁵⁶ When he was again arrested in 1929, the French found pictures of Marx and Lenin in his house.

Other party mergers may have been initiated since March, on Doriot's advice to enlarge the Thanh Nien membership – it could be, for example, that some members of the 'Youth Party' (also known as Jeune Annam) founded in Saigon in March 1926, had become affiliated with Thanh Nien. (The closeness to the Thanh Nien name is apparently coincidental.) In mid-1926 Nguyen Ai Quoc had made a glowing report to the Comintern on the Jeune Annam group, which was close to Phan Van Truong and Nguyen An Ninh, both of whom had worked in Paris within the Intercolonial Union.¹⁵⁷ Their possible links to Thanh Nien, perhaps via the French CP, also need to be investigated. On the whole, very little is known about the nature of the contacts between Canton and the southern revolutionaries at this stage. But certainly by mid-1927 activists from Central Vietnam had begun to build formal organizational ties to augment whatever personal networks were already in existence.

The July 1927 attempt to merge with Thanh Nien left the Cach Mang Dang in some confusion: until July 1928 it would retain the name Thanh Nien, Ha Huy Tap claims, along with the association's statutes and methods of organization.¹⁵⁸ In his view, the two parties did not have any disagreements of principle, but suffered from personal rivalries when it came to questions of organization.

A more complicated view of the relationship between the two parties is presented in the memoir of the Revolutionary Party member Hoang Duc Thi, published by the *Sûreté* in 1933. He admits that in 1927 his Party adopted the organization in cells which Thanh Nien had instituted, and that they pretended that the two parties had united, under the leadership of Thanh Nien's central committee in Canton.¹⁵⁹ He explains this Byzantine behaviour as an attempt to win back the allegiance of the students returning from China. But reading

¹⁵⁵ Ha Huy Giap, op. cit., p.46 and *Contribution, vol.1, p.21*. The term of address 'Tu' was used for someone who had passed the *tu tai* examinations, roughly equivalent to the baccalaureate.

¹⁵⁶ Fonds Goucoch, (NA2, HCM), *Note Mensuelle de la Sûreté*, Mai 1928. (My thanks to Philippe Peycam for providing this document.) *Humanité*, 13 Oct. 1929 refers to Kien's 18 years' deportation on Poulou Condore and his 1929 arrest in an article on repression in Indochina.

¹⁵⁷ RC, 495, 154,596, p. 10, from an article written for *Imprecor*, 9 July 1926.

¹⁵⁸ Ha Huy Tap, *RC, 495, 201,45*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁹ *Contribution, vol.1, p. 20*.

between the lines, one senses that he is playing down a potentially dangerous episode in his political past. By 1933, his old associate Tran Phu had died in police custody in Saigon, and Ha Huy Tap himself, an important Revolutionary Party member in 1927, was on the point of returning from Moscow to become a major force in the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party. While Hoang Duc Thi may never have fully approved the closeness between the two parties, there is little doubt that it existed. Thi's version of the breakdown of negotiations places the blame on the Thanh Nien members who refused to merge their regional committees in the Center and North.¹⁶⁰ Both he and Ha Huy Tap agree that Vuong Thuc Oanh played a negative role in these merger attempts.

The situation was probably complicated by Nguyen Ai Quoc's fondness for the tactic of taking over movements from the inside. Ha Huy Tap describes what he calls 'some typical examples' of collaboration between the two parties: 'the comrade H. of Thanh Nien was also the second secretary of the Revolutionary Party's central committee; comrade Nguyen Si Sach, a liaison agent of the Revolutionary Party's central committee, was a member of Thanh Nien's regional committee for Annam...'.¹⁶¹ Tap does not say whether he played a dual role, although he makes it clear that he considered himself a communist. (He also shared a house with 'certain members of the Thanh Nien Regional Committee for Cochinchina.) Hoang Duc Thi's memoir confirms that even Thanh Nien trainees who had no previous association with the Revolutionary Party 'offered their services' to the Revolutionary Party on their return from Canton.¹⁶² One can assume that they did so on the instruction of the Thanh Nien leadership in China.

4. The Collapse of the United Front

The organizational progress which the Doriot visit represented for Thanh Nien had already been undermined by the time the merger negotiations with the Revolutionary Party fell apart. Just as Nguyen Ai Quoc's party-building and lobbying for Comintern support began to pay off, the united front in Canton was brought to an abrupt close. Chiang Kaishek's Shanghai coup on 12 April 1927 destroyed the left-wing workers movement there and pushed the CCP underground. Similar moves in other cities of republican China followed – mass arrests and executions of trade unionists began in Canton around 14 April. By then Nguyen Ai Quoc had either fled north or taken refuge in the Russian consulate. He explained to the Comintern after arriving in Moscow that the one Russian remaining in

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶¹ *RC*, 495/201/45, p. 6 of Ha Huy Tap manuscript.

¹⁶² *Contribution*, vol. 1, p. 19.

Canton, 'could not give us any aid or advice, or even continue to pay me as a translator, as all work had become impossible. .. I had no choice but to allow myself to be arrested or to continue my work in Siam after returning to Moscow.'¹⁶³ Agent Konstantin reported that Quoc and other Vietnamese communists had been informed on by members of the rival patriotic group in Canton, led by Tam Kam Xay (Dam Giam Tay).¹⁶⁴ This group, with which Nguyen Hai Than was beginning to align himself, was positioning itself as the purely nationalist revolutionary organization in Canton. Two of Ly Thuy's comrades had been arrested, along with 4 or 5 Vietnamese who had just arrived from Tonkin, Konstantin said. The intrepid Lam Duc Thu had had to allow himself to be imprisoned along with Ho Tung Mau in order to preserve his cover. He wrote to his *Sûreté* contact on 13 May 1927 that he had been in prison since 15 April. '...The presence of Ho Tung Mau is a considerable obstacle to the writing and transmission of my letters,' he explained. 'Do you realize, Sir, how I am feeling? If at this moment I am still sparing no effort, it is because I have always had the most complete confidence in you.' By mid-June they had been freed, however, and Lam Duc Thu was once again engaged in reporting on the revolutionaries.¹⁶⁵

Relations between Nguyen Ai Quoc and Nguyen Hai Than had been deteriorating as tensions grew within the united front. Nguyen Hai Than was drawing closer to the rival collection of Vietnamese rebels, who were more exclusively focussed on military activity than Quoc. As Lam Duc Thu described them, Tam Kam Xay and Pham Nam Son were 'professionals in circulating counterfeit money and in opium trafficking, who have used Hai Than to create this party...'.¹⁶⁶ Lam Duc Thu had reported at the end of January that Nguyen Hai Than was discussing the organization of a new party with Tam Kam Say and an assortment of others.¹⁶⁷ By March, Thu reported, Ly Thuy was no longer consulting Hai Than.¹⁶⁸ Lam Duc Thu also reported that Ly Thuy's highly secretive handling of financial matters was a cause of the break-down in trust: 'Almost all the expenses of the group are paid by Ly Thuy in a very clever way: he gives the money either to Hong Son or Tung Mau who deposit it in their names... In this way it appears that the friends from Annam trust each other and lack confidence in their compatriots from other parts of the Union, and it is this very distrust which has pushed Hai Than and Pham Nam Son to

¹⁶³ RC, 495,154,598, p. 2, undated report signed by NAQ.

¹⁶⁴ AOM, SPCE 368, Mission Noel, Annexe I à l'envoi N. 374 du 21 avril 1927, Rapport de Konstantin

¹⁶⁵ AOM, SPCE, 368, Mission Noel, Annexe à l'envoi n.384 du 27 juin 1927, Rapport de Pinot, 21 June 1927.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., Mission Noel, 8 April 1927.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., Mission Noel, annexe à note du 10 février 1927, letter of 29 jan. 1927.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., Mission Noel, 7 March 1927.

create their own group.' (The money came from the Canton government, Thu wrote, which paid it on the request of a Russian councillor.)¹⁶⁹

Yet the two groups continued to cooperate within the framework of Whampoa Academy. In February 1927 Thu claimed that fifty-three Vietnamese had been enrolled at Whampoa since the previous December. Graduates, including Le Hong Son and Le Nhu Vong (Le Thiet Hung), had been selected to instruct the newly enrolled Vietnamese, for whom a special Vietnamese language section was being created.¹⁷⁰ As it turned out, the Thanh Nien group would retain a foothold in Canton after the April coup by maintaining their links with the non-communist national liberation movement, including the left-wing of the Chinese GMD. In the case of some members such as Truong Van Lenh, it was a question of out-and-out infiltration of the rival group, as Lam Duc Thu informed the *Sûreté* on 8 April.¹⁷¹ Truong Van Lenh managed to stay on the payroll of the Canton government, first as police corporal, then as a police company commander, until the end of October 1927. After that he served in the army of GMD General Zhang Fakui.¹⁷² As for Le Hong Son, his political fortunes were also linked in part to Zhang Fakui – he had served on Zhang's staff in 1926, when he was based on Hainan Island.

Nguyen Ai Quoc's whereabouts were the source of frequent rumours until at least December 1927. He may have primed Ho Tung Mau and Le Hong Son to pass on false reports to the émigré circle. Konstantin, for example, reported on 1 June that Ly Thuy had been imprisoned with the other Thanh Nien members. Later he was reported by Lam Duc Thu to have fled to Hankou,¹⁷³ and still later in the year to have joined the troops of Ye Ting in Swatow.¹⁷⁴ From Quoc's own account of his movements to the Comintern, however, we learn that he must have gone more or less directly to Shanghai after leaving Canton. Perhaps he went via Hankou, where a meeting of the Pan Pacific Trade Union was held in late May or early June. But he makes no mention of this. He travelled by ship from Shanghai to Vladivostok with Jacques Doriot and arrived in Moscow sometime in June.¹⁷⁵ In Vladivostok he ran into Voitinsky, who tried to persuade him to return to Shanghai to work among the French and Vietnamese troops there. But Quoc seems to have already made up his mind to request funding to carry on his political training work from Siam. In

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., Mission Noel, letter of 17 March 1927.

¹⁷⁰ AOM, SPCE, 368, 16 Feb. 1927.

¹⁷¹ AOM, SPCE, 368, 8 April 1927.

¹⁷² SMP, National Archives, Washington D.C., Box 23 file 3055. (I suspect that Lam Duc Thu was the original source of this information.)

¹⁷³ AOM, SPCE, Box 368, 10 June 1927.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., Annexe à l'envoi N. 401 du 5 oct. 1927, letter of 29 Sept. 1927.

¹⁷⁵ RC, 495,154,598, p. 2, from a 3-page, unsigned report datelined Moscow June 1927.

Moscow he had only brief contact with the Vietnamese at the University of the Toilers of the East, who had formed a communist cell of five members. They were 'Fon-shon' (Nguyen The Ruc, a northerner from the clan of Nguyen The Truyen); 'Le-man' (Ngo Duc Tri, son of the scholar and former political prisoner Ngo Duc Ke from Ha-Tinh); 'Jia-o' (Bui Cong Trung, the young journalist and activist from central Vietnam who first became known in Saigon as a member of *Jeune Annam*); 'Min-khan' (Bui Lam, a sailor and print-shop worker from Haiphong, who came to Moscow via his French party contacts in Paris); and 'Lequy' (Tran Phu), who had been elected secretary of the group.¹⁷⁶ In a brief note Quoc requested the communist cell at the university to take charge of their political education. On 25 June he also made a report to the Krestintern in Moscow on the peasant movement in Guangdong.¹⁷⁷ After a time in hospital to treat his tuberculosis, he would be sent to Paris in November with a new set of instructions from the Comintern.¹⁷⁸

The remaining members of the Borodin mission left their last Chinese refuge in July 1927, after an effort to patch together a new united front with the left-wing of the Guomindang in Wuhan had failed. Once all illusions of compromise with its leader Wang Jingwei had disappeared, the CCP was left to work out a new strategy, in order to preserve something of the gains it had made during the united front years. After three years of serving within the Guomindang-commanded army, the Chinese communists would within a matter of months have to create their own fighting forces. Stalin and the Comintern finally made an abrupt policy turn in July, after the first escapees from the April coup had returned to Moscow to report. (These included a 'Freyer', who made a lengthy report to the Krestintern on the Peasant Movement, as well as Nguyen Ai Quoc.)¹⁷⁹ In a July 14 resolution, the ECCI declared that, 'The revolutionary role of the Wuhan government is played out; it is becoming a counter-revolutionary force. This is the new and peculiar feature which the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and all the Chinese comrades must clearly and fully take into account.' Still the communists were advised to remain in the Guomindang, but to apply a united front 'from below' strategy: to 'intensify the work among the proletarian masses ... build up labour organizations... strengthen the trade unions... prepare the working masses for decisive action...develop the agrarian

¹⁷⁶ RC, 495,154,598, p. 1, letter of 25 June 1927, signed by Humbert-Droz and NAQ, 'the Vietnamese delegate'. Biographical information on the students can be found in Anatoly Sokolov, *Komintern I Vietnam, [Comintern and Vietnam]*, (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniia, 1998).

¹⁷⁷ RC, 535,1,127, 'Kratkoie Informatsionnoie Sobshcheniie o Krestyanskom dvizhenii provintsii Guandun', ['Brief Report on the Peasant Movement in Guangdong'].

¹⁷⁸ RC, 495, 154, 598, p. 5, letter of 4 April 1928 from Berlin, signed in Russian 'Nguyen Ai Kvak'.

¹⁷⁹ RC, 535, 1,127.

revolution... arm the workers and peasants...organize a competent fighting illegal party apparatus.¹⁸⁰

After the anti-communist carnage unleashed by the GMD in April, the CCP leadership at last hit back. Their first attempt to wrest power from the GMD 'reactionaries' came on 1 August, when the troops commanded by generals Ye Ting and He Long staged a revolt in Nanchang, capital of Jiangxi Province. Zhou Enlai was the political mastermind of the Nanchang uprising. This event marks the foundation of the People's Revolutionary Army, according to CCP historians, as it was the beginning of the communists' independent leadership of their troops. The revolt was crushed within three days, when General Zhang Fakui, whom the communists had assumed was their ally, attacked the rebels with his own forces. The peasant masses did not come to the aid of the besieged communists, who were forced to retreat south to Swatow in the northeast of Guangdong Province, where their attempts to establish a new capital were once again defeated in early October. In the meantime, the CCP Central Committee met on August 7 in Hankou to condemn the 'right capitulationism' of the party leader Chen Duxiu, who had become the scapegoat for the failures of the united front. They declared a new policy of agrarian revolution and armed resistance to the GMD. The new provisional leadership 'decided to make mobilization of the peasants to stage autumn harvest uprisings the major task of the Party'.¹⁸¹ The new Comintern representative, Besso Lominadze, apparently took an active part in shaping these decisions. It was not until 19 September, however, that the Central Committee's Politbureau resolved that it would no longer carry on the pretense of fighting under the banner of the Left Guomindang. From then on the CCP was fighting for soviet power under its own red banner.¹⁸² At a November 1927 meeting of the CCP Provisional Politbureau, the communists confirmed their leftward course, again under the influence of Lominadze. Although their numbers had dropped precipitously since April, they resolved that the 'revolutionary situation' was still at a high point and that the tactics of armed insurrection should continue.¹⁸³

The Vietnamese communists who had joined the GMD forces must have found themselves in difficult circumstances – they may not have had time in 1927 to make a conscious choice to fight under the communist's flag or under the command of the unpredictable Zhang Fakui. We know from Lam Duc Thu's reports, however, that one of

¹⁸⁰ Cited by Harold Isaacs, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁸¹ Party History Research Centre of the CC of the CCP, *A History of the Chinese Communist Party: A Chronology of Events (1919-1990)*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991), p. 53.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7.

the heroes of the Vietnamese party, Le Hong Son, was still linked to Zhang Fakui as late as November 1927, as were other members of *Thanh Nien*. Lam Duc Thu told the *Sûreté* on 13 November that there were still 'a large number of communists' in the army of 'Truong Phat Khue', including Le Quang Dat and Truong Van Lenh. They were earning monthly salaries of 200 and 150 piastres per month respectively.¹⁸⁴ In Canton, the anti-communist purge had been carried out by General Li Jishen, who, as Nguyen Ai Quoc reported to the Krestintern, had shown particular vehemence against the local peasant organizations.¹⁸⁵ So when Zhang Fakui's army staged a coup against General Li on 17 November, there was apparently great relief among the *Thanh Nien* leadership. '...The partisans of Tung Mau are jubilant, because the return of their comrades will permit them to find work and support easily...' Lam Duc Thu wrote in anticipation of the coup.¹⁸⁶

During these months of political transition, Vietnamese continued to come to Canton for training. They included several from Tonkin who would become the leaders of a radical break-away faction in the *Thanh Nien* group in 1929: Ngo Gia Tu, Nguyen Duc Canh, Trinh Dinh Cuu and Nguyen Hoi.¹⁸⁷ It is extremely difficult to do more than guess at what political influences they would have been subjected to after April 1927, as the political situation both within *Thanh Nien* and Guangdong Province was so complex. Different processes were under way which appear to have been contradictory. Within *Thanh Nien*, there was an effort at reconciliation with their nationalist rivals, while within the CCP, there was a lurch towards insurrection. On the one hand, the remaining members of *Thanh Nien* in Canton began a concerted effort in the autumn of 1927 to reunite the estranged Nguyen Hai Than with their group. On both 18 and 24 October, Lam Duc Thu had reported meetings between the two groups aimed at fusing their parties. 'Yesterday, Sunday,' he wrote, 'Ngo Thanh and Dinh Te Dan met Tung Mau, Van Lenh and Quang Dat in the public gardens. They discussed the need to bring an end to their quarrels ...' Tung Mau believed that they had resolved their disagreements.¹⁸⁸ It was in September of 1927 that Nguyen Duc Canh's biography says he went to Canton to meet the Central Committee of the *Thanh Nien* association, in order to coordinate the work of his movement with theirs. A native of Thai Binh Province born in 1908, Canh had been ejected from his school in Nam Dinh in 1926 for organizing a student strike. He was a member of

¹⁸⁴ AOM, SPCE, box 368, 13 nov. 1927.

¹⁸⁵ RC, 535, 1,127, p. 36.

¹⁸⁶ AOM, SPCE, 368, Annexe a l'envoi N. 401 du 5 oct. 1927.

¹⁸⁷ Biographical information on Ngo Gia Tu, Nguyen Duc Canh and Nguyen Hoi comes from, *Nhung Nguoi Cong San, [The Communists]*, (no author), (T.P. Ho Chi Minh: NXB Thanh Nien, 1976). Trinh Dinh Cuu's presence in Canton is revealed in Quang Hung and Quoc Anh, 'Le Hong Son', *NCLS*, n. 184, 1979, p. 17.

¹⁸⁸ AOM, SPCE, 368, 24 oct. 1927.

the Nam Dong Publishing Society, which in December 1927 transformed itself into the Vietnamese Quoc Dan Dang or Nationalist Party.¹⁸⁹ Like other students before him, he switched his allegiance to Thanh Nien after attending a training course based on Nguyen Ai Quoc's programme. Trinh Dinh Cuu and Nguyen Hoi were possibly in Canton at the same time as Nguyen Duc Canh. Ngo Gia Tu's official biography claims that he was in Canton in mid-1927. We do not know if he observed the April coup d'état.

The Vietnamese trainees would also have been aware of the events taking place in the Haifeng and Lufeng districts to the east of Canton. Some of the troops who had withdrawn from Nanchang to Swatow had since regrouped to these districts, the scene of the first successes of the Guangdong peasant movement. These troops began an attack on 25 October to create a soviet. After the violence perpetrated against them by the troops of Li Jishen, both the peasantry and the province's communist leadership seem to have been bent on revenge. Provisional revolutionary governments were set up in Haifeng and Lufeng which were 'fully communist and strongly military', writes Fernando Galbiati.¹⁹⁰ He quotes a letter from the CCP's Guangdong Committee which advised that, 'the killing of landlords should continue until not one is left... Where this does not occur the taking of Hai-Lu-feng is as unsound as a house built on sand.'¹⁹¹ As Galbiati points out, the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet as a whole was firmly under control, stage-managed by 'a small central body, whose orders were carried out by the members of the Peasant Association'. The CCP organizers remained highly secretive and came to be referred to within the Soviet as 'the *zuzhi*' or 'the organization'.¹⁹²

The existence of the peasant soviet at Hai-Lu-feng was encouragement to the CCP leadership to stage a revolt in Canton itself. The immediate trigger, however, was the competition between Zhang Fakui and General Li Jishen, for on 26 November the Canton communists decided that the warlords' conflict created a good opportunity to organize an insurrection. The date was set for 13 December. The German communist, Heinz Neumann, the new conduit for Stalin's instructions in Canton, is believed to have made the final decision to stage the insurrection, perhaps under pressure from Stalin to deliver a success in China to coincide with the Fifteenth Congress of the Soviet CP. The three-day insurrection, which was crushed by the newly united GMD generals, again resulted in harsh reprisals against the workers and communists who took part. It became an inspirational legend for the CCP, in spite of its poor planning and the lack of support from

¹⁸⁹ *Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, p. 93.

¹⁹⁰ Fernando Galbiati, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

the working class. But how did it affect the Vietnamese communists who were based in Canton or studying at the Whampoa Academy?

One official history of the Vietnamese C.P. claims that the members of the Thanh Nien association joined in the fighting and that 24 Vietnamese were arrested.¹⁹³ Those in the cadet corps at Whampoa are in fact the Vietnamese most likely to have taken part, for this was the only military force available to defend the communards. One Vietnamese, Phung Chi Kien, is said to have retreated to the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet after the insurrection failed, where he served as a unit commander of communist troops.¹⁹⁴ But a confession by a southern communist who knew Phung Chi Kien in China states that after participating in the Canton uprising, he returned to Whampoa until he was imprisoned at the start of 1929. Only after his release in the autumn of 1929 did Kien enter the Chinese CP and join the Red Army in eastern Guangdong (Dong Kiang) as a company commander.¹⁹⁵ Another Whampoa cadet who may have been arrested following the uprising was Tran Van Cung (Quoc Hoa), who in 1929 led the break-away faction of Thanh Nien.¹⁹⁶ A Hanoi source claims that Truong Van Lenh was one of the leaders of the commune, but that he changed his name and uniform afterwards to blend into the nationalist troops.¹⁹⁷ It is equally possible that he was with Zhang Fakui's army outside of Canton. Unfortunately, Lam Duc Thu's reports are silent on how this drama unfolded. But in May 1928, he reported that 24 Vietnamese were still teaching or studying at Whampoa. Among them were Le Duy Nghia (Le Duy Diem) and Manh van Lieu (one of Phung Chi Kien's pseudonyms). Those Thanh Nien members who had been arrested during the uprising were released on 13 May, most of them in bad health.¹⁹⁸ One history of the commune claims that the Vietnamese cadet Do Huy Liem was killed in the fighting;¹⁹⁹ yet he remained at Whampoa until the end of 1928 and returned to work for Thanh Nien and then the ICP in Tonkin until his arrest in 1930.²⁰⁰ Still, for the new recruits and trainees who were in Canton, the commune and the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet may have been radicalizing experiences. At this point the CCP was on an insurrectionary path: the formation of soviets both in the towns and country was

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 295.

¹⁹³ *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau*, p. 194.

¹⁹⁴ Georges Boudarel, *Giap*, (Paris: Editions Atlas, 1977), pp. 172-4.

¹⁹⁵ AOM, SPCE, 367, Déclarations faites par Truong Phuoc Dat les 22 mai 1933 et jours suivants, p. 41.

¹⁹⁶ *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau*, p. 194

¹⁹⁷ Quang Nung and Quoc Anh, 'Le Hong Son', *NCLS*, n. 184 1979, p. 17. This is plausible, as Zhu De himself is said to have returned to the GMD 16th Army after the loss of Swatow with the help of another officer. See Pierre Broue, *Histoire de L'Internationale Communiste* (Paris:Fayard, 1997), p. 476.

¹⁹⁸ AOM, SPCE 368, Mission Noel, envoi n. 441 du 25 mai 1928

¹⁹⁹ *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau*, p.205.

²⁰⁰ AOM, SPCE 368, Annexe à envoi no. 3222/S du 25 juin 1930.

the order of the day. But contrary to the standard Hanoi picture of 1928, Thanh Nien would manage to continue some of its activities and military training in Canton until the end of the year, when a second wave of anti-communist repression would begin.

Two currents of Vietnamese communism may have already been diverging by the end of 1927 within the émigré group in China. One would follow the united front strategy of the previous years, while the other would converge with the newly militant strategy of the CCP. With no Comintern structure left in Canton at the end of 1927, there was no source of instruction or orthodoxy for the Vietnamese other than the CCP. As Nguyen Ai Quoc had left China, he was not forced at this point to identify with either current. After his return to Moscow he would slip into the communist underground and apparently remain aloof from the rivalries which would split the Vietnamese communist movement in 1929. Although the French would continue to receive intelligence reports of planned Vietnamese insurrections throughout 1927, it does not seem likely that Quoc had approved any such schemes. He remained the gradualist and patient organizer, in spite of the violent end to the united front experiment. When Grigory Voitinsky suggested to him in Vladivostok that he return to Shanghai to work among the Vietnamese troops there, he rejected the idea. 'Should we try to organize a few Vietnamese soldiers in Shanghai (who in any case are about to return to their country, from what they told me), and let the work begun in Indochina perish?' he asked in a report to Moscow. He proposed to move his work to Siam: '... the work or rather the continuation of the work in Indochina – even though the result may be more distant and less visible – is more important,' he wrote, 'because in Shanghai other comrades can replace me, but not in Siam. And because the news of the Chinese reaction, which has been spread widely by the French imperialists, is sowing discouragement among the Vietnamese, and if we discontinue our work now, all that we have done during the last three years will be lost, and it will be very difficult to begin again, in view of the morale of the Vietnamese, who have already been disappointed several times.'²⁰¹

²⁰¹ RC, 495,154,598, p. 3 of June 1927 report.

CHAPTER IV

From the Old to the New Course (1927-1929)

1. Nguyen Ai Quoc's Travels

When Nguyen Ai Quoc fled from Canton in April of 1927, he travelled via Shanghai and Vladivostok to Moscow. In Moscow, as we have seen, he sought support for his plan to continue the work he had begun in Canton from a new base in Siam. He spent part of that summer in a Crimean hospital being treated for tuberculosis. That September (1927) the Comintern drew up directives for his future work, and sent him off to Paris in November, to coordinate his plans with the Colonial Commission of the French CP.¹ Although the French party now had responsibility for nurturing communism in Indochina, in practice FCP members worked under strict supervision from Moscow.

In spite of the Comintern's disillusionment with the Guomindang, the instructions which Nguyen Ai Quoc took to Paris still reflected the tactic of the united front with nationalist forces. The two-page directive (dated 12 September 1927) noted that 'AK' (Ai Kvak, as the Russians spelled his name) should help to fuse 'the national-revolutionaries among the Indochinese emigres (first in Paris and in France) by creating a solid communist core among these elements...'. Then he was to establish liaisons with Indochina in order to transfer revolutionary activity to the country itself. In the meantime, in collaboration with the French CP, he was instructed to draw up an action programme for the national revolutionary movement in Indochina. After clearing this document with the Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI), he was to publicize it in Indochina and 'determine the possibility of developing intense revolutionary work for Indochina in a neighbouring country, in Siam or another country...'.² The Communist Party of Indochina which 'should begin to function in the near future' would rely 'as far as possible on the national-revolutionary organisations, as the left wing of these organisations, while retaining complete liberty of criticism.' The basic political slogans of the revolutionary movement were defined as: '1) independence; 2) withdrawal of the forces of occupation; and 3) convocation of a Constitutional Assembly and the creation of a democratic-revolutionary republic, assuring the free distribution of all land to the peasants, broad-based legislation to support workers' rights, and the energetic defense of the country's independence against any attacks by the rapacious imperialists.' The final point of the 12 September directive

¹ NAQ gives a resume of his movements from his departure from Canton to his 1928 stay in Berlin in RC,495, 154, 598, p. 5, letter dated 12 April 1928.

² RC,495, 154, 556, p. 16, untitled French document dated 12 Sept. 1927

notes that the Comintern would pursue its efforts to establish links to Indochina via China.³

For a variety of reasons, Quoc was unable to follow through on his Comintern instructions in France, he later reported to Moscow. A French police crack-down on communist activity in Paris coincided with a political crisis within the French CP, probably connected to the purge of Trotskyists then underway in the Soviet Union in anticipation of the December Fifteenth Party Congress. At the same time, Jacques Doriot, Quoc's patron in the party's Colonial Commission, had been thrown in prison in France. Quoc wrote that the remaining members of the Commission avoided substantive contacts with him. What he referred to in this report as a 'lack of suppleness' in the Commission's work may actually have been political paralysis. 'During the month- and-a-half when I was in Paris,' he explained, 'as Comrade Doriot was in prison, I could not find a single chance to have a serious conversation with the other comrades. Several times I asked for serious addresses, so that I could communicate with them when I am in the East, but the comrade in charge refused to give them to me.'⁴

Quoc made no mention of his contacts with other Vietnamese in Paris, but one wonders whether he found a way to meet Nguyen The Truyen again. Until at least 1926 Truyen was the key link between the Vietnamese leftists in Paris and the Colonial Commission of the FCP. It was he who arranged for Vietnamese, including several of his own relatives, to be sent to Moscow for study.⁵ In early 1927, following the 1926 collapse of the Intercolonial Union, Truyen had started a new party in Paris called the Annamite Independence Party (AIP).⁶ The formation of this nationalist party in 1927 is normally seen as the beginning of a split between nationalist and communist-oriented Vietnamese. But there is now some evidence that Truyen was following a Comintern-approved policy for colonial countries, which may actually have been strengthened during the time that Bukharin was in charge of the ECCI. Jacques Doriot's prescription for Thanh Nien to become a mass nationalist party is one example of this policy; Nguyen Ai Quoc's September instructions are another sign that colonial communist groups were expected to exist within national revolutionary parties. Even as late as the winter of 1929, French members of the FCP's Colonial

³ RC,495, 154, 556, p. 17.

⁴ RC,495, 154, 598, p. 8, letter of 21 May 1928.

⁵ See e.g. SPCE 367, Déclaration de Ngo Duc Tri, April-June 1931.

⁶ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, op. cit. , pp. 233-5, gives the summer of 1927 as the AIP's founding date, but this appears to be too late.

Commission would continue to implement this policy in Algeria, by working to form a nationalist Algerian party, *l'Etoile Nord-africaine*.⁷

The AIP was closely connected with the French branch of the Comintern-led Anti-Imperialist League, which had held its first conference in February 1927. In a report from the French CP's Colonial Commission to the Comintern in March 1927, the author mentioned that the Independence Party was establishing groups in the south of France and planning to hold congresses in the summer. 'We will take part in the group's Paris meetings, to give them more practical support in their work,' the report said.⁸ Truyen, along with two other activists from Vietnam, *Jeune Annam* journalist Trinh Hung Ngau and Duong Van Giao of the Constitutionalist Party, undertook a French speaking tour in October, during which they subjected French policy and institutions to vigorous criticism. The *Sûreté* believed that these meetings were organized with the complicity of the French CP.⁹ But like Quoc, Truyen may have found dealing with the FCP more difficult after Doriot's arrest. Truyen returned to Vietnam in December. By the summer of 1928 Comintern prescriptions for action in colonial countries would grow more confused, but it would not be until the middle of 1929 that the Comintern would explicitly revise its stand on cooperation with non-communist nationalists in colonial countries.

From Paris Quoc moved on to Brussels in December 1927 to attend a conference, he claimed. But this was not, as is often written, the first Congress of the Anti-Imperialist League, which had taken place the preceding February.¹⁰ Possibly he took part in an interim meeting of the League's Executive Committee, which was held 9 December in Brussels.¹¹ From the middle of December until May 1928 he stayed in Berlin, waiting for money and instructions from the Comintern for his return to Asia. He received 18 marks a week from the Red Aid organization to cover his living expenses, not enough to make ends meet, he said.¹² During his enforced wait he wrote an account of the Canton peasant movement, which featured Peng Pai as the hero. It was 120 pages, free from politics and statistics, concerning the peasants' way of life, he explained. The Krestintern declined to undertake the editing necessary for publication, but some of Quoc's material may have

⁷ RC, 495, 16, 10, p. 11; Tasca letter to Kuusinen, 7 Jan. 1929.

⁸ RC, 495, 154, 296, p. 176.

⁹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 29, note from Ministry of Interior to Minister of Colonies, no. 7667, 27 oct. 1927.

¹⁰ RC, 495, 154, 598, p. 5 letter of 12 April 1928.

¹¹ Thierry Levasseur, 'La Ligue Française Contre l'Impérialisme et le mouvement anticolonialiste vietnamien', *Cahiers de l'Asie du Sud-est*, no. 26, 1989, p. 60.

¹² RC, 495, 154, 598, p. 5.

found its way into other publications.¹³ What sort of contacts he had with the Chinese community in Berlin is unknown. But it would be surprising if he had not exchanged ideas with those associated with the Anti-Imperialist League, which had its seat in Berlin. Sun Yatsen's wife Song Qingling moved to Berlin in late 1927 and seems to have spent most of 1928 there, working to establish a 'Third Party' for China.¹⁴ In his 21 May letter to Moscow, Quoc informed his contacts that he would be communicating with them via Comade Chutto, an Indian working in the Anti-imperialist League.¹⁵ So the League would appear to have been an important contact point for him in Berlin.

The Comintern was preoccupied with far weightier questions than Nguyen Ai Quoc and his travel plans that winter. Leon Trotsky and 148 other members of his Opposition were exiled from Moscow at the end of January, following the 15th Congress of the Soviet CP. For most of February the Comintern was busy with the 9th Plenum of its Executive Committee. Jacques Doriot, who after his release from prison passed through Berlin on his way to the Comintern Plenum, had promised Quoc that he would take care of his 'problem'. But by mid-April Quoc had still had no news from Moscow or Doriot.¹⁶ The Krestintern had also been unhelpful. Quoc had asked them for 500 US dollars and a 'practical organizing plan, so that I may work usefully.'¹⁷ Dombal not only refused to provide any funds, but said that he knew too little about the peasant situation in Indochina to provide a concrete plan of organization. He advised that Quoc use his experience of the peasant movement in China to begin the fundamental task of forming peasant unions.¹⁸ On 12 April Quoc wrote to Jules Humbert-Droz, a Swiss communist working in the Comintern Secretariat which had responsibility for the French colonies, saying, 'you can imagine what a moral and material state I am in: knowing that there is a lot of work, but unable to do anything, unoccupied, without money, living from day to day in forced inactivity, etc...'.¹⁹ Humbert-Droz was finally able to tell him (in a brief 2-paragraph note dated 28 April) that the decision to provide funds for his voyage and first three months of work had been taken. 'The amount we send in the future will depend on news from you. I think that it would be more prudent for you to try to get along on your own, without waiting for any sort of aid,' he said.²⁰

¹³ RC, 535,1,42, letters of 3 Feb. 1928 and 21 Feb. 1928

¹⁴ Klein and Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 783. Song Qingling lived from 1927 to June 1929 in Europe, most of the time in Moscow and Berlin.

¹⁵ RC,495, 154, 598.

¹⁶ RC,495, 154, 598, p. 5.

¹⁷ RC,535, 1, 42, p. 68, letter from Berlin, 16 Dec. 1927.

¹⁸ RC,535, 1, 42, p. 11, letter of 5 Jan. 1928.

¹⁹ RC,495, 154, 598, p.6.

With this luke-warm send-off, Nguyen Ai Quoc departed for Asia at the end of May, travelling via Switzerland to Italy, and from there by ship to Bangkok. By then he would have been aware of the crushing of the Trotskyist Opposition which Stalin had engineered within the CPSU, as well as the varying strands of resistance to Stalin's policy within the Comintern. One can assume that he would also have seen the documents of the Ninth ECCI Plenum held in February 1928, which included a set of resolutions on China. These made clear that the Russians felt it was time for the Chinese comrades to show more caution, to take a step back after their reckless attempts at insurrection at the close of 1927 (which of course had been undertaken with the guidance of Comintern representatives Lominadze and Neumann.) The present stage of the Chinese revolution was to be characterized as neither socialist, nor 'permanent', as Lominadze had mistakenly claimed, but as still in the 'bourgeois-democratic' phase. The CCP's basic tactical line was to 'prepare itself for a violent surge forward of new revolutionary waves'. But the current task was still 'winning over the worker and peasant millions, educating them politically, organizing them around the party and its slogans...' Although an 'immediate tactical task' was defined as 'organizing and carrying through armed mass uprisings', the vanguard of the workers and peasants should not break away from the masses and 'play with revolts'.²¹ As Vietnam's revolutionary movement was less developed than China's, Nguyen Ai Quoc may have interpreted these resolutions as an affirmation of his own policy of careful political education and organizing.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that Quoc may have still been somewhere at sea when the Sixth Comintern Congress began in July 1928. He may not have heard any detailed news of its results for many months. From all the available evidence, it appears that he departed for Asia with nothing more recent than his September 1927 instructions to guide his work.

2. The Sixth Comintern Congress

By the summer of 1928 the struggle against the Trotskyists had left both the Comintern and the FCP in disarray. Yet another round of political bloodletting was about to begin. In fact, by the 15th Party Congress at the close of 1927, Stalin's surrogates had already begun to criticize Bukharin for ignoring the 'right danger' in the Comintern.²² But Stalin was not yet ready to dispense with his ally on the right. A dual system of policy implementation

²⁰ RC,495, 154, 598, p. 7.

²¹ Degras, *The Communist International: Documents*, vol. II, pp. 437-9.

²² Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 267.

was developing in Russia, with Stalin increasingly working through his own appointees and organizations such as the Komsomol to implement forced grain collections and similar measures.²³ The Sixth Comintern Congress, a drawn-out affair which lasted from 17 July until 1 September, reflected this duality. It was the beginning of a change of course for the Comintern, a process which dragged on for an entire year, until the ECCI's Tenth Plenum in July 1929. It is usually assumed that the Programme and Theses of the Sixth Congress marked a new era for the Vietnamese communist movement. Yet it is very difficult to establish a direct chain of cause and effect between Moscow and events in Vietnam until the autumn of 1929, or even precisely what the new policies for colonial countries were.

During the summer of 1928 the leaders of the Chinese CP gathered in Moscow, where their Sixth Party Congress was held from 18 June to 11 July, just before the Comintern's Congress. This meeting was held under Bukharin's patronage and approved the more moderate policies for China set out at the ECCI's Ninth Plenum. But the dual nature of Comintern politics at this juncture was reflected in the Congress resolutions, many of which were ambiguous or even contradictory. Bukharin's advocacy of an anti-imperialist alliance with the petty bourgeoisie was overlooked. The slogan 'preliminary victories in one or more provinces' became what Zhang Guotao termed a 'panacea', a way of excusing the putchism of late 1927, without having to claim that the Chinese revolution was experiencing a 'high tide'.²⁴ The Congress selected a new politburo, led by the worker Xiang Zhongfa. The other members were Qu Qiubai, Zhou Enlai, Zhang Guotao, Cai Hesen, Li Lisan and Xiang Ying. Three members of the new politburo returned to China before the Comintern Congress. These were Xiang Zhongfa, Cai Hesen and Li Lisan, who according to Zhang Guotao had been placed in charge of party organization.²⁵ The personal influence of the CCP leaders who returned to Shanghai in July or August 1928, following their own party congress but before the Comintern gathering, may initially have had more effect on the Vietnamese communists than the Sixth Comintern Congress itself.

Although the Comintern's Sixth Congress is commonly seen as the decisive event which instituted the 'new course' and 'proletarianization' as the watchwords of world communism, it was in fact only the beginning of a tectonic shift. Bukharin, still the General Secretary of the Comintern, dominated the proceedings and produced the 'General Programme of the Third International'. But his position was already being undermined by Stalin's manoeuvring within the CPSU – by December 1928 he would quit his post in the Comintern, even though he was not officially removed until June 1929. Bukharin's

²³ Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-80.

²⁴ Chang Kuo-t'ao, *The Rise of the Chinese Communist Party, 1928-1938*, pp. 78-81.

position at the Congress meant, however, that his 'rightist' allies in European parties such as Jules Humbert-Droz retained their influence until the winter.²⁶ In the summer of 1928 there was thus still a degree of support within the Comintern for cooperation with the social democratic left and lack of unanimity regarding the correct analysis of the current stage of world capitalism. The Soviet delegation, made up mainly of Stalin's supporters, was dissatisfied with Bukharin's 'Draft Theses', and 'amended them to emphasize the international significance of the Soviet economic plan and the contradictions of capitalist stabilization, and to sharpen the attack on the left social democrats.'²⁷ Nevertheless, the apocalyptic tone of the description of the 'Third Period' in the development of post-war capitalism was not as clear as it became at the ECCI's Tenth Plenum in 1929. At the Sixth Congress, Bukharin characterized the Third Period as one of 'capitalist stabilization', which would ultimately develop into another crisis of capitalism.²⁸ By the summer of 1929, Otto Kuusinen would report to the Tenth ECCI Plenum that 'there is now full unanimity on the characterization of the Third Period as the period of the break-up of capitalist stabilization and further – the period of the ripening of a new revolutionary upsurge.'²⁹

Kuusinen, a veteran Finnish communist, headed the Colonial Commission at the Congress and was put in charge of the Eastern Secretariat at the Congress's end. He was destined to become one of the Comintern's new authorities on the East. But it was Bukharin's General Programme for the Third International which provided the most concise statement of policy for colonial countries. This programme listed eight main tasks:

1. The overthrow of foreign imperialism, of feudalism, and of the landlord bureaucracy;
2. Establishment of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry on the basis of Soviets;
3. Complete national independence and political unification;
4. Cancellation of state debts;
5. Nationalization of large undertakings (in industry, transport, banking, etc.) belonging to the imperialists;
6. Expropriation of large landowners, of church and monastery estates, nationalization of all land;

²⁵ Chang Kuo-t'ao, op. cit., p. 82.

²⁶ See Richard Thornton, *The Comintern and the Chinese Communists*, (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 28-9, for a discussion of Stalin's compromise with Bukharin.

²⁷ Degras, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 455.

²⁸ *Inprecor*, Vol. 8, no. 41, 30 July 1929, p. 726.

²⁹ Otto Kuusinen, *Mezhdunarodnoie Polozheniie I Zadachy Kominterna (The International Situation and the Tasks of the Comintern)*, (Moscow-Leningrad: Government Press, 1929), p. 112.

7. Introduction of the eight-hour day;
8. Establishment of a revolutionary workers' and peasants' army.³⁰

Within the Congress's Colonial Commission, Kuusinen's attempts to elaborate a more detailed Comintern policy for the 'colonial and semi-colonial countries' faced considerable opposition. Delegates were confused by his attempted division of colonial countries into four categories and the lack of clarity regarding tactics for the more backward countries.³¹ (These classifications were abandoned in the final text of the theses.) In his concluding speech on 21 August, Kuusinen admitted that the section of the Theses concerning 'non-capitalist development of the backward colonial countries' lacked theoretical proof. (It had lacked proof in Lenin's 1920 Theses as well, he said.) He requested that this point, which refers to the 'separate path' to communism, receive special attention from the drafting commission, which had yet to begin work.³² In later remarks on the drafting commission's work, he mentioned that the section of the Theses on tactical questions now applied only to one group of colonial countries: China, India, Egypt and Indonesia – 'certainly the most important colonial countries', as he put it.³³

The *Theses on the Colonial and Semi-colonial Countries* had not been printed in *Inprecor* by the end of 1928, in contrast to the other Congress resolutions and theses. They were eventually printed as a 96-page booklet in Russian dated 1928, but precisely when that appeared is unclear.³⁴ In their final form the theses upheld the analysis of capitalism as a spent force, with no future developmental role, even in colonial countries. A brief dissenting view from the British delegation to the Colonial Commission was printed on 27 December 1928.³⁵ The Italian Angelo Tasca (Serra) who briefly headed the Romance [Languages] Secretariat after the Sixth Congress, was also unhappy. He wrote to Kuusinen in January 1929 to complain about the Theses. 'They are neither purely political theses, nor a work programme, they are insufficient in either case. I don't know to what extent the FCP took part in their elaboration...'.³⁶ In July Tasca would be removed from the Comintern leadership. Jacques Doriot, the promoter of the united front in Vietnam, would have to make a full recantation of his views on cooperation with social democrats in order

³⁰ Degras, Vol. II, p. 507.

³¹ See remarks of Sultan-Zade, *Inprecor*, vol. 8, no. 74, 25 Oct. 1928, p. 1,359.

³² *Inprecor*, Vol. 8, no. 81, 21 Nov. 1928, p. 1,519.

³³ *Inprecor*, Vol. 8, no. 81, p. 1,542.

³⁴ *Tezisy i Resolyutsii VI Kongressa Komintern, Vypusk Vtoroi, (Theses and Resolutions of the Sixth Comintern Congress, part II – Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries)*, (Moscow-Leningrad: Government Press, 1928).

³⁵ *Inprecor*, Vol. 8, no. 91, p. 1,743.

³⁶ RC,495, 16, 10, p. 3, Tasca letter of 7 Jan. 1929.

to retain his positions in the French CP.³⁷ This difficulty in achieving consensus on the correct strategy for colonial countries was symptomatic of the general malaise in the Comintern bureaucracy in the latter part of 1928. It was in November that Spanish communist Andres Nin wrote a revealing note to Trotsky. 'Here in the Comintern there is complete disarray. Nothing at all is done. Everybody is awaiting the outcome of the fight between Stalin and the right. Demoralization is complete,' he complained.³⁸

The three-man Vietnamese delegation which attended the Sixth Congress was selected by the FCP from among the activists in Paris. One of the three was Nguyen The Vinh, from the family of Nguyen The Truyen. He had studied in Moscow from September 1926 until November 1927, but left after a year due to ill health.³⁹ Another was a Tonkinese sailor identified only as 'Ban' who left the party not long after the Congress.⁴⁰ The third was Nguyen Van Tao, a southern Vietnamese who had become a member of the FCP and formed a Vietnamese communist group in Paris in April 1928.⁴¹ He delivered a speech to the Colonial Commission on 17 August using the pseudonym 'An'.⁴² His analysis of French colonialism was close to Kuusinen's view of colonial development in India: Vietnamese small-scale industry was being destroyed by competition from companies in the hands of the national bourgeoisie and imperialists; the artisans were joining the growing proletariat; agricultural productivity was stagnant. His report made no mention of the training of Vietnamese activists which had been taking place in Canton, nor of the beginnings of Thanh Nien. For this reason it appears unlikely that Nguyen Ai Quoc had prepared the speech which Tao delivered, as the *Sûreté* later believed.⁴³ There was a group of relatively experienced Vietnamese in Russia by mid-1928, including Tran Phu, Ngo Duc Tri, and Le Hong Phong, who seem to have attended the Congress as observers. Why they were not made part of the official delegation is unclear. Two of the delegates from Paris, however, seem to have ended up as *personae non-gratae*. A subsequent letter from a disgruntled, Paris-based Vietnamese activist, written in 1930 to the Eastern Secretariat, mentions that after one of the Vietnamese Congress delegates had criticized the work of the FCP's Colonial Commission, two of them (presumably Nguyen The Vinh and Ban) were given their tickets back to France the following day.⁴⁴ In September 1928 a

³⁷ *L'Humanité*, 4 April 1929, p. 1.

³⁸ From letter in the Trotsky Archives, Harvard Univ. library, cited by Degras, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 566.

³⁹ Dang Huu Thu, *Than The va Su Nghiep Nha Cach Manh Nguyen The Truyen*, [*The Life and Times of the Revolutionary Nguyen The Truyen*], (Melun, France: 5, Blvd. Des Carmes, 1993), p. 160.

⁴⁰ SPCE 367, *Déclaration de Ngo Duc Tri*.

⁴¹ Thierry Levasseur, 'La Ligue Française Contre l'Impérialisme et le mouvement anticolonialiste vietnamien', in *Cahiers de l'Asie du Sud-est*, n. 26, 1989.

⁴² *Inprecor*, vol. 8, no. 74, 25 Oct. 1928.

⁴³ See SPCE 367, *Historique du P.C.A.*, p.2.

⁴⁴ RC, 495, 154, 606, p. 8, unsigned letter.

Comintern reorganization once again shifted responsibility for Indochina back to the Middle-eastern Section, a division of the Eastern Secretariat which also covered India and Indonesia.⁴⁵ Thus, although the FCP and its Colonial Commission continued to be called on to support the Vietnamese movement, in theory the primary source of ideological guidance was now the Eastern Secretariat, which Kuusinen headed.

At the Tenth ECCI Plenum Kuusinen was able to make a more categorical statement on tactics in his comments on the opening day, 3 July 1929. Stalin, having emerged supreme in the factional warfare in the CPSU, was using the Comintern to demonstrate his new style of leadership. In this report, later printed as *The International Situation and the Tasks of the Comintern*, Kuusinen called on communist parties to become, 'chemically pure', to prepare for 'the decisive battles for power'.⁴⁶ 'Without cleansing themselves from opportunistic elements and overcoming their conciliatory relationship to them, the communist parties cannot successfully move forward to resolve their new problems, arising from the sharpening of the class struggle in the new stage of the workers' movement,' he declared.⁴⁷ Members of any party who refused to submit to Comintern decisions would be expelled.⁴⁸ Now there was to be no more equivocating about united front tactics – the Indian communist M.N. Roy, who had come to believe in the need for a united front with Indian nationalists, was denounced.⁴⁹ In a stirring conclusion, Kuusinen announced that, 'The current course of the Communist International is a new course, but at the same time an old one. Three-quarters of a century ago Marx had already stated our current slogan of "class against class" in his call to the revolutionary class struggle. This is our new course.'⁵⁰

At the Tenth Plenum far less attention was paid to the fine-tuning of instructions to colonial countries in different stages of development. The world revolution, a purely communist movement, was seen as one massive force fighting for the world-wide proletariat. Kuusinen was inspired to new heights of eloquence: 'Looking back on the mass battles which have taken place in the short space of time since the Sixth World Congress, we can say: the world army of active class warriors is growing rapidly. The miners of the Ruhr and Scotland, the textile workers of Poland and France, the fighters on the Berlin barricades, the Bombay strikers and demonstrators, the plantation workers of Columbia, the black rebels in the Congo, the striking agricultural workers of Czechoslovakia and Poland,

⁴⁵ Adibekov et al., op. cit., p. 155.

⁴⁶ Kuusinen, *The International Situation and the Tasks of the Comintern*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁹ Ibid, op. cit., p. 61.

⁵⁰ Ibid, op. cit., p. 159.

the Chinese revolutionary workers and peasant partisans, the struggling Moroccans and hundreds of thousands of others – this is a gigantic, active army.’⁵¹ Kuusinen’s discussion of mass struggles foreshadowed what would happen in Vietnam within the next year. ‘In the current period the point of departure of the mass struggle is [the masses’] immediate, daily interests,’ he said. ‘We must take this into account in our tactics. But the struggle now is not limited by these immediate, partial demands – it has a clear, strong tendency to go beyond these...’.⁵²

3. *Nguyen Ai Quoc in Siam*

Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Siam just as the Comintern was initiating its shift to more radical class-based policies in the summer of 1928. Since he wrote no known reports to the Comintern during the approximately 16 months he spent in Siam, from July 1928 until November of 1929, we rely for information on this period on the memoirs of a few communist veterans and on the Tran Dan Tien book, Quoc’s supposed autobiography. So the picture of the forgotten political exile derived from his own letters becomes that of the ascetic underground sage, walking through the forests from village to village. Although he was somewhere between 34 and 36 years old, in the Tran Dan Tien book he is known as ‘Old Man Chin’, and is always just a few jumps ahead of the police. At one point Tien writes that Quoc had to enter a Buddhist monastery in order to avoid the French detectives on his trail.⁵³ This is perfectly plausible, but is not mentioned in any of the other Vietnamese memoirs of Quoc’s time in Siam.

The lack of documentary information on this period is especially frustrating, as one suspects that Nguyen Ai Quoc was involved in more than encouraging mutual aid societies, playing the village elder and helping to set up village schools. Echoes of the changes in Comintern policy were beginning to be heard in China, Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia by the autumn of 1928, yet we have very little sense from the available memoirs that these had an impact in northeastern Thailand. Only a few Thanh Nien cadres whom he had trained in Canton would have known his real identity, as well as one liaison agent, Cao Hoai Nghia, a former sailor who was probably also a member of Quoc’s Canton circle.⁵⁴ By 1929 the rumour had spread in Europe that he had been arrested.⁵⁵ The Canton-based Thanh Nien leadership assumed that he was still in Moscow.⁵⁶ Whether his

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁵² Ibid, p. 87.

⁵³ Tran Dan Tien, op. cit. (1976), p. 71.

⁵⁴ SPCE 367, *Historique du PCA*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ See RC,495,154,558, p.1b, letter of 28 August 1929 from ‘Thibault’, sent from Belgium to Moscow.

⁵⁶ SPCE 367, *Historique du PCA*.

well-developed clandestine habits were simply coming into play, or whether he had a more precise reason to keep a low profile is unclear. One can speculate that he was waiting for the storms of the anti-Trotskyist purges to blow over. (Although he himself could hardly have been considered a Trotskyist, within the French CP he had contacts such as Doriot who were suspected Trotskyist sympathizers.) He may also have feared being informed on by one of the non-communist Vietnamese with whom he had earlier associated in southern China; or he may have begun to suspect that Lam Duc Thu was a French spy.

Travelling on foot from the central town of Phichit, Quoc arrived in Udon, one of the centers of the overseas Vietnamese community, in August 1928, according to the memoirs of Hoang Van Hoan.⁵⁷ From what we can glean from Hoan's and other Vietnamese memoirs of this period, Nguyen Ai Quoc proceeded carefully, collecting information about local conditions, helping to organize and build a school for the training of Vietnamese youth in a village outside of Udon.⁵⁸ Hoan informs us that after his stay in the neighborhood of Udon, Quoc moved on to Sakhon, on the eastbound route to Laos, and then to Nakhon Phanom on the Mekong.⁵⁹ A Thanh Nien cadre from Nghe An, Vo Mai, in 1931 described to his French interrogators how he brought a group of eight students from Vinh to Lakhon (an old term for the Nakhon Phanom region) in October 1928. He remained with them for their three months of study, then escorted them back to Vinh in December. Vo Mai's account does not mention Nguyen Ai Quoc's presence in Siam, but the timing suggests that the trip may have been connected to his presence there. Vo Mai, a courier working closely with the Thanh Nien Ky Bo (regional committee) in Central Vietnam, would have brought vital information about the state of affairs in-country.⁶⁰

Quoc's approach to rural organizing recalls the methods developed by Peng Pai in Guangdong during the united front with the GMD. By the time Quoc turned up in Siam, these methods were already being put into practice by Thanh Nien members such as Hoang Van Hoan, who had arrived in northeastern Siam in June 1928. The heart of the movement was to be found in the 'progressive' schools which the activists established in rural areas. In these schools young people could be exposed to modern political ideas and physical education, but also had to produce some of their own food and a surplus to pay the teachers if possible. By the time Quoc reported to the Comintern on his activities in Siam, in

⁵⁷ Hoang van Hoan, *A Drop in the Ocean*, (Beijing: FLPH, 1988), p. 47.

⁵⁸ See Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), Chapter 2, for a list of Vietnamese sources.

⁵⁹ Hoang Van Hoan, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-1.

⁶⁰ SPCE 368, *Interrogatoire de Vo Mai, alias Quoc Hoa*, 10 Nov. 1930. Vo Mai was believed by the *Sûreté* to be Dang Thai Mai, who later became Vo Nguyen Giap's father-in-law and a leading cultural figure in North Vietnam. See SPCE 367, *Déclarations de Ngo Duc Tri*, index of names.

February 1930, he claimed that Thanh Nien had established three training schools and was working on a fourth.⁶¹ In the same report, he explained that as the Vietnamese resident in Siam were 'free peasants, handicraftmen, small merchants, they can be organized only in "Brotherhood", with patriotic and anti-imperialist ideology.'⁶² He suggested that the Vietnamese activists change the name of their local newspaper from *Dong Thanh (Unity)* to *Thanh Ai (Fraternity or Affection)*, which implies a step back towards a looser, more inclusive form of organization.⁶³ There does not seem to have been a landless rural proletariat to attract his attention among the Vietnamese in Siam. By the end of 1929 this emphasis on 'patriotic ideology' would be seen as dangerously reformist. But Quoc may not have been informed of the changing climate within the world communist movement until the summer of 1929, when two Vietnamese delegates from Siam returned from the first Thanh Nien Congress in Hong Kong, held in May.

The available memoirs are lacking in details regarding Nguyen Ai Quoc's activities from the end of 1928 until November 1929, when he left Siam for Hong Kong. Vo Mai did not report any more trips across Laos to Siam after December 1928. Hoang Van Hoan informs us that Quoc occupied himself with the translation of works of communist theory from Chinese into simplified Vietnamese and that they often worked together on these translations. But he places this activity in the latter part of 1928. In Sakhon, Quoc is said to have composed a verse epic on the life of Tran Hung Dao, a patriotic hero of the 13th century whose cult was worshipped by the local Vietnamese. The memoirs of Dang Van Cap report that Quoc studied traditional eastern medicine for a time, to help the local villagers improve their health.⁶⁴ (Perhaps he was looking for a cure for his tuberculosis, for he later informed a Vietnamese colleague in Hong Kong that he had been ill for more than a year in Thailand, and had been 'unable to undertake anything'.)⁶⁵ Quoc travelled briefly in Laos in order to meet Vietnamese residents, but abandoned two attempts to cross into Vietnam, he later reported to the Comintern, because of the heavy police presence on the border.⁶⁶ According to Le Manh Trinh, around June 1929 he moved on to Bangkok, from where he visited a number of 'old revolutionaries'.⁶⁷

⁶¹ RC,495, 154, 615, p. 5, letter of 18 Feb. 1930.

⁶² RC,495, 154, 615, p. 5, (original in English).

⁶³ Hoan, op. cit., p. 48.

⁶⁴ *BNTS*, vol. I, p.311, refers to Memoirs of Dang van Cap in the Hanoi Historical Institute.

⁶⁵ SPCE 367, Déclaration de Ngo Duc Tri, 4 August, 1931.

⁶⁶ RC,495, 154, 615, p. 4b; also Nguyen Tai, 'Nho lai ngay dua Bac Ho tu Thai Lan sang gay dung co so cach mang o Lao', ['Remembering the Time I took Uncle Ho from Thailand to Laos to Build a Revolutionary Base'], *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 2, Dec. 1986.

⁶⁷ *Bac Ho: Hoi Ky [Memoirs of Uncle Ho]*, (Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1960), p. 108.

Some Vietnamese historians believe that Quoc established contact with his father in 1928 and 1929 via the widow of the Luong Ngoc Can, whose house in Phnom Penh served as a communications link for Vietnamese nationalists.⁶⁸ From the spring of 1928 until his death in November 1929, Nguyen Sinh Huy (who had taken the name Nguyen Sinh Sac) spent most of his time in the village of Hoa An near to Cao Lanh, in Sa Dec province. Huy was believed by the French to use his travels as an itinerant practitioner of eastern medicine to stay in touch with various centers of nationalist activity in the South. There appears to be no documentary evidence of direct contacts between father and son, however, even though Huy wrote frequently to Can's widow in the spring of 1928, in the hope that she would have some special news for him.⁶⁹ While he was working in Siam, Quoc was thought to have sent two natives of Nam Dan district in Nghe An, then living in Siam, to work in Cambodia.⁷⁰ It is tempting to believe that Quoc contacted not only his father via Phnom Penh, but also the group of Thanh Nien activists who had established a progressive school in Sa Dec town. These included Chau Van Liem, Ha Huy Giap, and Pham Van Dong, according to Tran Van Diep, a Canton trainee and native of Can Tho who also taught there.⁷¹ Most of this group would become members of the communist faction loyal to the Canton leadership and Nguyen Ai Quoc, the Annam Cong San Dang, in the autumn of 1929.

4. *The Progress of Thanh Nien*

While Nguyen Ai Quoc worked quietly in Siam, while the Comintern readjusted its course in Moscow, the revolutionary movements in southern China and Vietnam developed their own momentum. During the latter part of 1928 a group of around 24 Vietnamese was teaching and studying at Whampoa -- those activists arrested in December 1927 had been freed.⁷² By mid-1928 Thanh Nien Regional Committees (Ky-bo) had been formed in all three parts of Vietnam.⁷³ The Canton-based Central Committee (Tong-bo) in February designated the members of the Ky-bo for the Center: Vuong Thuc Oanh, Nguyen Thieu and Nguyen Si Sach. In June the Canton leadership named Le Van Phat to head the southern Ky-bo, which already included Nguyen Kim Cuong, Chau Van Liem and

⁶⁸ This theory is put forward in a book about Quoc's father: Nguyen Dac Hien, ed., *Nguyen Sinh Sac*, (Dong Thap: Khu Di Tich Nguyen Sinh Sac, 1994), p. 146.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, see letters on pp. 153-160. The author says that the *Sûreté* intercepted all of them.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁷¹ AOM, SPCE 371, Declaration of Tran Van Diep, 23 Sept. 1931; see also Ha Huy Giap, *op.cit.*, pp. 52-55.

⁷² SPCE 368, Mission Noel, '*Rapport de l'Agent Pinot*', envoi no. 441 du 25 mai 1928.

⁷³ AOM: SPCE 368, Vo Mai declaration, p. 2 and SPCE 367, Do Ngoc Du declaration, p.3. for Feb. and July 1928 establishment of regional committees in the Center and in Tonkin.

probably Ngo Thiem.⁷⁴ Phat was a traditional doctor from Ben Tre who had just returned from Canton, where he had been imprisoned following the December uprising. The northern Ky-bo, started in July 1928, composed of Duong Hac Dinh, Trinh Dinh Cuu and perhaps Nguyen Danh Doi⁷⁵, came under the leadership of Tran Van Cung, when he returned from Canton at the start of 1929.

In June 1928 a final attempt to unify the Cach Mang Dang with Thanh Nien had failed. After that the former party held a congress in Hue, where they took the name Tan Viet (New Vietnam) party. Several of the leaders selected at this Congress, including Phan Dang Luu, Hai Trieu (Nguyen Khoa Van), and Nguyen Chi Dieu, would become the leaders of the communist party in Central Vietnam during the Democratic Front in the late thirties.⁷⁶ Vo Nguyen Giap, a student at the Quoc Hoc school in Hue, may also have been active at this Congress. The Tan Viet party, like Thanh Nien and the VNQDD, had begun organizing among women by this time. A student from Vinh, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, was elected the leader of their women's group. She later claimed that in 1928 her group had 50 members, including a cell of 20 people at the match factory in Vinh, along with one of 15 members at the local saw mill.⁷⁷ Labour organizing in Cochinchina was also showing marked growth in 1928.⁷⁸ Ha Huy Tap reported later that a successful strike was held at the Phu My sugarcane plantation in Ba Ria, in June and July. He himself went to work at the plantation in September 1928. He recounts an August strike of Bien Hoa railway workers and a strike at the Nha Be refinery as well. All of these actions he attributes to unnamed communists.⁷⁹

On 28 and 29 September 1928, Thanh Nien's Tonkin Ky-bo is said to have met near Hanoi to discuss ways to 'proletarianize' their party. According to one Vietnamese source, this meeting, sometimes described as a congress, was held in the home of Ngo Gia Tu in the village of Lien-xon, Bac Ninh province. It became known as the 'Reorganization Conference', this source claims. The group recognized that their membership was mainly composed of students and teachers, and so resolved in the future to make workers the base

⁷⁴ See bio of Nguyen Kim Cuong in Nguyen Chon Trung et al., *Con Dao ky su va tu lieu*, p. 166; Chau Van Liem in *Van Kien Dang*, 1998, Vol. 1. On Le Van Phat see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-217.

⁷⁵ Nguyen Chon Trung et al., *op. cit.*, on Nguyen Danh Doi, grandson of a patriotic resistance leader, and school mate of Nguyen Duc Canh and Dang Xuan Khu (Truong Chinh) in Nam Dinh.

⁷⁶ Ngo Nhat Son, *Dong Chi Phan Dang Luu*, (NXB Nghe Tinh, 1987), pp. 13-4.

⁷⁷ RC, 495, 201, 35, Autobiography of Fan-Lan, dated 16 Dec. 1934.

⁷⁸ On 1928 strikes in Cochinchina, see Ralph Smith, 'The Foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party', in *Modern Asian Studies* 32,4 (1998), pp. 781-2.

⁷⁹ RC, 495, 201, 45, Ha Huy Tap, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14. A Saigon worker at the Vth Profintern Congress in 1930 claimed that the strikes before 1930 were often spontaneous. See RC, 534, 1, 144, speech by 'Cong', pp. 130-6.

of their movement. They decided to increase propaganda among miners and factory workers; to send cadres to work in the mines, factories and on plantations and to use 'every legal means to organize the masses more widely'.⁸⁰ Two Thanh Nien cadres, Ngo Gia Tu and Nguyen Duc Canh, were designated to oversee propaganda among the workers. They were also to oversee the attempted conversion of the petty bourgeois students and sons of scholars, the great majority of Thanh Nien members, to the working class. Those Thanh Nien activists who could not adjust to the new demands were to be removed from the Association. This category included any bourgeois member who was 'spoiled', who didn't follow revolutionary technique, who was afraid of hardship or lacking in virtue. In March of 1929 the Tonkin group would pursue their move to the left by organizing what they would claim was the first communist cell in Vietnam. Among those who attended this meeting at 5-D Ham Long St. in Hanoi were Ngo Gia Tu and Nguyen Duc Canh, as well as Tran Van Cung (Quoc Anh) from Nghe An, who, as we have seen, had come to Tonkin from Canton at the start of 1929 to take over the Ky-bo.⁸¹ This was a group which had all been in Canton after the departure of Nguyen Ai Quoc, during the upheavals of 1927. Tran Van Cung is thought to have taken part in the Canton Uprising.⁸² Their actions from September 1928 through to the end of 1929 show that they had lost confidence in the Thanh Nien leadership in Canton. The obvious question is whose ideological lead they were following in this period. Although their September 1928 meeting might be seen as a reaction to the Sixth Comintern Congress, it would seem to be too early for them to have a real understanding of the Congress programme, especially as there was still no consensus as to how this programme should be applied in colonial countries.

News of the 1928 events in Moscow – the Comintern's Ninth ECCI Plenum and the Sixth Congresses of both the CCP and the Comintern in the summer -- may have been filtering back to Asia by the autumn. Informal reports from the Vietnamese in Moscow and Nguyen Van Tao in Paris could have alerted the Thanh Nien membership to the changes underway. But it is unlikely that any Comintern directives aimed specifically at Indochina reached the Vietnamese before the spring, and more likely the autumn, of 1929. By that time Kuusinen's *Theses on the Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries* must have been printed, at least in Russian, and Bukharin's 'General Programme' could have become known via *Inprecor* and other communist publications. One must remember, though, that even the initial discussion of Kuusinen's Theses was not printed in *Inprecor* until 4 October 1928;

⁸⁰ Nguyen Van Hoan, 'Phong Trao Vo San Hoa Nam 1930', ('The Proletarianization Movement in 1930'), *NCLS*, no. 134, Sept.-Oct. 1970, p. 11. Another source on this meeting is *Nhung Su Kien Lich Su Dang Bo Hanoi [Events in the History of the Hanoi Party Committee]*, (Hanoi: Hanoi Press, 1982).

⁸¹ *Nhung Nguoi cong san, [The Communists]*, (Ho Chi Minh City: Thanh Nien Press, 1976, p. 29). Information on Tran van Cung's return comes from SPCE 367, *Declaration de Do Ngoc Du*.

'An's' speech on Vietnam did not appear until 25 October. The French party did not begin to implement the 'New Course' until its own Sixth Congress, held in April 1929. In a 21 April 1929 *Humanité* article, Maurice Thorez wrote that the party was entering 'a decisive phase of correction' and a major struggle against 'opportunism'.

5. *The Evolution of the Chinese Left*

From the Comintern's archives on China one can see that throughout 1928 the Chinese Politburo tended to take a more militant line than the Comintern on the state of the Chinese revolution. For example, a May 1928 statement of the Chinese Politburo criticized the 9th ECCI Plenum of February that year. It insisted that the 'revolutionary upsurge' was continuing, and that the Comintern resolution said 'too little about the lack of perspective for political and economic stabilization of the ruling class' in China.⁸³ The ECCI's Far Eastern Bureau (FEB), formed in Shanghai in 1926 to guide the east Asian communist parties, was reduced to a skeleton crew during this period and did not resume its full guiding role until the spring of 1929.⁸⁴ The representative of the Comintern's International Communications Section (*Otdel Mezhdunarodnoi Svyazy* or OMS), A. E. Albrecht (Abramovich), took on the double function of distributor of funds and political representative during this interregnum. At the beginning of June 1928, Albrecht wrote from Shanghai to Moscow, to complain that the CCP's 'putchist mood' was continuing to manifest itself in the countryside. In southern Hunan, Shanxi and northern Guangdong, he said, the army was continuing to fight. But it had broken away from the masses and was behaving like a 'group of bandits'. Albrecht blamed his fellow Comintern representative Mitkevich (aka Olga) for planting the putchist tendency in the CCP.⁸⁵ But Mitkevich himself criticized some of the excesses of the Hai-Lu-feng Soviets: for example, the order to paint all the houses red, and the 'tendency to destroy district towns (as centers where the power of the landlords and gentry was concentrated)'.⁸⁶

Although Albrecht reported that the May 1928 Japanese intervention in Jinan had given a 'strong push to the urban mass movement', the CCP's center of gravity was already shifting to the rural areas. Communist bands commanded by Zhu De and Chen Yi linked

⁸² *Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quang Chau*, p. 189.

⁸³ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part 1, pp. 380-1, 'Statement of the CCP CC Politburo on the 9th ECCI Plenum Resolution on the Chinese Question', Shanghai, April-May, 1928.

⁸⁴ Joseph Ducroux revealed in an unpublished memoir (pp. 13-14) that he remained in Shanghai until the spring of 1928, working as a CYL organizer among the French troops; memoir dated 6 Sept. 1970, in author's possession.

⁸⁵ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part 1, p. 423-5, early June letter from A. E. Albrecht to Piatnitsky. Mitkevich was a Profintern representative in China in 1927 and 1928.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, part 1, p. 448-451, note by O.A. Mitkevich on 'The Soviet Experience in China', Moscow, 10 July 1928.

up with Mao Zedong's forces on the Hunan-Jiangxi border in April 1928, to create a rural base area. After the fall of the Hai-Lu-feng Soviets in March, some of their defenders retreated into the mountains of eastern Guangdong, while some may have returned to Canton and melted back into the GMD army. Other remnants joined the refugee flow which had swelled during 1927 to the Chinese communities of the Nanyang, the Southern Seas.⁸⁷ This movement of working-class Chinese to Southeast Asia apparently reinforced the development of the Nanyang Provisional Committee, thus strengthening the latter's potential influence on the Vietnamese communist movement. The French Foreign Ministry reported that by 1927 in Saigon, Cholon, and Phnom Penh, among the coolies and dock workers there was a 'notable proportion of Chinese.' In Tonkin the Chinese were heavily represented in 'certain mining centers' .⁸⁸

The refugees, who included fleeing communist activists, were absorbed by a well-organized diaspora where the GMD was already a strong force. The French report on immigration stated that 'the Chinese in Indochina all claim to be affiliated to the nationalist party or Guomindang... They are in effect recruited by force, as they do not dare to rebel against the power of their "Congregations" or "Corporations", which all belong to a General Union, itself controlled by the GMD.'⁸⁹ It is unclear to what extent communist structures remained hidden within the GMD in 1928. In Canton, as we have seen, some of the Vietnamese communists remained within GMD structures until the end of that year in order to continue their clandestine training courses, but probably also to earn a living. In the colonial countries of Southeast Asia they would have done so simply in order to survive. In Singapore, for example, the communist-influenced Left GMD (known as the Main School movement) controlled 21 out of 29 GMD sub-branches in August 1927. A purge of communists within the Singapore GMD began in April 1928.⁹⁰ But the Nanyang Committee may have formed new front structures during the year in order to maintain its organization, as I will discuss below.

During 1928 and 1929 the left-wing intellectual climate in China was influenced by an effort to revive the Left GMD, independent of the Comintern. In May 1928 the Reorganization Comrades Association (RCA) was created. The term 'reorganization' was a reference to the spirit of the 1924 reorganization of the GMD, carried out under Borodin's influence. The immediate stimulus for the formation of this faction was the

⁸⁷ For example, see bio. of Pen Hatan, CPM student leader in Malacca and Singapore in RC,495, 62, 30, p. 4.

⁸⁸ MAE, *Asie 1918-1929/Affaires Communales* 50, *Emigration Asiatique, enquête de l'année 1927*, pp. 303-315.

⁸⁹ MAE, loc. cit., p. 310.

Japanese occupation of Jinan in Shandong province that same month.⁹¹ But in the view of So Waichor, the GMD leftwing was also disturbed by Chiang Kaishek's disregard for what they considered their basic principles: anti-imperialism and agricultural reform.⁹² The ideology which the RCA represented between 1928 and its collapse in 1931 'was intended to appeal to the "oppressed classes" in China, which comprised a variety of social categories such as the middle and small merchants, the peasantry – from small landlords to farm labourers, the working class, the petite bourgeoisie, intellectuals, and the youth.'⁹³

The intellectual influence of the RCA leader, Chen Kungpo, appears to have extended beyond the GMD. He was a US-educated intellectual and CCP drop-out who had held several key posts during the united front.⁹⁴ The journal which he published from early 1928 until it was suppressed by Chiang Kaishek in September, *Ko-ming P'ing-lun*, (*Revolutionary Critique*), was Marxist-oriented. Its contributors represented the extreme left of the GMD and included communist 'fellow-travellers'.⁹⁵ One of the ideas promoted by Chen Kungpo in this journal and other writings was that 'the Chinese National Revolution was indissolubly linked with the world revolution against imperialism'. He believed that the GMD should take on the responsibility of leading the national revolution of the colonial peoples of the East, thus promoting a world revolution.⁹⁶ To this end he advocated the establishment of an 'International of the East' or an 'International of the Three People's Principles', which would be a counterweight to both the League of Nations and the Third International in Moscow. So Waichor maintains that Chen Kungpo's theory of anti-imperialism, 'fashioned the minds of the Left on the issue'.⁹⁷

The July or August 1928 founding of a new anti-imperialist league in Shanghai, 'The League of the Oppressed Peoples of the East', may have been the work of the RCA faction (also known as the 'Reorganizers') in the GMD.⁹⁸ This League would play a leading role in left-wing activity in the Nanyang during 1929 and the first months of 1930. Its existence could have facilitated the RCA's efforts to form overseas branches in Hong

⁹⁰ C.F. Yong & R.B. McKenna, *The Guomindang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1914*, (Singapore: Singapore Univ., 1990), p. 89.

⁹¹ So Waichor, *The Guomindang Left in the National Revolution, 1924-1931*, (Hong Kong: Oxford Univ., 1991), p. 156.

⁹² So Waichor, op. cit., pp. 91-5.

⁹³ So Waichor, op. cit., p. 173.

⁹⁴ Howard Boorman, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, vol. 1, (New York: Columbia Univ., 1967)

⁹⁵ So Waichor, op. cit., p. 66.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁹⁸ *Comintern and China*, vol. III, part II, p. 888, n. 14, says the League was directed by the CCP. However, the final issue of *Thanh Nien* (no. 208) of May 1930 says that the League was the creation

Kong, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore.⁹⁹ However, the League also seems to have been used as a legal front for communist activities. This seeming anachronism -- a continuation of the GMD-CCP united front -- appears to have been connected to Willy Munzenberg's direction of the Anti-imperialist League in Berlin. At the Sixth Comintern Congress he had spoken up for the need to maintain communist influence in a wide-range of non-communist organizations.¹⁰⁰ As of April 1929 Mme. Sun Yatsen, by then associated with the 'Third Party' movement, was still listed as an Honorary President on the League's notepaper.¹⁰¹ In a March 1930 letter, the FEB would refer approvingly to the CCP's 'mastery of the use of legal and semi-legal possibilities', which, it noted, included the Anti-imperialist League and the 'Freedom League'.¹⁰²

A report by the Nanyang Provisional Committee (apparently to the CCP Central Committee) written on 19 July 1928, reflects the importance of anti-imperialist activity in this period. It also deals with the need for a 'merciless purge' of the Committee's leading organizations.¹⁰³ The report covers an extended plenum which began 2 July 1928. This meeting included representatives from Borneo, the 'Special Seamen's Cell', the cells of rubber workers, CYL and the Anti-imperialist League.¹⁰⁴ The Guangdong Committee did not send any representatives; nor is there any mention of representatives from the Cochinchina-Cambodia branch. The plenum decreed that the party organization in the Malay Archipelago (one of the ways in which the Russians translated the term 'Nanyang') must be reorganized; all 'saboteurs, regressive and hesitating elements' were to be purged. Only the 'bold, honest and self-sacrificing comrades' were to be promoted; comrades from the workers and peasantry were to be advanced to leading posts.¹⁰⁵ The organization of events for the 3 of August, designated a day of anti-imperialist demonstrations, was given special emphasis at the plenum. Cadres were instructed to go 'to the peasants' and organize 'the broad popular masses' to 'spontaneously rise up' to participate in the anti-Japanese movement. But these actions would not be taken in the name of the Nanyang Committee. The report stated that, 'at present we still do not have the possibility to openly

of the Chinese nationalists, who founded it to separate Asian revolutionaries from the Third International. (AOM, SLOTFOM V, 16.)

⁹⁹ So Waichor, op. cit., p. 165; also Yong and McKenna, p. 243, note that Liao Zhongkai's widow was in Singapore in 1930 to persuade GMD branches to change their allegiance to the RCA.

¹⁰⁰ Degras, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 465.

¹⁰¹ RC, 542, 1, 30, p. 36a.

¹⁰² *Comintern and China*, vol. III, part 2, p. 826, letter to the Eastern Secretariat datelined Moscow, 20 March, 1930.

¹⁰³ RC, 495, 62, 1, pp. 1-10, in Russian translation.

¹⁰⁴ As I am working from a Russian translation, I cannot say for sure what the exact title of this Anti-imperialist League would be in Chinese. The Russians, however, seem to have used the term 'anti-imperialist' for the League of the Oppressed Peoples of the East, as in *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, pp. 885, 888.

¹⁰⁵ RC, 495, 62, 1, p. 2.

lead the mass movement in the name of the communist party'. Thus the movement on the 3 August would be secretly led, in the name of mass organizations such as the Anti-Japanese Society, the Society of Chinese Residents for the Salvation of the Motherland, the Society for the Boycott of Japanese Goods, and so on.¹⁰⁶

The date of this plenum, at which the reorganization of the Nanyang Committee was decreed, is intriguingly close to that of the 'Reorganization Meeting' of the Tonkin Thanh Nien Committee in September. Did the Cochinchina-Cambodia branch of the Nanyang Committee receive instructions on the need to 'reorganize' after the July plenum? Was there any kind of link between the Chinese activists in Saigon or Tonkin and their Vietnamese counterparts in Thanh Nien? Potentially any of the communist organizations such as the Seaman's Union, the CYL, the Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, or communist elements in the Anti-imperialist League, could have provided the framework for contacts and transmission of political advice. At the very least, one can speculate that the impulsion to purge the Thanh Nien organization and place more emphasis on proletarian organizing was transmitted through the CCP, perhaps via the Nanyang Committee, not directly from Moscow or from Nguyen Ai Quoc in Siam. The Thanh Nien Central Committee in Guangdong does not seem to have been involved -- as the events of 1929 would show.

When Li Lisan returned from Moscow in the late summer or early autumn of 1928, he quickly moved to encourage the CCP's leftward tendencies, but in a manner which temporarily brought the Chinese communists into a united front from below with elements of the Left GMD. This is an aspect of Li Lisan's policies which is not reflected in the official CCP record. But Comintern documents on the CCP provide some evidence of this overlooked facet of Li Lisan's leadership, which in my view may have influenced the path of Vietnamese events in 1929 and early 1930. When Li returned to Shanghai he was only an alternate member of the Politburo and the Standing Committee.¹⁰⁷ But as head of the CCP's Organization Department, he soon became a dominant leader in the urban areas. It seems likely that Li Lisan also made his influence felt in the Nanyang Provisional Committee. As both a leader of the General Labour Union in Shanghai during its zenith in 1925, and a member of the Permanent Secretariat of the Pan Pacific Trade Union, he was probably a familiar figure to the labour activists who had emigrated to the ports of Southeast Asia between 1926 and 1928.¹⁰⁸ He was associated with the leftist views of the Guangdong Regional Executive Committee, of which he had been a member after his flight

¹⁰⁶ RC,495, 62, 1, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ *History of the CCP*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁸ Klein and Clark, op. cit., p. 514.

from Shanghai in late 1925.¹⁰⁹ Following the fall of the Canton Commune he was made head of the Guangdong Province Committee; it is not clear how long he held that post.¹¹⁰ The Singapore police would later note that there was a 'very great increase in propaganda' sent from the CCP CC to Malaya in 1928 and 1929. They attributed the growth of communism in Malaya to this propaganda.¹¹¹ The return of Li Lisan to Shanghai in the second half of 1928 would appear to be one of the causes of this propaganda offensive.

One of Li's first moves on returning to Shanghai was to expel Cai Hesen from the leadership, an act which the Comintern regarded as a rejection of the results of the Sixth CCP Congress. The Comintern had hoped to guarantee unity in the CCP's leadership by bringing representatives of various factions into the Politburo, a December 1928 letter from the Far Eastern section's Vladimir Kuchumov to Stalin, Molotov, Bukharin, and Pyatnitsky explained. But Cai's removal was seen as a step backwards towards the pre-Sixth Congress ultra-left line. Kuchumov's letter referred to a CCP CC circular on organizational questions (no number is given) which criticized the moderate leadership of the Shanghai Committee, by contrasting it to the more radical Guangdong Committee. The Comintern letter, in turn, criticized Xiang Zhongfa and Li Lisan for failing to organize the masses and for promoting the slogan, 'Union with the Petty Bourgeoisie'. The remedy to these political mistakes was to send out a new team of ECCI representatives to work with the CCP CC. The final point of Kuchumov's letter recommended the re-establishment of the Far Eastern Bureau to lead the parties of China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Indochina.¹¹²

The new FEB was already working in Shanghai by the end of March 1929.¹¹³ It included a Pole named Ignaty Lyubinetski-Rylski, aka 'Osten', as well as a German who had been on both the left and right wings of the German CP in the 1920s. He was Gerhard Eisler, Ruth Fischer's brother, who was known as 'Roberts'. Others who were based in Shanghai in 1929 were the Profintern representative George Hardy and a G.M. Bespalov, the representative of the Communist Youth League (CYL), known as Willy or 'Young'. Jakov Rudnik, head of operations for the OMS, would not appear in Shanghai for his second stint

¹⁰⁹ Van de Ven, op. cit., p. 220.

¹¹⁰ Klein and Clark, p. 514.

¹¹¹ CAOM, GGI 65560, *Police Journal*, Straits Settlements, no. 5, 15 May 1931; my thanks to Christopher Goscha for sharing this document.

¹¹² *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, 1927 - 1931, pp. 510-512.

¹¹³ See letter from Gerhard Eisler to ECCI, 31 March 1929, *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, pp. 543-546.

until the spring of 1930, using the pseudonym Hilaire Noulens, among several others.¹¹⁴ Osten/Rylski and Roberts/Eisler were the principal political reporters until Pavel Mif arrived in September 1930, while the other FEB staff had narrower responsibilities, e.g. for labour affairs, or in Rudnik's case, for handling the money and logistics of the Bureau. The Chinese communists were aware, as Zhang Guotao tells it, that Rylski and Eisler had 'rightist errors' in their pasts. (Zhang incorrectly identifies them as Thalheimer and Brandler.) For this reason, he believes, they were not treated as reliable authorities on the views of the Stalinized Comintern.¹¹⁵

The summer of 1929 brought new developments, which seemed to promise that the elusive 'revolutionary high tide' which the Chinese had been waiting for was about to roll in. As we have seen, the Comintern's Tenth Plenum in July made the 'New Course' and class warfare the official policies of the world communist movement. (A Comintern letter to the CCP that summer informed the CCP that rich farmers were no longer to be regarded as allies in the struggle against the landlords.¹¹⁶) At the same time, armed resistance against the Guomindang in Nanjing from a loose coalition of warlords and generals was on the rise. Kuusinen had criticized the CCP in a February meeting of the ECCI Political Secretariat, saying that 'Many Chinese comrades are focussed on the short-term, as if they are sitting by the window and waiting for a sudden revolutionary miracle to take place. How this miracle should take place is not entirely clear. ... They talk about the war of the bourgeoisie and the Guangxi group and say that thanks to this an upsurge of the revolutionary movement is approaching.'¹¹⁷ However, with the Comintern increasingly emphasizing the need to guard against 'right opportunism' and 'conciliationism', the CCP seems to have decided that the rekindling of 'militarist wars' provided a good opening to promote their own armed uprisings. Stalin also was heightening the tension within the Comintern by issuing increasingly urgent warnings of a coming imperialist war against Soviet Russia, perhaps to stir up support for his radical economic policies. He used the conflict over the Chinese Eastern Railway, which escalated in June 1929, to promote the idea that one of the obligations of the world communist movement was to defend the Soviet Union.

When the Reorganizers became involved in coordinating armed resistance to the Nanjing government in mid-1929, the CCP apparently gave them their support. Among the

¹¹⁴ For details of Rudnik's movements see Frederick Litten, 'The Noulens Affairs', *China Quarterly*, no. 138, June 1994, p. 502. *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II also has biographical details of Comintern and FEB representatives in its 'Index of Names'.

¹¹⁵ Chang Kuo-t'ao, Vol. II, pp. 126-7.

¹¹⁶ Thornton, op. cit., p. 87.

¹¹⁷ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, p. 523.

militarists who backed the challenge to the GMD leadership were Zhang Fakui in Hubei, and Li Zongren and Yu Zuobo, both in Guangxi.¹¹⁸ Chen Kungpo moved to Hong Kong in June 1929 to take charge of this military campaign, which developed into the 'Party-defending and National Salvation Movement'.¹¹⁹ For a time it appeared to have a good chance of bringing an end to Chiang's rule. Two communist cadres, Deng Xiaoping and Zhang Yunyi (a native of Hainan), were sent from Shanghai to Guangxi province to infiltrate the 'National Salvation Movement', Deng in mid-1929 and Zhang perhaps as early as 1928. Deng would tell Edgar Snow in 1936 that he went to Guangxi via Haiphong in Vietnam, as the route from Canton was too risky. He claimed to have had contacts with the Vietnamese rebels who started the 'worker-peasant rebellion in 1930'.¹²⁰ It is improbable that, as Uli Franz claims, Deng consulted with Nguyen Ai Quoc in Shanghai on the best route to Guangxi. Yet Deng does appear to have used Vietnamese contacts to help him travel from Haiphong by train to the Guangxi border, from where he followed the Thanh Nien emigration route to Longzhou and then to Nanning.¹²¹

Following the Tenth ECCI Plenum, the FEB in Shanghai -- with former 'rightists' on its staff -- made a point of passing a resolution which would express their loyal support of the 'New Course'. This document, dated October 1929, declared that the FEB was ready to combat 'opportunistic dangers and deviations in the CCP'. The resolution criticized the CCP for having only a 'thin layer of industrial workers and contacts with various national-reformist groups'. The Guangxi Committee had carried on negotiations with the General Yu Zubei (Yu Zuobo) on work within his army, it said, and had sent telegrams to local organizations calling for a mass campaign in support of a Zhang Fakui-Yu Zuobo bloc. Some comrades had also refused to create red trade unions in enterprises where government or yellow unions already existed.¹²²

This FEB resolution would cause an angry reaction in the Chinese Politburo. During a series of meetings with the FEB in December 1929, the Chinese, represented by Zhou Enlai, Li Lisan and Xiang Zhongfa, would refuse to acknowledge the 'rightist errors' they were being accused of. At a 10 December meeting, Rylski criticized the CCP for

¹¹⁸ Diana Lary, *Region and Nation: The Kwangsi Clique in Chinese Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1974), Chapters 6 and 7, illuminates one side of this conflict, pitting the 'Guangxi Clique', which in 1928 and the first half of 1929 had a strong influence in Nanjing, against Chiang Kaishek. Her description of GMD politics in 1927, as a period which 'almost defies untangling' (p. 87), seems to apply equally well to 1928-1929. It was, however, a temporary alliance with Chiang Kaishek against the Guangxi Clique, which brought the Left GMD into a position of influence in Guangxi in the second half of 1929. (pp. 140-147)

¹¹⁹ So Waichor, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹²⁰ Klein and Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 821.

¹²¹ Uli Franz, *Deng Xiaoping*, (Boston: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 78-9.

¹²² RC,495, 154, 380, pp. 19-20; also printed in *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part 1, pp 619-22.

cooperating with the rich peasants and for collaborating with the 'national reformists' in Guangxi.¹²³ Osten admitted that when the problem of the Eastern Railway developed, 'we discussed partisan wars with you and made very concrete suggestions, which you accepted. We advised you to organize, broaden and provoke partisan battles...'.¹²⁴ But in an effort to avoid responsibility for CCP errors, he added that this advice had been accompanied by instructions to educate the masses, which the CCP had failed to implement.¹²⁵ Li Lisan rebutted this criticism in a second meeting (13 December), saying that the Chinese CC had been struggling against the right danger consistently, that it had fought such right tendencies as the move towards a legal movement, peaceful development and the over-evaluation of the bourgeoisie. He also pointed out that the CC had criticized the 'Reorganizers' in Guangxi. 'Possibly there are comrades working in the military who do not clearly understand the situation in Guangxi. But their mistakes cannot be connected to the Central Committee and the [Guangxi] Special Committee,' he explained.¹²⁶

Finally, after a long speech from Eisler on 17 December, the two sides agreed to report their disagreement to Moscow, whose decision on policy would be final. 'Until the resolution of this question, we will carry on our daily work as before,' concluded Xiang. 'Then, if the CCP commits errors, the FEB can correct them and in the same way, if the FEB makes mistakes, we must struggle against them. In addition to a telegram, we propose to send a Chinese comrade to Moscow,' he said.¹²⁷ This outcome left the FEB without any real authority in the eyes of the CCP until Moscow handed down its decision. It appears that from the end of December 1929, Li Lisan and his supporters showed increasing independence in interpreting Comintern policy. They did not, however, want to lose the Comintern subsidy for their work, which in 1929 amounted to over 200,000 US dollars, as well as 16,408 dollars for the Communist Youth.¹²⁸ Zhou Enlai left for Moscow for consultations in February 1930, where he arrived in April after travelling to Berlin.¹²⁹ Rylski would return to Moscow around the same time.

¹²³ RC,495, 154, 380, p. 24; in *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, pp. 664-670.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50, in *Comintern in China*, Vol. III, part I, pp. 697-705.

¹²⁸ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, p. 513, letter from Pyatnitsky to Albrecht, 14 Dec. 1928.

¹²⁹ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, p. 791, letter from FEB to Eastern Secretariat, 30 Jan. 1930.

6. *The Thanh Nien Rift*

The early stage of Li Lisan's attempt to gain control of CCP structures coincides with the growth of a rift within the Thanh Nien association. As mentioned earlier, starting in September 1928, the northern branch of Thanh Nien had begun a campaign to 'proletarianize' itself. In March 1929 they had formed a communist cell in Hanoi. Just as the FEB was establishing itself in Shanghai, the Thanh Nien leadership called a national congress in Hong Kong. (They had had to leave Canton at the start of 1929, when Ho Tung Mau and a group of Vietnamese cadets at Whampoa were arrested.) By the time the congress opened in May, the leftward turn in Comintern policy had been clearly established. There was no apparent disagreement among the delegates on the need to establish a communist party in the Bolshevik mold, following what had become known as the spirit of the 6th Comintern Congress. But in meetings preceding the official Thanh Nien congress, the northern delegation provoked a split by insisting on the immediate formation of a communist party. Three of the dissidents, Tran Van Cung, Nguyen Tuan and Ngo Gia Tu, left the congress early, when the China-based leaders, Lam Duc Thu and Le Hong Son, refused to change their opinion that Vietnam was not yet ready to move beyond the preparatory phase of party formation.¹³⁰ But according to a *Sûreté* source, Le Hong Son had consulted the Chinese CP in Hong Kong on the new programme, and so had some grounds to believe that he was following the right path.¹³¹ The delegates from the central, southern and Siam sections of Thanh Nien remained in Hong Kong until the end of May to draw up a voluminous 'minimum programme', complete with a disciplinary code that listed five infractions meriting the death penalty. The programme explicitly accepted the documents of the Comintern's 6th Congress and announced the end of all relations with the Chinese GMD, which it called a party of 'notables, landowners and capitalists'.¹³² A Preparatory Commission was set up, to begin the work of establishing a communist party. Nguyen Ai Quoc was dropped from the leadership, as he was too far away; according to Lam Duc Thu, there were now rumours that he was seriously ill in Germany.¹³³

The question of why the northern Thanh Nien leadership had become so hostile to the China-based committee probably has no simple answer. Youthful arrogance seems to have played a part, combined with a reasonable desire to bring the communist leadership closer to its members in-country. By the time of the May congress, the northern group may have had several concrete objections to the Canton/Hong Kong leaders. The most obvious

¹³⁰ Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit., pp. 117-8, citing *Contribution*, vol. 4, supp. 2, p. 59.

¹³¹ SPCE 368, Mission Noel, Envoi. No. 507 du 11 juin 1929, Rapport de l'Agent Pinot.

¹³² RC, 495, 154, 604, pp. 22; 67; Programme Minimum du VNKMTN.

¹³³ SPCE 368, Mission Noel, Envoi no. 507 du 11 juin 1929.

would have been the presence of Lam Duc Thu, even in 1929 suspected by some of the revolutionaries, notably Nguyen Hai Than, of being a French informer.¹³⁴ Thu was also known for his decadent life-style and himself reported to the *Sûreté* that he 'had been violently criticized by certain comrades in the course of the year.' He had thus asked not to be given a leadership position, and assured the *Sûreté* that this would, 'greatly facilitate my task'.¹³⁵ (His task may have involved creating misunderstandings among the various revolutionary groups.) Another source of friction could well have been the dominance of men from the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh in the Hong Kong leadership. Related to this regional tension may have been the different kinds of training and organizing on which the two groups were concentrating. The China-based group was mainly composed of men with military training, some of whom had been instructors at Whampoa. These included Truong Van Lenh, Le Quang Dat, Le Duy Diem and Le Hong Son. They had a rural orientation as well. Le Hong Son had served as a CYL propagandist among the peasantry of Hainan Island; Ho Tung Mau had helped to organized mutual aid societies in rural Siam. The Tonkin members of Thanh Nien, on the other hand, were being drawn increasingly into organizing in urban areas. Their work in the port of Haiphong and the mines of Campha, Uong Bi and Mao Khe, where there were high proportions of Chinese labourers, may have brought them into contact with union organizers of the Nanyang Labour Federation or perhaps the CCP's Guangdong Committee. These tensions may well have been present in Cochinchina as well. The competition between Ton Duc Thang, a Saigon labour leader, and Le Van Phat, which led to the latter's murder by Thanh Nien assassins in December 1928, may have grown out of this conflict between urban and rural orientation. One can see that these sorts of differences would provide fertile ground for *Sûreté* provocateurs to sow seeds of conflict.

The period from June 1929 until February 1930 was a critical one for the Vietnamese communists. The break-away faction in Tonkin formed their own communist party, the *Dong Duong Cong San Dang* (Indochinese Communist Party or ICP) in June, and quickly started sending emissaries to other parts of the country. As they controlled the Thanh Nien committees in north Vietnam, the northern membership appears to have joined the new party more or less automatically. They made inroads in the center and south as well. In both of these regions the Thanh Nien leadership was hit by a wave of arrests in the latter part of 1929. In July the entire committee for central Vietnam was arrested, including Nguyen Si Sach, who had just returned from the Thanh Nien congress, and Vuong Thuc

¹³⁴ SPCE 367, Déclaration de Le Quang Dat, July 1931, 'Au sujet de Lam Duc Thu,' pp. 4-5.

¹³⁵ SPCE 368, Mission Noel, envoi no. 507, 11 juin 1929.

Oanh. Tran Van Cung was also arrested. Vo Mai, fled to the uplands of Nghe Tinh.¹³⁶ (Nguyen Ai Quoc and Tran Phu were both sentenced to death in absentia by a tribunal in Vinh in October 1929.) It was also in July that the French began to arrest activists whose names had come to light during the investigation of Le Van Phat's murder, what came to be known as the Rue Barbier affair. These included Pham van Dong, Ton Duc Thang, and Nguyen Kim Cuong.¹³⁷ Other organizers were forced to retreat to rural areas such as Dong Thap.¹³⁸ At the same time, the Tan Viet party (the former Cach Mang Dang) was decapitated by the arrest of its leaders, both in the Center and in Saigon. Their shared living arrangement with the Thanh Nien leaders had led to the discovery of party documents written by Ha Huy Tap when the rue Barbier murder was discovered. (Ha Huy Tap and two other Tan Viet members, Tran Ngoc Danh and Tran Pham Ho, had fled to Shanghai following the discovery of Tan Viet's headquarters in December 1928.¹³⁹) In Vinh, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai would report, only the workers and women's groups remained strong.¹⁴⁰ These arrests must have worked to the advantage of the ICP faction, as they became by default the most experienced group of leaders in Vietnam. Not long after the ICP's formation, Ngo Gia Tu was sent to Saigon, where he established a base among the coolies in Cholon and began to create a General Trade Union. The Thanh Nien labour organizers who remained outside the ICP would before long start to form their own General Labour Union.¹⁴¹

Under the threat of losing its entire membership, the Thanh Nien Central Committee in Hong Kong was forced to give up its previous stand on the formation of a communist party. By late August 1929, soon after Ho Tung Mau and around 20 former Whampoa cadets had been released from prison, they decided to form the *Annam Cong San Dang* (the Annam Communist Party or ACP). As they wrote in a long, defensive missive (probably dated mid-October, given the reference to an ICP letter of 4 Oct.) to their membership: 'the Preparatory Commission was suited to the earlier situation, but now this Commission no longer answers the needs of the moment.'¹⁴² Part of the problem was that

¹³⁶ SPCE 368, Interrogatoire de Vo Mai, p. 7.

¹³⁷ Ralph Smith, op. cit., p. 784; also see *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 18 July 1930, 'La Crime de la rue Barbier et les sociétés secrètes devant la Cour Criminelle'.

¹³⁸ Ha Huy Giap, op. cit., p. 60.

¹³⁹ *Contribution*, Vol. I, part 2, pp. 48-9.

¹⁴⁰ RC, 495, 201, 35, 'Fan-Lan's' Autobiography, 16 Dec. 1934.

¹⁴¹ See SPCE 367, Déclarations de Truong Phuoc Dat, 22 May and following days, on the formation of the ICP's General Trade Union, and the competition from the ACP.

¹⁴² RC, 495, 154, 616, p. 62; 'Letter to the Interior from the ACP'; the French copy in the Comintern archives is stamped 29 March 1930 and is 25 hand-written pages. This letter is one which was not captured by the French, and thus does not appear in their collection of documents in SLOTFOM III, 129. These were intercepted by the French in Jan. 1930, and comprise letters exchanged by the ICP leadership in Haiphong and the ACP leaders in Hong Kong, as well as letters and instructions from the

many members of this Commission had been arrested upon their return to Vietnam following the May congress, the letter explained. Thanh Nien had been dissolved and there were now only a few remaining groups in Siam and Cochinchina. A cell of the ACP had been formed in Hong Kong, whose task would be to work for the formation of a real party, 'as we have noted that the ICP is not a real party', the letter said. The new party, led by Ho Tung Mau, Le Hong Son, Le Quang Dat and Le Duy Diem, declared that it wanted to unite Thanh Nien's communist elements within Indochina, but at the same time work towards a fusion with the ICP.¹⁴³ This desire for fusion did not mean, however, that the ACP leaders fully accepted their rivals' programme. They complained that the ICP had started organizing from the top down, before it had created cells in workplaces or among the masses. Another criticism was that the ICP was creating groups of so-called 'Reds' who were called on to work among the masses and to pay monthly contributions to the Party, without actually becoming party members. Thus, the 'Reds' were forced to submit entirely to the orders and decisions of the party – this ran counter to the principles of democratic centralism, the letter said. (The ACP leaders based their knowledge of ICP methods on a letter of 4 October 1929 from the ICP to the CCP, as well as on the 26 September issue of the ICP paper, *Co Do (Red Flag)*.)¹⁴⁴ Yet another complaint was that, according to an anonymous ICP member, the latter party had 'led the masses to destroy pagodas and temples'.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps the most galling ICP fault was the fact that it had worked 'to overturn Thanh Nien and the Tan Viet parties, while offering collaboration to the Nationalist Party (Quoc Dan Dang) in order to contribute to its development'. The letter claimed, in fact, that the ICP had aided the VNQDD by modifying its programme and by introducing communists into the party.¹⁴⁶ The introduction of communists into the VNQDD is reminiscent of Nguyen Ai Quoc's tactics in 1926-7 with regard to the Cach Mang Dang/Tan Viet. It may have been an echo of the apparent alliance which existed in 1928-9 between the CCP and the Left GMD. The closeness between the ICP and the VNQDD also appears to be a sign of regional rivalry between north and center. While the Thanh Nien leadership had been keen to infiltrate and then fuse with the Tan Viet Party, a group with roots in central Vietnam, the ICP preferred to form a front with the non-communist party rooted in the north. As the ICP leaders had written to the ACP on 4 October, their party believed 'that it could

ICP in Haiphong to their representative Ngo Gia Tu in Saigon. Ralph Smith, op.cit., pp. 789-798, gives a thorough description of this correspondence, which is extremely acrimonious on the ICP end.

¹⁴³ RC, 495, 616 pp. 61b-62.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-64b.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

cooperate with the VNQDD for the time being... But this cooperation would only take place if the Nationalist Party did not oppose the propaganda and organizational work of the ICP within their party (which means that the PCI will direct it secretly).¹⁴⁷ Then in a letter of 7 January 1930, from the ICP CC to Ngo Gia Tu in Saigon, the author noted that vis-à-vis the VNQDD, the ICP would continue to look for ways to infiltrate it in order to organize a soviet, then 'to incorporate our masses, in order to create real soviets.'¹⁴⁸

Figures for the competing communist groups vary, but the ICP itself claimed by 5 December 1929 to have recruited 60 members in Cochinchina, and either 40 or 20 in Annam (the reporter could not remember exactly).¹⁴⁹ Ha Huy Giap claims in his memoirs that there were 800 Thanh Nien members in the south by the autumn of 1929.¹⁵⁰ Yet the ACP had only absorbed around 50 of these by mid-autumn, according to one *Sûreté* informer, Duong Hac Dinh. He was an early Thanh Nien trainee and until May 1929 a member of the Tonkin break-away faction. But he had rallied to the China-based leadership after the congress, and was sent to Saigon in September to organize a provisional committee for the ACP. (This was after the July arrest of most of the members of the original preparatory committee.) Along with Hoang Tuyen (Tran Van Minh), a former Whampoa cadet from Cochinchina, Nguyen Ngoc Ba, Do Luong and Nguyen Van Ngoc, he drew up a list of Thanh Nien members for the Saigon-Gia Dinh region, and another list for Mytho and Cantho, to be inducted into the new party. The two lists amounted to around 50 names, Dinh claimed.¹⁵¹

The first outside stimulus for the two communist factions to unite came from a Chinese inspector of the FEB in Shanghai, who arrived in Hong Kong in November on his way to Singapore. As Ho Tung Mau wrote to the ICP on 14 November, a decision had been taken in Shanghai to form a secretariat of the Communist League of the Oppressed Peoples of the East. The role of this league or federation would be 'to guide directly Malaya, Java, Burma, Siam and Annam, with a view to organizing them as soon as possible into communist parties.' The opening meeting of this association was to be held within two months, with delegates from different countries attending. 'But it would be preferable for

¹⁴⁶ RC,495, 154, 616, pp. 65-67. The VNQDD did re-write its statutes in 1929, with advice from Hoang Van Tung, a member of the Cach Mang Dang/Tan Viet. Thus Thanh Nien, the CMD and the VNQDD had very similar structures. (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, op. cit. p. 185.)

¹⁴⁷ SLOTFOM III, 129, documents captured by French, letter 13, p. 5.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., letter of 7 Jan. 1930.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., letter 14.

¹⁵⁰ Ha Huy Giap, op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁵¹ SPCE 367, Declaration de Duong Hac Dinh, p 30..

us to complete our unification before sending delegates,' Ho Tung Mau wrote.¹⁵² The League's secretariat would be based in Singapore and thus appears to have been a new manifestation of the Nanyang Provisional Committee. A hint of the importance of the CCP role in Vietnamese communism at the end of 1929 can be found in the *Sûreté's* comments on one of the letters exchanged between the two factions in November. The *Sûreté* noted that the ICP in Saigon was sending Chinese propaganda brochures to their comrades in Tonkin, a sign that the South was still the center of Nanyang Committee activity in Vietnam.¹⁵³ The Vietnamese in Hong Kong questioned the idea of working under Singapore's jurisdiction, according to Duong Hac Dinh's account. The Chinese delegate advised them to inform the FEB of their feelings, but at the same time encouraged them to send two delegates from each faction to Singapore at a later date. Thus Le Quang Dat was sent off to Shanghai to talk with 'certain Chinese members of the FEB'.¹⁵⁴

Significantly, at this stage the European members of the FEB seem to have been promoting the role of Chinese communists in Southeast Asia. The role of the Chinese inspector mentioned above may have grown out of the request from the Anti-imperialist League in Berlin that the FEB organize a delegation to the Anti-Imperialist Youth Conference which was due to be held in Frankfurt just before the second World Congress of the Anti-imperialist League, scheduled for July 1929. The FEB wrote to Berlin in May 1929 that they had no addresses for youth organizations in Korea, Indonesia, Indochina or Malaya. 'The only possibility is to work through the Chinese organisations there...', the letter said. They had decided that, 'a comrade must be sent to these places carrying instructions and suggestions for the building of some anti-imperialist youth organisation to include both native and Chinese youth.' The FEB's efforts were obviously too late to send any delegates to Berlin, but as they explained, their envoy would give them 'the possibility to learn first-hand the conditions in these places and to take steps for the formation of some national organisation.'¹⁵⁵

Rylski reported in January 1930 that the FEB was short of 'comrades to do the travelling' required within the region. The usefulness of the Chinese was limited by the fact that they were frequently refused entry at Southeast Asian ports, or were arrested on arrival.¹⁵⁶ Yet there seemed to be no alternative but to rely on Chinese comrades. In Moscow the Comintern was coming to the same conclusion. The resurrected Mideastern Section,

¹⁵² SLOTFOM III, 129, documents captured by French, letter of 14 Nov. 1929, signed 'Luong', who is identified in French notes as Ho Tung Mau.

¹⁵³ Ibid., French comments on 'Luong' letter of 14 Nov. 1929.

¹⁵⁴ SPCE 367, Duong Hac Dinh, pp. 34-5.

¹⁵⁵ RC, 542 (Anti-Imperialist League), 1, 96, p. 2, letter signed 'M'.

¹⁵⁶ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, p. 803: FEB letter to Eastern Secretariat, 30 Jan. 1930.

responsible for Burma, India, Indonesia and Indochina, held a meeting on 12 November, at which rebuilding the Indonesian CP was discussed. As the Indonesian cadres had been dispersed by the Dutch after the 1926 uprising, it was suggested that 'the Chinese communist organization which exists in Singapore, the Malay States and Indonesia, which is linked to the CCP's CC' be made use of. 'In spite of its numerical and ideological weakness, the organization has links among the local Chinese and the native workers and leads a variety of trade unions, which are united in the Trade Union Council of the Malay Archipelago...For the time being this organization can serve as the base for the development of work in Indonesia,' the protocol reads.¹⁵⁷ The Comintern does not appear to have understood the traditional Chinese concept of the 'Southern Seas' as a geographical area in which Chinese influence would be predominant. The Europeans in the FEB thought of Singapore as a central point for communicating with the area controlled by the Comintern's Mideastern Section, from India to Indonesia, and when required, Indochina. Kuusinen viewed India and Indonesia as the main targets of Comintern work in this region, as we have seen; these two colonies would be the ultimate destinations of the two French Comintern inspectors sent to Southeast Asia in 1930 and 1931.

The first of these to depart, an agent known as 'Thibault', was in Belgium in August 1929, to obtain false papers. While he waited for news and money from Moscow, he wrote that he was gathering documentation on Indochina, the Dutch Indies and the Philippines. He asked that any recent decisions regarding his task, including materials from the Anti-imperialist League, be sent to him rapidly.¹⁵⁸ By piecing together several sources, one can guess that this was Jean Crémet, the French communist who was long thought to have disappeared in China in early 1930. (In the 1960s he surfaced in Belgium.)¹⁵⁹ Joseph Ducroux, sent by the CYL to Asia in 1931, mentions in his memoirs that the OMS had asked him to search for Crémet in Shanghai and Hong Kong, as the Comintern had had no news of him for over one year.¹⁶⁰ Ducroux recalled that Crémet had travelled on a Belgian passport under a Walloon name. Ducroux had worked in Moscow from 1928 to 1930 as a CYL expert on India and was assigned in the winter of 1929-30 to take 'political, moral and material aid' to the Indian CP. Neither of the Frenchmen would succeed in his mission: Thibault would get no farther than Tonkin before vanishing in February 1930, and

¹⁵⁷ RC, 495, 154, 378, p. 9, protocol no. 12, 12 Nov. 1929.

¹⁵⁸ RC, 495, 154, 558, pp. 1-2b; letter of 28 August 1929, from 'Thibault' to Vasiliev.

¹⁵⁹ Roger Faligot and Remi Kauffer, in *As-tu vu Crémet?*, (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 302, say that Crémet obtained a passport in the name of 'Thibault' while he was in Shanghai. This book depicts a working relationship in China between Ho Chi Minh and Crémet which is not supported by any of the documentation which I have seen in the French or Russian archives. Faligot and Kauffer do not make clear what their sources are or provide footnotes.

¹⁶⁰ Joseph Ducroux, memoir dated 16 Sept. 1970.

Ducroux, after travelling through Vietnam, would be arrested in Singapore in 1931 before reaching India. Thibault/Crémet's disappearance seems to have created some confusion in the lead-up to the unification of the Vietnamese communist groups, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

The Revolutionary Hightide (1930-31)

1. The Return of the Comintern Trainees

At the end of 1929 the Vietnamese communist movement was composed of two feuding parties competing for members. The ICP faction had gone so far as to announce that even Nguyen Ai Quoc would be treated as an ordinary party member if he returned.¹ The former Thanh Nien leaders in Hong Kong were fighting to unify the communists on terms which would not mean total defeat for the Annam CP. They were on the point of sending Le Duy Diem to Moscow to find Nguyen Ai Quoc, when the liaison agent Cao Hoai Nghia admitted that he had met Quoc in Siam. He was only persuaded to reveal Quoc's hiding place when he realized how severe the split in the ranks of the Thanh Nien group had become.² It was Truong Van Lenh, one of the remaining Thanh Nien stalwarts, who went to find Quoc in October and persuaded him to return to southern China.³

At the same time, in Moscow the Comintern was beginning to make long-delayed decisions regarding the communist movements in India, Indonesia and Indochina. Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri, having completed their studies at the Stalin School, were preparing for their return to Vietnam via France. A brief set of 'Directives for Work in Indochina' was drawn up in Moscow on 27 October 1929,⁴ when according to Ngo Duc Tri the Comintern passed a formal resolution on the creation of an Indochinese Communist Party.⁵ The following day Tran Phu attended a day-long discussion led by Kuusinen on the future programme for the Indian CP.⁶ This must have been a way of preparing him for the thorny theoretical and practical problems he would face in Vietnam. Caution was the dominant note in the directives for Indochina. The 'general line' was to form communist groups and then to proceed to their unification as a party. The two Vietnamese comrades leaving the Stalin School were to gather information on the peasant movement and the strikes which had been occurring in the the last year; they were to develop links with the

¹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 129, *Sociétés Secrètes*, letter 13, p.5.

² AOM, SPCE 367, '*Historique du P.C.A.*'

³ AOM, SPCE, *Déclarations de Duong Hac Dinh*, p. 35.

⁴ RC, 495,154, 556, pp 10-11; the Russian version is dated 27 /V/1929, but given the strong evidence that these directives were drawn up in October, on the eve of Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri's departure for Paris, as well as the usual Hanoi date for these instructions, one can assume that the typist made a mistake in writing V in place of X.

⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, *Déclaration de Ngo Duc Tri*. In Vietnam, Ngo Duc Tri's role in 1930-1 has been reduced to that of a turncoat, as he is said to have given away many party members after his arrest in 1931. How much blame he deserves for individual arrests is debatable, but he clearly was badly disillusioned by April 1931, and he eventually made a long confession to the *Sûreté*.

proletarian and poor peasant elements among the nationalist groups and to 'provoke a differentiation' in such organizations in order to attract the proletarian members to join communist groups. The creation of labour unions, or where these had been dissolved, mutual aid groups, was another task. (They were encouraged to take advantage of Chinese and Vietnamese traditions in developing these groups.) Point 15 of the directives was a warning against any confusion, 'between our elements and the Independence Party of the ex-communist Nguyen The Truyen'. On the other hand, the two Moscow trainees were to enter into relations with the Chinese communist groups which existed in Indochina and to make use of their experience. Point 17 called for the collection of political and economic data for the preparation of a set of 'Theses' on Indochina.

Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri were in theory returning to Vietnam as equals. An addendum to their directives, on 'Technical Problems', stated that 'the two Vietnamese comrades leaving the University must be considered as our leading elements' for our work in Indochina.⁷ Yet Tran Phu, who had served as head of the Vietnamese group at the Stalin school, was considered to be the first among equals, perhaps because he was not tainted by any contacts with Nguyen The Truyen (as was Ngo Duc Tri, from his earlier stay in Paris). As the two were preparing for their journey they were presented to the French communist with the pseudonym 'Thibault', who was heading to Asia via Siberia as a delegate of the Comintern. Thibault/Crémet made an arrangement privately with Tran Phu to meet him in Hong Kong between the first and 15 of January 1930, or if that failed, in Haiphong in the first two weeks of February.⁸

In addition to their resolution and the guidance which Thibault was due to provide, the Comintern was to furnish the returning Vietnamese with a more detailed set of instructions. These took the form of a 48-page brochure entitled '*On the Immediate Tasks of the Indochinese Communists*' which was drawn up in October and November. It was, in fact, a critique of the resolutions of the Thanh Nien Congress in May 1929. When Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri arrived in what was then Leningrad on 11 November 1929, they were informed that they would receive money in Berlin and Paris; the resolution and the letter of instructions on forming a communist party would also be sent to them in Europe. After sailing to Hamburg, they went by train to Berlin, where they received a 'finely bound

⁶ RC, 495,154, 384, 'Consultation on the Indian Question, 28 Oct. 1929.

⁷ RC, 495, 154, 556, p. 31, 'Tekhnicheskiye Voprosy' (undated).

⁸ AOM, SPCE 367, *Déclarations de Ngo Duc Tri*, April, May and June, 1931.

novel'. They were told not to take apart the cover until they were in Saigon, where they could extract the papers hidden by the Comintern.⁹

The Immediate Tasks of the Indochinese Communists is a typical Comintern document of the time, an attempt to combine elements of Lenin's *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* with the more radical prescriptions of the Sixth Congress and the Tenth ECCI Plenum.¹⁰ The Indochinese revolution was still 'a struggle with the remnants of feudalism and a struggle against French imperialism for national independence'.¹¹ But now the party must be a 'product of class struggle', not something created in political education groups.¹² The Thanh Nien programme was criticized for outlining a specific progression of revolutionary periods, leading towards an armed struggle. The instructions stated that 'it is impossible to establish the order or length of the phases of revolutionary development'. 'Concrete analysis of the movement in any given period' must be the guide to action. Overestimation of the situation could lead to 'adventurism and putchism', while underestimation would lead to 'opportunism'.¹³ The blossoming of the Indochinese movement was occurring at a time when an upsurge in the world revolutionary movement was beginning – this demanded that the Indochinese communists orient themselves not just towards a gradual growth of their movement, but 'towards the possibility and probability of large-scale struggles and a quickening tempo of events...'.¹⁴

'The main defect of the Thanh Nien resolutions', the Comintern said, was that 'they do not contain the necessary exactitude regarding the essence of classes and their roles'.¹⁵ The petty bourgeoisie could no longer be counted among the 'moving forces' of the revolution, as the Thanh Nien programme had stated. They could be used in the anti-imperialist struggle and for the agrarian revolution, but only under the leadership of the proletariat. The true moving forces of the revolution were the working class and the peasantry; the most revolutionary elements of the peasantry were the rural poor – landless peasants and small landholders.¹⁶ Relations with legal groups and other parties were now defined in terms of pure exploitation. The party should 'broaden, use and lead the anti-imperialist struggle of the urban petty bourgeoisie, including students'.¹⁷ 'The creation of strong illegal

⁹ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri.

¹⁰ RC, 495. 154, 560, pp. 20-68, *On the Immediate Tasks of the Indochinese Communists*, (brochure), 23 Nov. 1929.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

communist groups, who have mastered a large variety of weapons to wield legal and semi-legal influence – this must be the basis of party work in Indochina's current conditions,' the brochure said.¹⁸ Work in rural areas was not to be neglected. One of the most important tasks of the party was to develop the peasant movement against the landlords. 'The communists must ignite, prepare and lead the peasant struggle against land rents, against the expropriation of land, taxes, share-cropping and so on. We must aim for the extension of individual flare-ups to a broad peasant movement against the landlords and imperialists.'¹⁹ But still, the 'center of gravity of party and mass work must be in the factories, mines, railways, plantations, etc.'²⁰ These instructions put heavy pressure on the Vietnamese to foment a violent struggle, yet made clear that errors in the analysis of the local revolutionary situation would be blamed on them.

Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri did not get to Saigon with their instructions until 8 February 1930. They were delayed in Paris by their difficulty in obtaining false travel documents. Although it is generally believed that the Comintern had a workshop in Berlin turning out counterfeit passports, this does not seem to have been in operation in 1929 or 1930. For both the returning Vietnamese and the Frenchmen who went to Southeast Asia for the Comintern in 1929-31, obtaining false identity papers posed considerable problems. Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri took the advice of their former Moscow classmate, Bui Lam, and travelled clandestinely. They paid 1,500 francs each to be hidden by a Chinese sailor aboard the *SS Porthos* for the voyage to Saigon. Their late departure meant that Tran Phu would not arrive in Hong Kong until roughly mid-February. He would thus miss both of his rendez-vous with Thibault, not to mention the unification congress.²¹

The method and date of transmission of the Comintern's instructions to Vietnam and Hong Kong are still sensitive details for Vietnamese communists, as they bear on Nguyen Ai Quoc's legitimacy as the party's unifier. The date on a Russian copy of the 48-page brochure is 23 November 1929. (Whether Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri had received the instructions in their final form is unclear.) This document, it would seem, is what became known in the ICP as the 'December instructions' on reunifying the party.²² Contemporary accounts refer to these instructions as the source of Comintern authority on

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 37

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 36.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

²¹ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri.

²² A synopsis made by Le Hong Phong was sent to Hong Kong, but intercepted by Lam Duc Thu and passed to the *Sûreté*. They in turn sent a copy to Paris on 14 Dec. 1929. (AOM, SPCE 383, Mission Noel, envoi no. 542, 14 Dec. 1929.)

unification.²³ But the Vietnamese text which since 1970 has been cited as the basis on which Quoc unified the party is dated 27 October, 1929. (It has not been possible to find a version of this document in the Comintern archives.) Titled, '*Ve Van De Lap Dang Cong San Dong Duong*', ('On Establishing an Indochinese Communist Party'), it emphasizes the role of 'the Comintern representative' in the creation of a communist party.²⁴ However, on the basis of the 1930-31 criticisms of his role in the party's unification, as well as Ngo Duc Tri's confession, it would appear that Quoc had seen neither the 'December instructions' nor the document printed in *Van Kien Dang* when he brought the communist groups together in early 1930.

2. *The Unification Process*

Nguyen Ai Quoc arrived in Hong Kong almost two months ahead of Tran Phu.²⁵ Although he reported to the FEB that he had arrived in China on 23 December,²⁶ a *Sûreté* informer claimed that 'Ly Thuy' had been sighted on the train in Kowloon before the 15 of that month.²⁷ In Hong Kong Quoc would find that the Vietnamese communist movement had already been receiving instructions from a Chinese representative of the FEB. Moreover, Thibault, assigned to guide the Vietnamese communists, appears to have arrived in Hong Kong not long after Quoc. He would seem to have been the anonymous Comintern representative 'charged with the inspection of all communist groups in the Far East', who was reported to have turned up in Hong Kong in late December 1929. According to a *Sûreté* report, this inspector repeated the message of his Chinese counterpart, that the direction of the affairs of the Vietnamese communists would be in the hands of the Chinese CP for the time being.²⁸ The FEB would report on 3 March 1930, that 'Jacques', 'the Frenchman', had headed to Hong Kong at the end of December; after making contacts there and possibly undertaking some travelling, he was due to return to Shanghai at the end of February. 'However, since a message from Hong Kong received at the end of January, in which he wrote that he was planning to travel to Indochina, we have had nothing more from him,' they reported.²⁹ In an earlier communication the FEB had

²³ See RC, 495, 32, 95: Lettre du C.C. d'Indochine (Tran Phu) to FEB of 17 April, 1931, p.7 of file.

²⁴ *Van Kien Dang*, vol. I, p. 9-17; published in *Nhan Dan* 6 Jan. 1970. See excerpts in Robert Turner, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, Declaration of Duong Hac Dinh, p. 38-39.

²⁶ RC, 495,154,615, p. 5, letter of 18 Feb. 1930.

²⁷ AOM, SPCE 368, Mission Noel, Envoi no. 554, 3 Jan. 1930, which refers to a report by Agent 'K' from 18 Nov. to 15 Dec. 1929.

²⁸ Ralph Smith, op. cit., p. 795, citing AOM, SLOTFOM III, 48, no.4, pp. 5-6.

²⁹ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, unsigned letter from FEB to the ECCI, 3 March 1930, pp. 821-3.

referred to him as, 'the comrade for Indonesia'.³⁰ Strangely, the French envoy does not seem to have met Quoc in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong Quoc moved quickly to end what he considered a 'puerile feud', even though he had now become one voice of the Comintern among several who could claim to have authority to direct the Vietnamese movement. Duong Hac Dinh's 1930 declaration to the *Sûreté* shows that Quoc disapproved of the dissolution of Thanh Nien.³¹ It should have been kept in existence after the creation of a communist party, 'at least at the beginning'. This disapproval underlines Quoc's view of Thanh Nien as a useful political front and may be why the Hong Kong party members continued to publish their newspaper *Thanh Nien* until May 1930,³² alongside the ACP paper *Do (Red)*, which had first appeared on 1 September 1929.³³ Dinh's report reinforces the idea that Quoc was out of touch with the rapid development of the political situation. 'We reported to Quoc everything which had happened, both within the country and outside...', he explained. Two days after his arrival, Quoc wrote to the leaders of the ICP faction to explain his mission from the Comintern, to form a communist party for Vietnam. By this account, Quoc drew his authority from the instructions he had received before his departure for Siam. He seems to have been convinced that he had to act fast, without waiting for updated directives. He requested that the ICP faction send two delegates to meet him in Hong Kong. (By the end of December two delegates from the ACP were already in Hong Kong: Nguyen Thieu, alias Nghia, on the run from the French police, and Chau Van Liem, who had been designated by the Saigon party branch to attend the coming Singapore conference.)³⁴ Quoc also wrote to the FEB to announce his presence in Hong Kong and submit his proposals to them. According to Duong Hac Dinh, he asked for a monthly salary of 240 to 300 Chinese dollars, to be paid via the Guangdong committee of the CCP.³⁵ The authority which he displayed before his comrades may have involved a touch of bravado, however. In late February 1930 he wrote to the French CP representatives in the Comintern to ask for a clearer mandate: 'Now I don't know exactly what my position is... am I a member of the PCF or of the PCV?', he

³⁰ Ibid., Rylski letter of 30 Jan. 1930, p. 803.

³¹ AOM, SPCE 367, Déclaration de Duong Hac Dinh, arrested June 1930, p. 38. Whether Dinh was a French informer prior to his arrest in early June 1930, as claimed by Huynh Kim Khanh, (*Vietnamese Communism*, p. 117, n. 49) is unproven by the documents I have had access to; it is equally possible that he was an ICP-faction spy within the China-based group. But it is certain that the *Sûreté* in large part based their analysis of events within the ACP leadership on his subsequent declaration. The report labelled *Fusion des Associations Antifrançaises en Indochine et l'Action Déterminante de Nguyen Ai Quoc* in SPCE 367 is a case in point.

³² AOM, SLOTFOM V, 16; the final numbers 207 and 208 appeared in May 1930.

³³ See copy in RC, 495, 154, 610a.

³⁴ AOM, SPCE 367, Duong Hac Dinh, pp. 33, 37. This contradicts the version of events in Nguyen Nghia's first article on the unification, in *NCLS* 59, 1964, mentioned below.

³⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, Duong Hac Dinh, pp. 40-2.

asked. And further: 'Has the mandate which the Comintern gave me been terminated? If not, am I a member of the FEB here?' He requested a decision from the ECCI.³⁶

Sometime between 6 January and 8 February 1930 the process known as the 'Unification Conference' took place. In his 18 February 1930 report (in English) to the Comintern, Quoc gives a typically laconic description of his actions: '...I called out representatives of the two factions (Dongzuong (sic) [ICP] and Annam). We met on January 6. As envoy of the Komintern with full power to decide all questions regarding Revolutionary movement in Indochina, I told them where they were wrong, and what they must do. They agreed then to unite into one party. Together we fixed up programme and strategy, following the Komintern line.'³⁷ He noted that a Provisional Central Committee of seven full members and seven candidate members would be formed. The representatives returned to Vietnam on 8 February, he claimed.³⁸ Quoc sent the FEB an English translation of his 'Appeal to workers, peasants, soldiers, youth, students, oppressed brothers, sisters and Comrades', which proclaimed the founding of the VCP. The appeal was due to be distributed around 20 March, when the Central Committee would be organized.³⁹

On the issue of Vietnam's place in the communist hierarchy, Quoc appears to have made a diplomatic compromise. He explained: 'The Singapore section has written to us that, the Annam CP will be under the direction of Singapore. But considering geographical situation (Russia – China – Annam) as well as political situation (Party more strong, industries more developed in Tonkin than in Cochinchina) – I propose that, the An. CP shall be directed from Shanghai via Hong Kong. However, the An. CP must be in close touch with Singapore. For that reason, I ask the Chinese CP a letter of introduction, so that we may send an Annamese comrade to work with Singapore.'⁴⁰ Quoc was thus signalling that he was willing to cooperate with the new federation being organized in Singapore, but that the Vietnamese party would be directly linked to the Comintern via the FEB. His preference for working through Shanghai should not be interpreted as a Chinese orientation, but rather as a refusal to be subordinated to the CCP. The new party was named the '*Dang Cong San Viet Nam*' (Vietnamese CP), which Quoc referred to in his English text as the Annam CP.

³⁶ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 34b, letter in French seems to be dated 27 Feb. 1930, but the day is unclear.

³⁷ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5-b.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 10-12b; p. 5b.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 8

Hanoi's official version of the conference is that recorded by Nguyen Thieu, one of the ACP faction delegates.⁴¹ In his account the conference occurred between 3 and 7 February. The two delegates from the ICP faction were Nguyen Duc Canh and Trinh Dinh Cuu, both members of the original ICP cell. A letter from the ICP faction to its members in Saigon dated 7 January indicates that the two delegates summoned by the International were due to depart for Hong Kong around the 17 or 18 of January.⁴² Thus Nguyen Ai Quoc may have been referring to the lunar calendar when he wrote to the Comintern that the meeting began 6 January – that would have made it 4 February by the western calendar.⁴³ Another possibility is that the meeting occurred in two or more stages, with a preliminary meeting held 6 January, followed by consultations with the FEB and ICP members in Tonkin, and then a final meeting between 3 and 7 February. To complicate this already confusing picture, a Chinese account of the Unification Conference claims that Nguyen Ai Quoc was not present at the opening of the conference, as the meeting was too 'large' [apparently meaning too public], but that it was held under Quoc's 'direct leadership'.⁴⁴ It is difficult to say what meeting this description would refer to, however, as all the other accounts of the conference describe it as an intimate affair.

The exact date of the Unification Conference would be unimportant, were it not for the hints of continued competition within the new party's leadership which can be found in the French archives and even in Nguyen Thieu's second article on the party's founding.⁴⁵ As it is, the confusion over dates reinforces the impression that there were still conflicting lines of command in the Vietnamese CP after 8 February 1930. The Conference in the end provided the framework for unification of the feuding Vietnamese factions, but did not by any means complete the process. The short programme which Nguyen Ai Quoc put together for the new party is not very different from the 8-point programme for the colonies which Bukharin produced for the Sixth Comintern Congress. Quoc clearly had not given up on the united front tactic, for he did not condemn the bourgeoisie as a whole. His programme called for 'the overthrow of French imperialism, feudalism and the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie'; the complete independence of Vietnam; a worker-peasant-soldier government; the confiscation of banks and other means of production in the hands of the imperialists; confiscation of all plantations and land holdings of the imperialists and

⁴¹ Nguyen Nghia, 'Cong cuoc hop nhat cac to chuc cong san dau tien o Viet Nam va vai tro cua dong chi Nguyen Ai Quoc' [The Unification of the First Vietnamese Communist Groups and the Role of Nguyen Ai Quoc], *NCLS* 59, 1964.

⁴² AOM, SLOTFOM III, 129, *Associations Secrètes*, notes from Annexe N.I a la lettre N. 895/SG, 12 Feb., 1930.

⁴³ See Ralph Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 769.

⁴⁴ Hoang Tranh, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁴⁵ Nguyen Nghia, in *NCLS*, 62, 5- 1964, cited below.

the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie, to divide them among the poor peasants; an 8-hour work day; the abolition of national loans, personal taxes and tax exemption for the poor; civil liberties; public education; and equality between men and women.⁴⁶ The policy on land confiscation appears identical to that established by the Chinese GMD's Central Land Committee at meetings between 19 April and 6 May 1927.⁴⁷ Thus the programme as a whole would not be acceptable to the post-Tenth Plenum Comintern and bore little resemblance to the Moscow instructions drawn up the previous autumn. It would be replaced by a new programme and a long set of theses at the party's first plenum in October 1930. This would mark the real beginning of the party's allegiance to the current Comintern line, as it had evolved between the summer of 1928 and mid-1929.

In spite of Quoc's apparent authority, the ICP faction appears to have played the predominant role in the new Vietnamese party in the first months after the unification.⁴⁸ Until his arrest at the end of May 1930, Ngo Gia Tu would retain a strong hold on the Saigon party structures, as head of a Provisional Executive Committee (*Ban Lam Thoi chap uy*) for the south. The two ICP faction members at the unification conference were given responsibility for work in North and Central Vietnam.⁴⁹ A marked federalism in the party's organization seems to have existed in the first half of 1930: Nguyen Van Loi, who was elected to the southern Provisional Executive Committee by the remains of the Tan Viet party, later told the *Sûreté* that 'standing central committees' (*trung uong thuong vu*), which met regularly in the north and center, were empowered to take decisions which had to be implemented in Cochinchina.⁵⁰ The Provisional Central Committee formed in early March contained five ICP members, as opposed to one from the ACP and one from the old Tan Viet. The original group of CC members was never able to meet, however. The members of the Provisional Standing Committee based in the north were all ICP faction members: Trinh Dinh Cuu, Nguyen Hoi and Tran Van Lan.⁵¹ Some of the new party's members may have harboured doubts about the need for unification. Nguyen Duc Canh, for example, is said to have turned down a place in the Provisional Central Committee, in favour of continuing his work in the Executive Committee of the *Bac Ky* General Labour

⁴⁶ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 35b; Letter to Bureau Francais a l'I.C., signed 'pour la Comintern et le PCV, Nguyen Ai Quoc. The list of 'mots d'ordre' is cited on the final page.

⁴⁷ Galbiati, op. cit., p. 256.

⁴⁸ See Ralph Smith, op. cit., pp. 799 and 803.

⁴⁹ Nguyen Nghia, 'Cong Cuoc Hop Nhat Cac To Chuc Cong San o Trong Nuoc', ['The Unification of Communist Organizations within the Country'], *NCLS*, 62, 5-1964, p. 54.

⁵⁰ AOM, SPCE 371, Declaration of Nguyen Van Loi, 18 Jan. 1932. Loi, one of the first Thanh Nien trainees to work in the South, did not declare that he had been to Canton for training, and may have left out other important details about the party.

⁵¹ Nguyen Ba Linh, 'Tim Hieu them ve Hoi Nghi Trung Uong Dang Thang 10 1930' ['A Further Look at the Central Committee Plenum of October 1930'], *NCLS*, no. 4, 1992, p. 1.

Union, a structure which may well have been affiliated with the Nanyang Federation of Labour Unions.⁵² Overall, one receives the impression that the different committee structures were being used in a competition for power.

3. *The New Year's Uprisings*

The first stirrings of revolt in 1930 were already in their final planning stages by the time the VCP was formed. The Comintern showed no sign of advance knowledge of these events, but the CCP and the Vietnamese seem to have been working in line with the a common timetable. The strike at the Phu Rieng rubber plantation in western Cochinchina, from the 3 to 7 February, may in fact have been part of a 1930 'Tet Offensive'. One of the organizers, ICP member Tran Tu Binh, relates in his memoir *The Red Earth* that the strike actually began on 30 January, the first day of the lunar New Year, when 5,000 workers gathered at the plantation manager's compound to watch a dragon dance and present their demands for better working conditions.⁵³ The strike appears to have been entirely an ICP initiative, overseen by Ngo Gia Tu in Saigon and activists from Tonkin, where the labour force had been recruited.

On 2 February, just north of the Vietnamese border in Guangxi province, the Longzhou Soviet and the Chinese Eighth Red Army were formed. According to official CCP records, the Soviet covered eight districts around Pingxiang and Longzhou and survived for about six months. It reportedly was sparked off by an uprising of GMD troops in Nanning and followed Deng Xiaoping's establishment of a revolutionary base in Bose (Pai-se) in December. The Longzhou uprising was led by a communist, Yu Zuoyu, on the staff of warlord Li Mingrui's Nanning-based forces.⁵⁴

There is no direct evidence of a Vietnamese role in creating this Soviet, but it would be surprising if the Vietnamese communists settled in Guangxi had not been involved. This was an area which the French considered to be in their zone of influence, and in fact bombing by their warplanes helped to destroy the soviet before long. A number of Vietnamese communists were living in Longzhou, including two drivers on the staff of the provincial government, Le Quang Dat later told the French.⁵⁵ Le Hong Son was thought to enjoy the support of the governor, Yu Zuobo, cousin of Yu Zuoyu and one of the warlords

⁵² *Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, p. 97.

⁵³ Tran Tu Binh, *The Red Earth*, trans. John Spragens, (Athens, Ohio: Univ. of Ohio Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), p. 67.

⁵⁴ Klein and Clark, Vol. I, p. 74.

⁵⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, *Déclaration de Le Quang Dat*.

with whom the CCP was cooperating in 1929.⁵⁶ Nguyen Ai Quoc claimed in his 18 February 1930 report that five Vietnamese 'comrades' working in Guangxi had recently been arrested.⁵⁷ In the same report he said that the 'anti-imperialist section' of the newly-formed party would have to 'do their best to enlarge the Guangxi Soviet influence'.⁵⁸ In May the final issue of the newspaper *Thanh Nien* commented that 'we must protest against the sending of French imperialist troops to the Sino-Vietnamese border to destroy the Longzhou Soviet government'.⁵⁹ Irrespective of the political identity and numbers of Vietnamese involved in the organization of the Soviet, the VCP rallied behind it.

The abortive Yen Bay mutiny of 9-10 February, planned between September 1929 and January 1930, although organized by the VNQDD, may also have had some connection to the other lunar New Year actions. Envisaged as a 'general uprising' during which large towns and French military installations would be attacked,⁶⁰ the uprising would have been a useful diversion of French troops from Longzhou. As we have seen, the ICP faction had stated its intention of working through the VNQDD as late as 7 January 1930. Nguyen Ai Quoc also informed the FEB in his 18 February letter that the 'left faction' of the VNQDD 'is in close relation with us;' at the same time he noted that its right wing was inclined to putchism.⁶¹ A key element of the mutiny, which was not organized in time, was to have been an attack from Yunnan down the Red River Valley. (Later in 1930 the French consul in Yunnan informed the British that among the VNQDD members in the province, were a 'considerable number of communists, of whom many are now in the Chinese military academy.'⁶²) A group in Macao called 'The Executive Council of the Association of Revolutionary Soldiers and Sailors' was quick to produce a tract in support of the Yen Bay mutiny. In Hong Kong the French confiscated copies of this leaflet (dated 17 February 1930) addressed to the sailors of the battleship *Waldeck Rousseau*, urging them to support 'the revolutionary uprising of the Vietnamese'. The Vietnamese were 'rising up heroically in Hanoi, Yen Bay and Hong Hoa (sic), etc...., the insurrection of the Vietnamese people should be supported and aided by the workers of France'.⁶³ The French assumed that this tract was connected to the Thanh Nien organization, but it may equally well have been produced by the ICP faction or the VNQDD. The Yen Bay revolt was later criticized by the Vietnamese communists, but it was still viewed as a heroic uprising which lit a

⁵⁶ *Contribution*, vol. IV, p. 19.

⁵⁷ RC, 495, 154, 615, pp. 9-9b.

⁵⁸ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 5b.

⁵⁹ AOM, SLOTFOM V, 16; translated French extracts from no. 208 are not dated, but issue 207 is dated 5 May 1930.

⁶⁰ Hoang van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, (Saigon: Giang Dong, 1965), pp. 78-80.

⁶¹ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 7.

⁶² PRO, FO 371, 14743, p. 404: letter from British Consulate Gen., Yunnanfou, 19 May 1930 to FO.

revolutionary fuse in 1930. French repression of the VNQDD uprising, which involved the destruction of whole villages which had shown support for the rebels, may have curtailed the development of communist activities in the Tonkin countryside later in 1930.

4. *New Assignments*

On 13 February Nguyen Ai Quoc left Hong Kong for Shanghai, where he wrote out by hand, in English, his account of his doings since his arrival in Siam in 1928. The report reveals a preoccupation with relations with the CCP. He discusses not only connections with the Singapore section, but also mentions that he has asked the CCP for a letter with addresses of some leading comrades (Chinese) in Siam, in order that Annam comrades in that country can work with Ch. (sic) comrades.' He also says that he has asked the CCP to 'send some leading comrades' to Saigon, where he notes that there are around 200 Chinese comrades, but who are lacking an able leader. He suggests that a bureau be created, with one or more representatives from each side, to coordinate the work of the two parties when the interests of the Chinese and Annamese masses are involved.⁶⁴ At the time, he was planning to go on to Vladivostok to meet his correspondent, who remains unidentified. His report (dated 18 February) shows that he had not yet met Tran Phu. He wrote that he had had no news from the French and 'the two Annam comrades' at that point. I have found no proof that he actually went on to Vladivostok after writing this report.

Vladivostok had become the site of a short-term training school established for Chinese party members to update their communist knowledge and technique. The CCP CC had suggested in May 1929 that such a training facility be set up, because they could not spare the cadres or the workers whom the Comintern wanted to train in Moscow. The Chinese saw it as a place to develop 'those elements from the intelligentsia and peasantry, who had attained military experience in the red armed forces and who had fled after the defeat at Hai-lu-feng.'⁶⁵ Several Chinese-speaking Vietnamese including Le Quang Dat, Ho Tung Mau and his wife Ly Phuong Thuan are believed to have travelled there in 1930 to attend a three-month propaganda course.⁶⁶ By 1930 the Pan Pacific Trade Union also had a full-time secretariat there.⁶⁷ But Nguyen Ai Quoc may have been exempted from this retraining and prevented altogether from going to Vladivostok, as he was pulled into service by the

⁶³ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 117, annexe 3 à la transmission no. 1965, 27 March 1930.

⁶⁴ RC, 495, 154, 615, pp. 8-8b.

⁶⁵ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, p. 555, letter from CCP CC to Eastern Secretariat, 6 May 1929.

⁶⁶ AOM, SPCE 384, Pinot interview with the 'Director', 22-23 Feb. 1930.

FEB in Shanghai. They reported on 3 March that Quoc had appeared, 'a few days ago'. 'We are enclosing his letter, in which he relates everything which he has reported to us orally. We have decided to use him for liaison work and have given him several assignments regarding organization and the continuation of work in-country,' they explained. The reason he was put to work in this ad-hoc way may be the fact that Thibault had disappeared. Moreover, neither Rylski, who had already departed for Moscow, nor Eisler spoke Chinese. So Quoc could have served as a much-needed linguistic go-between and perhaps as a source of information about Chinese politics. The FEB did not mention in this letter that Quoc was being made head of a Southern Bureau (it is unclear whether he ever had such a precise title), or that he was being sent to the Malayan party conference due to be held in Singapore in mid-April. They noted that one Chinese comrade would attend this conference, 'with instructions from us'.⁶⁸ It was only in May that they would reveal that they had sent Quoc to Singapore to the MCP conference.

Quoc returned to Hong Kong by mid-March, where he finally made contact with, first, Tran Phu and then Ngo Duc Tri. After landing briefly in Saigon, Tran Phu had gone ahead to Hong Kong so that he could meet Thibault. Tri waited in Saigon three weeks without news, and then decided to sail to Hong Kong to find Tran Phu. Before leaving, however, he met Bui Lam, a fellow Moscow trainee who had just returned from Paris on 9 March. Bui Lam was carrying a set of instructions entitled '*The Immediate Tasks of the Indochinese communists*', which had been translated into French in Paris. (Tri does not explain whether this was a version of the letter he had brought from Berlin, or whether it was an additional or more complete set of instructions.) In early March Tri sailed to Hong Kong, where he eventually tracked down Tran Phu at the YMCA. Tran Phu had missed his appointments with Thibault, and had been unable to proceed to Haiphong because of the French crackdown following the Yen Bay mutiny. He had not met Nguyen Ai Quoc until the latter returned from Shanghai in March. He told Tri about his meeting with Quoc and news of the communist party's unification in January. 'We had nothing more to do but return to begin our work, given that Nguyen Ai Quoc was in charge of relations with the Comintern,' Tri told the French.⁶⁹

Quoc later met Ngo Duc Tri and explained that, 'at the end of 1927 I received an order from the Comintern to make propaganda for the formation of an Indochinese communist

⁶⁷ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 127, folder on '*Bureau d'Extreme Orient et Syndicat Pan-pacifique 1929-1933*.'

⁶⁸ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, pp. 822-3, unsigned letter of 3 March 1930 to ECCI. The Chinese comrade is identified in a contemporary footnote as Fu Da-tsin, Fu Ta Ching.

⁶⁹ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri; note that here the party unification is again dated in January.

party. I was ill in Siam for more than a year and was not able to undertake anything.' Quoc then described the unification and said the FEB had given its approval. 'After the fusion,' he concluded, 'all the Chinese communists living in Indochina would join the Indochinese communist party.'⁷⁰ At this point, Quoc had enough authority to assign Ngo Duc Tri to return to Saigon, while Tran Phu was sent to work in Hanoi. Tri's declaration reveals nothing more of Quoc's instructions or his own plans.

Back in Saigon by early April 1930,⁷¹ Ngo Duc Tri was taken to meet Ngo Gia Tu. Tu assigned him to work on propaganda, but failed to give him any concrete tasks. He announced that, for the time being, 'we are still too occupied by a number of things which have not been finished...'. After that Tri was brought to Cholon to stay in the house which served as the office of the communist cell of the Cholon power station. He was not invited to join in the cell meetings, and no position was offered to him other than as translator of the 'Resolution' he had brought from Berlin, as well as of the letter carried by Bui Lam. Towards the end of April, Tri was told that he would be producing propaganda for a strike in the towns and country. But only after the May Day strike at the electrical plant and a move to a new lodging, was he put in charge of the paper *Red Flag*. Only after Ngo Gia Tu's arrest at the end of May was Ngo Duc Tri invited to join the southern Provisional Executive Committee, and then the Central Committee itself.

The important role assigned to Ngo Gia Tu in this account is underscored by the description given by Nguyen Nghia (Nguyen Thieu) in the second part of his memoir on the unification process. Nghia's memoir explains that the two communist groups in the south had selected two workers to serve on the Provisional Central Committee: Sau (Hoang Quoc Viet) and Lo (Pham Huu Lau).⁷² Yet he describes Ngo Gia Tu, who was chosen head of the southern Provisional Executive Committee, as the chief decision-maker. It was Ngo Gia Tu who assigned work in the provinces to Nghia and Chau Van Liem, the two delegates from the Unification Conference sent by Nguyen Ai Quoc to oversee the party's creation in the south, in the name of the Comintern.⁷³ Thus, as in China, the Comintern's power appears to have been much weaker on the ground than its staff in Moscow supposed.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Tri says he left Hong Kong in June 1930, but this appears impossible, as he worked for a time with Ngo Gia Tu in Saigon, who was arrested at the end of May; in fact just a few lines later Tri gives the date as the beginning of April.

⁷² Pham Huu Lau was from a peasant family in Hoa An village, Cao Lanh, where Nguyen Ai Quoc's father had been living at the time of his death. See *Nguyen Sinh Huy*, p. 160, 168.

⁷³ Nguyen Nghia, *NCLS* n. 62., p. 58.

Nguyen Nghia's article also raises the problem of assimilating Chinese party members into the Vietnamese party. As Nghia points out, the Chinese group in Cochinchina was larger than either of the Vietnamese communist factions there, with many experienced activists who had fled Guangdong after the Canton Commune. They were unenthusiastic about delegating members to join the new Vietnamese party's Central Committee, for a variety of reasons: they claimed that the Chinese lacked legal papers, were not familiar with the political situation, or did not speak the language. They preferred to select someone to serve on the southern Provisional Executive Committee.⁷⁴ Eventually, another Hanoi source says, two Chinese comrades were selected to the central body: Luu Lap Dao (A Lau) and A Duyen (Duy).⁷⁵

It is not surprising that the Chinese were slow to join the new party, given that it was not to be a sub-branch of the CCP's Central Committee. As Ngo Duc Tri reported to the French, the tension over the new party's alignment continued in the spring. He learned from Ngo Gia Tu that a Chinese delegate from the FEB had passed through Saigon on his way to Singapore from Shanghai. The delegate showed his disapproval of the Vietnamese party's direct links to the FEB, and remarked that the Indochinese communists should be answerable to the 'Secretariat of the Federation of Communist Groups of Indonesia' (apparently meaning the Singapore-based Federation or League). The *Sûreté* believed that in April a meeting was held in Saigon with 'a Chinese inspector from the FEB' who was coming from Siam and who had not learned of the 'independence given to the Vietnamese party by the FEB'. He held a meeting to unite the Chinese and Vietnamese communists on the 19th of that month.⁷⁶ The CCP thus does not appear to have been enthusiastic about the loss of authority over a Southeast Asian party.

5. The Revolutionary Upsurge in China and the Nanyang

As the Vietnamese communists were organizing their new structures, Li Lisan was pushing the CCP towards the crest of the new revolutionary wave. On 26 February 1930 he issued his Circular No. 70, which is considered 'the first clear and unconcealed formulation of what was soon to be called the "Li Lisan Line"'.⁷⁷ The circular claimed that as the 'new revolutionary wave is developing forward' and that as the 'warlord war' continued to expand, the objective basis was being created for the development of a 'new revolutionary high tide'. Li maintained that 'nationwide mass struggle' was developing

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

⁷⁵ Nguyen Ba Linh, op. cit., p. 1.

⁷⁶ AOM, SPCE 367, *Historique du PCA*, p. 11.

evenly and that party organization in urban areas was recovering from the setbacks of 1927. His strategy was one of 'concentration and attack' to win an initial victory in one or more provinces. This would be achieved by organizing 'an all industry general strike', supporting and penetrating the peasants' struggle for land, and organizing troop rebellions among the warlord armies. Li included a warning against 'rightists and liquidationists' who, he cautioned, would criticize the 'party's political line as putchism'.⁷⁸

In early March the Guangdong Province Committee of the CCP held a conference in Shanghai, to avoid the Nanking [Nanjing] spies and 'Reorganizers' in Hong Kong.⁷⁹ Around that time an 'action committee' was established in Shanghai by Li Lisan's deputy Luo Mei (Li Wei-han), in an effort to neutralize the still-recalcitrant Jiangsu provincial organization.⁸⁰ On 15 March the Nanyang Provisional Committee also met, most likely in Shanghai, as a meeting of the Federation of the Oppressed Peoples of the East occurred in Shanghai around the same time, and many of the participants would have been at both meetings. At this gathering a resolution in support of the ECCI's Tenth Plenum was passed. This resolution, which emphasizes the CCP's adherence to the Comintern line, was in part an answer to the FEB's October 1929 criticisms. It reads: '... the Executive Committee recognized that the line and resolution of the Plenum [Tenth ECCI] fully answer the demands of the leadership of the Revolution in China and in Nanyang, and especially the state of the struggle with the right deviation, liquidators, appeasers and opportunists ...'.⁸¹ The Nanyang Committee's resolution rejected the criticism made by Chen Duxiu and others who 'consider that the present struggle of the Chinese masses is the "opposite of a revolutionary upsurge"'.⁸² The document states: 'the transition from a general workers' strike in Nanyang to a general political strike is a pressing question for the workers' movement at the present time.'⁸³ This meeting may have been an occasion for Li Lisan's supporters to propagate his newly-articulated policy.

A *Sûreté* report shows that the day after this resolution was passed the Communist Youth League (CYL) held a meeting in Shanghai.⁸⁴ This report demonstrates the increasing involvement of the CCP in the affairs of other Asian parties. At this gathering the

⁷⁷ Richard Thornton, op.cit., p. 111.

⁷⁸ I am relying on Richard Thornton for this summary of Central Circular no. 70, '*Chung yang tung kao ti ch'i shih hao*', Thornton, op. cit., pp. 111-114.

⁷⁹ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, p. 821, letter of 3 March 1930.

⁸⁰ Thornton, op. cit., pp. 117-8.

⁸¹ RC, 495, 62, 1, p. 28., Resolution on the X Plenum of ECCI, 'Passed by Nanyang Provisional Committee', 15 March 1930.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 33.

⁸⁴ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 129, letter of 13 April 1930 from Gov. Gen. to Minister of Colonies.

Formosan Lee Nan Mow announced that, on instructions from the CC of the CCP, the Youth League had been assigned to support 'by all possible means' the revolutionary movement in the Indies, in Indochina and in Korea. The Korean and Indian participants noted that although their movements had recently made progress, it would nevertheless be difficult to continue the struggle without the support of the 'great fraternal Chinese party'. The meeting agreed to request that the Chinese CC send to the countries in question young Chinese propagandists and revolutionary cadres, who would be provided with arms, money and propaganda. The contact point for Indochina would be Canton. At the close of the meeting, the chairman announced that 'the local office of the GMD had promised to support the revolutionary movement in the Indies, Indonesia and Korea, independently of the policy of the Central Government.' This seems to be a sign that the GMD left-wing was still engaged in some level of cooperation with the CCP in the spring of 1930.

Although the discussions recorded by the *Sûreté* source make no direct reference to the Secretariat of the Communist Federation of the Oppressed Peoples of the Far East, their report cited above notes that this meeting of the CYL confirmed the existence of such a secretariat. This meeting may have been a gathering of the CYL's Anti-imperialist League, which had been created as a front for their 'legal and semi-legal' activities. The FEB noted in a May 1930 letter that at the start of 1930 there had been three different Anti-imperialist Leagues in China -- 'the best and the most popular' of these was that of the CYL, the letter observed. (One of the three, the 'Far Eastern' League, organized by the CCP they said, had been wound up, as it was nothing more than 'an apparat'.) The FEB apparently encouraged the CCP to work with what they called the 'Chinese Anti-imperialist League' based in Tianjin.⁸⁵ Behind these mild observations, there seems to lie a hidden drama, but it is only through the French sources that we get some hint of what had occurred.

The final issue of *Thanh Nien* in May 1930 reported that a new Anti-imperialist League of the East had been started, 'to denounce the lies and tricks of the nationalist Chinese party...'. Its first meeting in April 1930 had been attended by delegates from India, Korea, Java, Formosa, Indochina, China and other eastern countries. This report refers to the 1928 creation of the League of the Oppressed Peoples of the East as 'a subterfuge to separate Asian revolutionaries from the Comintern'.⁸⁶ Possibly Nguyen Ai Quoc attended this April meeting. By this stage, Russian scholars believe that the FEB was having difficulty in

⁸⁵ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, letter to Eastern Secretariat from FEB, 18 May 1930, p. 885.

⁸⁶ AOM, SLOTFOM V, 16, *Thanh Nien*, no. 208.

getting information about what was happening within the CCP; at the same time, they say, the fear of being accused of rightist errors was making the FEB staff 'extremely cautious' about reporting on or criticizing what they regarded as leftist tendencies in CCP policies.⁸⁷ That may be why the FEB staff played down their effort to get the CCP to close down or disassociate itself from one of the Anti-Imperialist Leagues, apparently the one founded in July-August 1928. As we have seen, the origins of this organization seem to lie in some sort of cooperation between the Left GMD/Third Party movement and the CCP.

The *Sûreté's* reports from the spring of 1930 are confusing and at times apparently contradictory. On the one hand, in March their detective in Hong Kong, Neron, reported that Nguyen Ai Quoc had suffered a considerable loss of influence with the Comintern after Stalin's consolidation of power.⁸⁸ However, by September 1930 the *Sûreté* had produced a new analysis. By then they had come to believe that Nguyen Ai Quoc was the Comintern representative who had turned up in December 1929 with the power 'to inspect... the communist organizations in the Far East'.⁸⁹ This changed view of Quoc's role may reflect the FEB's decision in March or April 1930 to take a more active role in combatting the influence of Li Lisan. In fact, it appears that Nguyen Ai Quoc took over some of the tasks which had been assigned to Thibault, the Comintern inspector (who as noted above was referred to by the FEB as 'the comrade for Indonesia') when the latter failed to return to Shanghai from his trip to Indochina. But Quoc's authority, according to the Russian documents, seems to have been delegated by the FEB in Shanghai between March and April 1930 and was probably not as sweeping as that given to Thibault.

By April 1930 relations between the FEB and Li Lisan had come close to the breaking point. On 17 April Li wrote to Zhou Enlai and Qu Quibai (then in Moscow) to suggest that the Comintern reorganize the FEB. He believed that the FEB's mistakes were of a 'dangerous, rightist character' and that they were 'politically in no condition to lead'.⁹⁰ Li apparently believed that he would receive Stalin's or Mif's backing in this dispute. While Moscow delayed giving a clear sign of approval or disapproval regarding the FEB, Li proceeded with plans for a general uprising. It was in this context that the FEB decided to use Nguyen Ai Quoc as an emissary to Siam and Malaya, to help the local communists establish national parties. The haste to set up these parties to replace the branches of the Nanyang Provisional Committee could in part have arisen from the FEB's desire to limit Li

⁸⁷ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part I, p. 488, Introduction to Section 2.

⁸⁸ AOM, SPCE 368, correspondence 1930, *Note conf. no. 1725, S.G.*, Hanoi, 17 March 1930.

⁸⁹ AOM, SPCE 368, 5220 S.G., 18 Sept. 1930, report on Nguyen Ai Quoc signed Neron.

⁹⁰ *Comintern and China*, Li Lisan letter of 17 April 1930, p. 866.

Lisan's and the Chinese CC's influence.⁹¹ It was only after the fact, in a letter of 18 May 1930, that Eisler and Bepalov informed the Eastern Secretariat that they had sent Quoc to Singapore to the Malayan party conference, and also assigned him the task of selecting Malayan delegates to the coming Fifth Profintern Congress in Moscow. They reported in the same letter that the French comrade who had gone to Indochina had still not been found, even though the Vietnamese communists were searching for his trace.⁹² This letter makes no mention of Quoc's role in Siam.

The exact dates of Quoc's travel are difficult to establish. Hoang Van Hoan states that Quoc arrived in Bangkok around the end of March 1930. After holding discussions with the Chinese comrades in Bangkok, he proceeded to Udon to explain the Comintern's policy to the Vietnamese residents there, according to Hoan's account. With the formation of a Siamese CP, the Vietnamese communists would be expected to become members instead of joining the Vietnamese CP. The same principle would apply to Chinese residents of Siam. Hoan says that after the Udon meeting Quoc returned to Bangkok to oversee the formation of the Siamese party on 20 April.⁹³

A report sent to Moscow by the Siamese party in 1935, however, gives a somewhat different chronology.⁹⁴ This document says it was in June 1930 that the Eastern Secretariat sent a delegate to Siam, who urged the Siam Committee (composed exclusively of Chinese members) to join the Vietnamese in the northeast of the country to form one party. The British found a passport bearing Quoc's picture, issued in the name of Sung Man Sho, when they arrested him June 1931. It had been granted for six months on 28 April 1930, by the Consul General of the National Government of China in the Straits Settlements. It stated that he was a citizen of the Republic of China proceeding to Siam on business.⁹⁵ So it appears that at the end of May Quoc did travel to Bangkok, after attending the Third Delegate Conference of the Malayan Provisional Committee in Singapore. But it was not until September 1930, when Quoc had returned to Hong Kong, that the unification of the Siam party was completed, with two Vietnamese joining the Siam Central Committee. Thus Nguyen Ai Quoc may have visited Siam as early as April 1930, as Hoang Van Hoan claims, but if he did so his visit did not coincide with the founding of a unified Siam CP.

⁹¹ Charles McLane suggests this idea in *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia*, p. 133.

⁹² *Comintern and China*, Vol III, part 2, letter of 18 May 1930, pp. 884-885.

⁹³ Hoang van Hoan, op. cit., pp. 52-55.

⁹⁴ RC, 495, 16, 51, report on General Situation in Siam, pp. 66-68, original in Chinese.

⁹⁵ AOM, SPCE 365, folder '*Arrestation de Nguyen Ai Quoc*'.

The Third Delegate Conference of the Nanyang Provisional Committee was apparently due to be held to coincide with the 1 May observances in Singapore. However, as a letter addressed to the 'English Komparty' in London explains, at a 29 April meeting held to prepare for May Day, all eleven people in attendance were arrested, including the secretary of the party, the Labour Union secretary and a member of the Central Committee. This letter says that on 21 May the 'Conference was called', and that the Malay Communist Party was organised on 24 May.⁹⁶ The meeting was attended by eleven delegates, not including the CC members and the representative of the FEB. The ten-page conference report which Nguyen Ai Quoc seems to have authored⁹⁷ demonstrates that the FEB was now moving to curb the influence of Li Lisan and the Chinese CC in the Nanyang. This report accuses the Nanyang Committee of the error of putschism and an irresponsible attitude toward the staging of insurrections.

After listing the 'Ten Big Demands of the Malay (sic) Revolution', the report launched into a long list of 'Mistakes and Lessons from the Work done'. The first mistake was 'to conduct the Chinese revolution in Malaya': 'the work was conducted in accordance with the political line of the Chinese Party, apart from the practical life of Malaya, and overlooked the fundamental tasks of Malay revolution,' it said. The party had neglected work among peasants and soldiers as well. 'The development of organization was not only directed towards Chinese people but towards one part of Chinese people (natives of Kwangchow, Kwangtung) ...,' it went on. Under the heading, 'Mistake of putchism', the report gave a list of errors. These included 'commandism and compulsion of strike'; 'disregard to insurrection and individual terror (the Malay party in part compelled the striking workers to play the insurrection as a joke. This is an unforgivable mistake)'; 'firing of factories and confiscation of property of factory owners'; and 'to bring out the slogan: seizure of power and establishment of soviet'. The author expanded on the final point thus: 'As the Malay P. was still in beginning of organisation, lack of broad masses round the party, it is to neglect the forces of enemies and overestimate our own forces and to abandon the general task of the Party, that is, to win over the masses, to organise masses and finally to prepare the armed insurrection, if we set up the slogan: seizure of power and establishment of Soviet.'⁹⁸ A final point described the 'connection between the Malay p. and brotherhood [NAQ's translation of 'fraternal'] parties'. This drove home the fact that

⁹⁶ RC, 495, 62, 6, p. 1, report of 1 June 1930 to the 'English Komparty, London'.

⁹⁷ RC, 495, 62, 3, pp. 1-10. Quoc did not sign the reports which he sent to the FEB on the Malayan CP, but in one of them he inserts a 'note from V.' (Victor), which was how he signed his Hong Kong letters to the FEB. The typing and English of the letters on Malaya get a bit erratic when he is in a rush, creating the impression of rapid, almost slapdash, execution which is often present in his letters on Vietnam, especially in the spring of 1931.

the CCP did not have the exclusive right to direct the Malayan party: 'the Malay parties (sic), besides under the direction of the Comintern, hope the P. of China, of G. Britain, of Holland and of France give their experiences and instructions from time to time.'⁹⁹ The *Police Journal* for the Straits Settlements later reported that propaganda and instructions from the 'Central' in Shanghai ceased in the middle of 1930, following the third Delegate Conference.¹⁰⁰

6. *The Revolutionary Wave in Vietnam*

The FEB reported on 25 June that they had just learned that Nguyen Ai Quoc would be arriving in Shanghai in the coming days. (They were relieved to learn that he had not been caught in the Singapore arrests at the end of April, which they had learned of from the Singapore press.)¹⁰¹ He must have returned to Hong Kong by the middle of June. He had thus missed the first wave of VCP militancy in 1930: a series of strikes and demonstrations in all three parts of Vietnam which started in April and led to a large number arrests in early May. As we have seen in Cochinchina, these actions, at least in the urban areas, were organized largely by the ICP groups which had existed before the Unification Congress. Both Ngo Gia Tu and Duong Hac Dinh were picked up in Saigon at the end of May. Just before the May Day events Hoang Quoc Viet was arrested in Haiphong, where he had gone to consult with Tran Phu. Many cadres in the northern labour movement joined him in prison after May Day.¹⁰²

This blow to the urban movement refocussed the Vietnamese communists' attention on the rural areas. Ironically, just after Quoc delivered his list of criticisms of the Malayan party, a group referred to as the 'Provisional Central Executive Committee' (*Ban Chap Uy Lam Thoi Trung Uong*) in Hanoi decided to work towards an uprising in Nghe An and Ha Tinh, two provinces often referred to collectively as 'Nghe Tinh'. At a meeting in Hanoi (said by one author to have been held in June), Tran Phu, Nguyen The Ruc, Tran van Lan, Trinh Dinh Cuu and Nguyen Phong Sac (the latter three from the original ICP faction) arrived at this decision.¹⁰³ Nguyen Phong Sac, a former teacher at the Thanh Long school in Hanoi, was the cadre who had been assigned to lead the party in Central Vietnam. (His colleague

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ CAOM, GGI, 65560, *Police Journal*, Straits Settlements, 15 May 1931.

¹⁰¹ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, Eisler letter to ECCI, 23-5 June 1930, p. 916.

¹⁰² Hoang Quoc Viet, *A Heroic People*, (Hanoi: FLPH, 1965), pp. 158-9, cited by R. Smith, op.cit., p. 805.

from the old Tan Viet party, Le Mao, remained in Nghe An during this meeting.) The participants delegated Nguyen Duc Canh, formerly based in Haiphong, to work with Nguyen Phong Sac in developing the Nghe Tinh movement. Thus the two major party figures guiding the Nghe Tinh Soviets were well-educated northerners who had been among the leaders of the ICP faction. In the 1950s and 60s the Vietnamese would glorify the role of Le Viet Thuat, a Ben Thuy worker who became head of the Regional Committee in Annam in April 1931.¹⁰⁴ However, the Hanoi historian Tran Huy Lieu would credit Nguyen Duc Canh with the direct leadership of the Nghe Tinh Soviets.¹⁰⁵ Tran Phu, imbued with the Comintern's radical view of the 'Third Period', may have been persuaded by his comrades with more recent experience of political work in-country that the time was ripe for action. The meeting issued an appeal to the workers, peasants and soldiers of Nghe An to continue their resistance struggle and prepare for the imperialist's repression – the least hesitation would be the equivalent of helping the imperialists to destroy them, it said.¹⁰⁶

Nguyen Ai Quoc, who now appeared to have reached the peak of his authority in the Comintern, seems to have returned to Hong Kong to deal with a situation beyond his influence. Although Huynh Kim Khanh speculates that Quoc may have played a 'considerable role in the conceptualization and direction of the soviet movement', his basis for this view is the doubtful attribution to Quoc of the article on peasant insurrection which I discuss in the Introduction.¹⁰⁷ Quoc's letters and reports of 1930-1 do include a prescription for work within the military. But the content and style of the 1928 article on military work among the peasants is very different from this 1930 document by Quoc. The latter is a six page, hand-written essay which seems to post-date Quoc's June return to Hong Kong and Shanghai, as it refers to a demonstration in Cholon province which probably occurred in or after the spring of 1930.¹⁰⁸ Headed simply, 'Military' this document (an English copy) is an attempt to strike a balance between the over-emphasis of

¹⁰³ Song Tung, *Tran Phu*, (Hanoi: NXB Thanh Nien, 1980), p. 142. It is not clear from this source whether this was a Bac ky or a national committee; the author says that Tran Phu had been co-opted as a member.

¹⁰⁴ *Guong Chien Dau cua Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, [Exemplary Communist Fighters], (Hanoi: NXB Su That, 1959); and Nguyen Duy Trinh, 'A Highlight of the Movement', in *In the Enemy's Net*, (Hanoi: FLPH, 1962), p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Tran Huy Lieu, *Cach Mang Can Dai Viet Nam, tap VI*, (Hanoi: Ban Nghien Cuu Van Su Dia, 1957, pp. 87-8)

¹⁰⁶ *Van Kien Dang*, 1930-1945, vol. I, pp. 50-52., Appeal dated June 1930.

¹⁰⁷ Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit., pp. 168-9.

¹⁰⁸ See Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit., p. 61 on spring demos. in the South; also *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 30 May, 4 and 6 June 1930.

military matters and the neglect of preparation for a coming armed struggle.¹⁰⁹ He states clearly: 'The military task of the party comprises: military training of the party members; agit-prop among the army; organisation of worker's and peasant's guards.' He devotes most of his attention to 'agit-prop in the army'. The native soldiers are conscripted from the villages and should not be treated as, 'whole hunting dogs' of the imperialist, he says. At a demonstration in Cholon, he points out, the peasants made the mistake of insulting the soldiers instead of 'making propaganda to them'. In agit-prop work, he says, 'the party must propagate the programme "Bourgeois democratic revolution" among the soldiers, and utilize national sentiment to make them agree with the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants and accept the leadership of the party.'

By June the beleaguered Eisler in Shanghai was failing in his attempts to moderate Li Lisan's policies, in spite of the fact that the May Day demonstrations in China had also resulted in large numbers of arrests.¹¹⁰ Nguyen Ai Quoc may have found himself in a similar position in relation to his own party, where he apparently did not have a vote in the Provisional Central Committee. As a good Bolshevik, however, he had to accept his party's decision to enlarge the Nghe An workers and peasants movement. A 9 June letter to the Vietnamese fighting in the Chinese Red Army, to ask that they return to the 'Annam front', may have been written by him. 'The work of the Vietnamese revolution is now our work,' it says; 'work in China is not our task.'¹¹¹ However, at the same time Li Lisan was pressing the Comintern to send foreign comrades from, 'England, France, Japan, India, and Indochina' to carry out propaganda work in China among the foreign sailors posted there. He insisted that they work under the direction of the CCP.¹¹² Thus by June several Vietnamese had been seconded to work on military propaganda in Shanghai. The ICP organizer from Tonkin, Do Ngoc Du alias Phiem Chu, says that Quoc assigned him to go to Shanghai in late March, after he had fled from Hanoi. He began editing articles aimed at the French military after 14 June 1930, he later told the *Sûreté*. Another Vietnamese, Luu Quoc Long, was responsible for the printing and distribution of tracts and articles. The French language newspaper *L'Armée* began to appear twice monthly.¹¹³ A Vietnamese language paper, *Giac Ngo (Awakening)* was the responsibility of Le Quang Dat (aka Hoang Cao), his wife Ly Phuong Duc, and Nguyen Luong Bang. Le Quang Dat was in charge of

¹⁰⁹ RC, 495, 154, 462, pp. 485-487b; undated, unsigned document, accompanied in the Comintern file by a note which reads, 'documents written by NAQ... Now our party has replaced them with others.'

¹¹⁰ *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II: on May arrests -- letter of 18 May 1930, p. 881; on Li Lisan's independent actions -- letter of 20 June 1930, p. 903.

¹¹¹ RC, 495, 154, 623, p. 5, letter in Vietnamese, signed 'q'.

¹¹² *Comintern and China*, vol. III, part II, letter to Zhou Enlai and Qu Qiubao from Li Lisan, 17 April 1930.

¹¹³ AOM, SPCE 367, Déclarations de Do Ngoc Du, 8 October 1931 and following days.

liaison between the FEB and Hong Kong, as well as for making travel arrangements for Vietnamese travelling to and from Moscow.¹¹⁴

French reports describe the interval between 1 June and 30 August 1930 as a period of peaceful demonstrations in Vietnam.¹¹⁵ In fact two processes appear to have been underway by June 1930: one was the formation of party structures which would lead to the selection of delegates for the plenum due to be held in the autumn; the other was, as noted above, the preparation for a second wave of direct action centered in northern Annam. It is difficult to say how closely coordinated the two processes actually were. Regarding party organization, Ngo Duc Tri's confession gives a picture (lacking for the two other regions of Vietnam) of the restructuring which went on in the south following Ngo Gia Tu's arrest. According to Tri's account, Ngo Gia Tu's leadership had not been entirely popular with local party members. 'Since the creation of the ICP and the Provisional Executive Committee all tasks had been decided by the members of this committee, without consulting the members of the cell committees,' he explained. He added, 'No reports of work carried out were made to the cells, which caused some discontent.' Demonstrations in May and early June in Sa Dec, Vinh Long, Cholon province and Duc Hoa in Gia Dinh had resulted in many arrests and the death of Chau Van Liem – this may have also prompted the southern party to reassess its tactics.¹¹⁶ Around 18 June 1930 a meeting of the Nam ky Provisional Executive Committee was held, which delegates from other localities were invited to attend in order to present their opinions. Ngo Duc Tri had joined Ung Van Khiem (Huan) and Nguyen Van Son (Dung) on the Committee just before the meeting.¹¹⁷ Afterwards he also joined the Provisional Central Committee. Over the summer, Tri says, 'some comrades wanted to start insurrections and commit acts of terrorism.' The Provisional Executive Committee had to summon the members of the provincial committees to explain to them that they had to abandon these plans. The Committee instructed the members of the province committees to explain to the masses that assassination is contrary to the fundamental principles of communism.'¹¹⁸ Ngo Duc Tri may have been trying to absolve himself of responsibility for the violence of 1930-31 in this confession, yet a 1931 report which he would send to Moscow confirms that he held a low estimation of the results of the party's activism. (see note 149)

¹¹⁴ AOM, SPCE 367, Déclaration de Le Quang Dat, July 1930.

¹¹⁵ Commission Morche, *Rapport de la Commission d'Enquête sur les Evènements du Nord-Annam*, Part II, p.6; consulted in SOAS library in a version which provides no publishing data.

¹¹⁶ *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 30 May, 4 and 6 June 1930.

¹¹⁷ In his *Sûreté* declaration (SPCE 371, 18 June 1932) Nguyen Van Loi claims that he was a member of this committee for a time. It is not clear whether he was, in fact, Nguyen Van Son.

In North and Central Vietnam, the party seems to have taken a different course. In principle Tran Phu gained more control over the party infrastructure when he joined the Provisional Central Committee in the summer, after the arrest of Nguyen Hoi. When Trinh Dinh Cuu dropped out of the Standing Committee to join the Bac ky Regional Committee, his place also went to Tran Phu.¹¹⁹ But in practice, the northern party operated fairly independently, according to later Comintern reports. For example, in an undated letter written after 4 April 1931, the FEB instructed that 'the question of separatist tendencies in the North and Central organizations must be cleared up...'.¹²⁰ (These tendencies seem to have surfaced the previous autumn, as I will discuss below.) After the transformation of the Nanyang Provisional Committee into a group of national communist parties, the CCP CC presumably no longer had a formal directing role in Southeast Asia. There is at present no way of knowing whether or to what degree Li Lisan's timetable for China's 'revolutionary upsurge' influenced events in Vietnam. But there does appear to be a rough correlation between the periods of planning and action in the two countries.

In China Li's planning for the armed uprisings of August and September 1930 took place at a series of meetings held between early June and 6 August. On 11 June the CCP Politburo adopted a resolution which called on the Soviet Union and 'the labouring masses of the world' to support the Chinese revolution. It made explicit the idea that the Chinese revolution had become the focal point of the world revolution.¹²¹ The communists' Third Army staged a briefly successful attack on Changsha on 28 July. On 6 August Li Lisan's 'Central Action Committee' called for immediate revolution and uprisings in Wuhan, Beijing, Tianjin, Harbin and other cities. (In response, the FEB sent the ECCI a telegram dated 4-7 August which requested that Li Lisan be 'immediately recalled' to Moscow.)¹²² A second attack on Changsha was staged between 24 August and 12 September. During this period Moscow maintained a noncommittal attitude towards Li's endeavours, leaving the FEB to continue their efforts to curb Li's adventurism. One of the new FEB representatives, the Profintern representative S. Stolyar, known by the pseudonyms 'Jack' or 'Leon', wrote to the Profintern chief Lozovsky on 5 August to support Eisler. He complained that Li Lisan was mobilizing all responsible comrades against the Comintern.¹²³ Interestingly, the revolutionary high-tide which Li Lisan was proclaiming

¹¹⁸ AOM, SPCE, *Déclarations de Ngo Duc Tri*.

¹¹⁹ Nguyen Ba Linh, op. cit., p. 2. Linh says that Tran Phu joined the CC in August.

¹²⁰ RC, 495, 154, 569, p. 52.

¹²¹ Benjamin Yang, 'Complexity and Reasonability: Reassessment of the Li Lisan Adventure', *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 21, Jan. 1989, pp. 121-2.

¹²² *Comintern and China*, Vol. III, part II, p. 962; telegram from FEB to ECCI, Shanghai 4-7 Aug 1930.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Stolyar letter to Lozovsky, 5 August 1930, p. 963.

coincided with a full-scale civil war within the Chinese GMD which lasted from 5 April until early November.¹²⁴ Chen Kungpo and the 'Reorganizers' played a key role in this conflict from their new base in Beijing. It seems likely that Li Lisan was counting on their eventual success.

In Vietnam, following the June meeting of the Bac-ky Provisional Central Executive Committee in Hanoi, the provincial party committees for Nghe An and Ha Tinh were reorganized in July. In Nghe An party organizations were created down to the village (xa) level.¹²⁵ The second wave of activism in Nghe Tinh, which led to the disintegration of local administration and the establishment of soviets, began on the 29 of August and reached its apogee on 11-12 September. (On 12 September the peasants of Gia Dinh, Cholon and Tan An provinces also demonstrated.)¹²⁶ District offices were burned down in a number of areas and local mandarins handed over their seals to the village insurgents; village officials either joined the movement or were killed.¹²⁷ French bombing of demonstrators converging on Vinh on 12 September caused over 120 deaths. As Tran Huy Lieu explains, by the 12 September, local demonstrations were being coordinated to involve several districts. These events are recounted chronologically in the French reports, as well as by Tran Huy Lieu.¹²⁸ It seems significant that the 12 September, later celebrated in Vietnam as the founding date of the Nghe Tinh Soviets, was also observed by the CCP in the 1930s as the anniversary of the 1927 August Harvest Uprising.¹²⁹

There is little question that the local peasants, burdened with a variety of taxes, were strongly motivated to demonstrate against the French and the local mandarins. But the idea that their actions were spontaneous or inspired by a few local hotheads is very hard to accept, in view of the planning carried out by the VCP, as well as the incendiary instructions the communists had received from Moscow. James Scott contends that 'while the party may have lent a certain coherence to the initial protests, it hardly needed to instruct peasants about the objects of their anger.'¹³⁰ Yet the very tactics which he refers to as arising from the 'concrete grievances of the rural cultivators' -- the demands for an end to taxes (or the delay of tax payments) and 'the seizure of rice from the landlords'

¹²⁴ On the summer military events, see Benjamin Yang, op. cit., pp. 120-6.

¹²⁵ S.A. Mkhitarian, *Podyem Revoliutsionnovo Dvizheniia v Indokitae, The Revolutionary Upsurge in Indochina*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 63-4.

¹²⁶ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 115, NAQ letter of 29 Sept. 1930 to FEB.

¹²⁷ Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit., pg. 69.

¹²⁸ *Rapport de la Commission d'Enquête sur les Evénements du Nord-Annam*, part II, pp. 1-12; Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit., pp. 62-72.

¹²⁹ Nym Wales, *Inside Red China*, (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1939), p. 345.

¹³⁰ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1977), p. 126.

granaries' – were ones which had been taught to peasant organizers since the early 20s at Peng Pai's Peasant Institute. The September actions in Nghe Tinh, which often involved the burning of district offices and destruction of tax and land documents, employed methods which had been used in Hai-Lu-feng during the soviet movement.¹³¹ One might conclude that, rather than following the peasantry, the communists had developed organizing methods which were well suited to the local conditions, at least in the short term. One can also conclude that Li Lisan's actions in China must have had some degree of influence on the events in Nghe Tinh. The Nghe Tinh uprising might well have occurred in some form without the Comintern's involvement, or without the CCP leadership's desire to hasten the advent of the Chinese and world revolutions. However, it would not have taken place in the form that it did had communist organizers not been in command. It would probably not have occurred at the exact moment that it did, had they not set some form of schedule for action.

7. The October Plenum and Tran Phu's Consolidation of Power

The newly-formed Vietnamese party was unable to unify its country-wide leadership until the first Central Committee plenum was held in Hong Kong in October 1930. In the interval between his June trip to Shanghai and the October plenum, Nguyen Ai Quoc seems to have settled into his work as a transmission post for the Malay, Siamese and Vietnamese parties. Between 23 July and 2 September, he claimed to have sent the FEB six letters. Of these, only the 2 September letter is in the Comintern's archives. In this letter he explained that on 13 August he succumbed to a TB attack, a condition which he described as, 'lung suffering and blood spitting, awfully weak and tired'.¹³² He also listed the agenda items which would be raised at the coming CC meeting: 'a) autocritique of the past; b) plan to keep the work going until the congress; c) plan for the congress; and d) plan for the sending of students.' He apparently did not foresee that the October plenum would involve a major redirection of the party. In the same letter he mentioned that he had just completed what he called 'a prop-vulgarisation work' entitled *Notebook of a Shipwreck*. It had taken 8 days to write and almost one month to print 20 copies, he said.¹³³ This is a fable about three sailors, one French, one African and one Vietnamese, who are shipwrecked and rescued by a Soviet vessel. They are taken to Moscow and given medical care, training in a communist institute, and shown respect which they had been denied as French labourers. The Vietnamese sailor is struck by the 'unusually powerful attraction' of

¹³¹ Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit., pp. 63-7 enumerates the September events.

¹³² RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 101, letter of 2 Sept. 1930, unsigned

¹³³ Ibid., p. 101.

Leninist theory on colonialism 'for people who have been deprived of their motherland'.¹³⁴ It was probably more than author's pride which led Quoc to spend a month preparing this pamphlet. He may well have been demonstrating his loyalty to Moscow, at a time when the CCP had adopted what the Russians considered an anti-Comintern line.

Quoc still maintained what appear to have been good relations with the CCP, however. He reported to the FEB on 22 September that he had requested advice from the Chinese Southern Committee on the tactics which the Vietnamese party should employ to deal with the 'White terror', the repressive measures which the French were using against the peasants in Nghe An. On 19 September three members of the VCP CC had arrived in Hong Kong for the Central Committee plenum, he explained, and had made a report on events in Vietnam. As it would have taken too long to consult the FEB (a 'fast' letter between Shanghai and Hong Kong was taking 15 days to arrive at this point)¹³⁵, the CC members and Quoc held a discussion with the Chinese to work out the VCP's next move. Quoc's bland description of this discussion mentions that the Chinese agreed with the VCP's decision to collect money for the victims and hold a national protest movement. The group also decided to begin organizing a 'peasant guard', to reinforce party work among workers and propaganda among soldiers.¹³⁶

Ngo Duc Tri gives a more detailed account of this encounter with two Chinese from the Southern Bureau, which he says included Quoc, Ho Tung Mau, Truong Van Lenh, his fellow CC member 'Sau' (Nguyen Trong Nha, also known as Nguyen Trong Nhat, a former student from Ha Tinh¹³⁷), and himself. (The other members of the Vietnamese CC had not yet arrived for the plenum.) The Chinese felt that the demonstrations which marked the beginning of the 'insurrectionary movement' were a good thing. But Ho Tung Mau responded that insurrection was bringing 'more defeats than victories', although there was no harm in continuing the demonstrations. Quoc believed that it would be impossible to stage a full insurrection, but that in the villages the peasants could elect soviets and carry out land redistribution. Ngo Duc Tri claims to have taken the firmest stand against the trend towards insurrection in Nghe Tinh. 'The revolutionary movement is just taking shape... it is a mistake to advocate insurrection; it will have no value for the revolutionary movement, just bombing and defeats. The Chinese party is calling for insurrection, but ... what is possible in China is not always possible in Indochina. The creation of soviets and the

¹³⁴ Excerpts from A.A. Sokolov, *Comintern and Vietnam.*, pp. 176-78.

¹³⁵ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 105, letter of 12 Sept. 1930.

¹³⁶ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 110, letter of 22 Sept. 1930.

¹³⁷ See AOM, SPCE 371, *Déclaration de Nguyen van Loi*, Jan. 1932, p. 4 on Nguyen Trong Nha. Confusingly, Hoang Quoc Viet was also known as 'Sau'.

distribution of land without the support of an insurrection is impossible to carry out,' Tri claims to have said. Of the Vietnamese, only 'Sau' was in full agreement with the Chinese.¹³⁸

The Chinese CC delegate from Saigon, A Lau, did not participate in this discussion. But he may have contributed to the report on the Cochinchina-Cambodia section of the party which Quoc sent to the FEB on 22 September. By this stage, the Chinese party in the south appears to have formally merged with the Vietnamese. (However, in 1931 a report from Saigon would again refer to the Cochinchina-Cambodia section as an entity separate from the ICP.)¹³⁹ In Cambodia, the party now listed 120 Chinese and 4 Vietnamese members, with 300 Chinese in a labour union. In Cochinchina the party had shown strong growth, with 70 Chinese members and 400 Vietnamese, an increase of 350 Vietnamese since February 1930. There were 500 members of labour unions (not broken down by ethnicity) and 13,500 members of peasant unions.¹⁴⁰

Two of the remaining CC members, Tran Phu and Le Mao, reached Hong Kong on 2 October, just as the southern members were about to give up waiting and return home. (A third, the former ICP activist Tran Van Lan, missed the rendez-vous and spent most of October waiting in a hotel. One wonders if he had been given a wrong address.) Nguyen Phong Sac, the other missing member, was too occupied with the Nghe Tinh movement to attend. Ngo Duc Tri came down with appendicitis immediately before the meeting, and thus spent the next two weeks in hospital. Although at least one Vietnamese scholar has attempted to show that Nguyen Ai Quoc was also absent from the October plenum, the Comintern evidence shows that this was not the case.¹⁴¹ On 28 October Quoc wrote one of his least informative reports ever on the proceedings. In addition to listing the numbers of party members in various organizations (now 1,740 members, of whom 190 were Chinese), he enumerated the items and resolutions discussed, noting that these had not yet been translated. His expense report showed that the total cost of travel, food and lodging during the plenum amounted to 440 Hong Kong dollars. At the close he asked, 'Please, call for us immediately, because we must return immediately after having seen you.'¹⁴² This would seem to show that he indeed accompanied Tran Phu to Shanghai, to report to the FEB, following the plenum.

¹³⁸ AOM, SPCE 367, *Déclaration de Ngo Duc Tri*.

¹³⁹ See unsigned report from Saigon in RC, 495, 154, 462b/part 3, p. 236.

¹⁴⁰ RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 110.

¹⁴¹ Nguyen Ba Linh, op. cit., p. 3. Linh cites a letter of 25 Feb. 1931 from the *Sûreté* archives, which he says is Quoc's criticism of the October plenum. However, this letter is not included in Ho's *Collected Works* or in any other collection of party documents which I have seen.

For anyone attempting to prove that Quoc was the constant guiding light of the Vietnamese party, his absence from Hong Kong would have been convenient at this point. For it was at the October plenum that he lost his authority as the interpreter of Comintern policy for Vietnam. His February 1930 programme for the VCP was replaced with new Political Theses and resolutions in tune with the current Comintern line. As we have seen, this required that the party develop as a class-based organization. The party's two-fold mission of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolution now concentrated on the emancipation of the working class, both urban and rural. By 1931 this ideology would result in the purging of many middle class patriots from the party and their alienation from the revolutionary movement. At the same time, the plenum appears to have criticized the September uprising in Nghe An. A circular which is identified by *Van Kien Dang* as dating from October criticizes the 'Annam Committee'. It states: At the present moment, given the situation in the country, the level of preparation of the proletariat and the exploited masses in the towns and countryside, the level of party preparation and the strength of the enemy, isolated uprisings in a few places are putchism and are incorrect.'¹⁴³ At the end of the plenum, the participants decided to establish the Central Committee in Saigon. Tran Phu was named secretary of the CC, with Ngo Duc Tri and Nguyen Trong Nha as the other two members of the Standing Committee (Bureau Permanent). Nguyen Phong Sac and Tran Van Lan retained their CC membership. The Chinese member, A Lau, decided to remain in Hong Kong to work with the Chinese party, as he was a Whampoa graduate.¹⁴⁴

Following the plenum, according to Ngo Duc Tri, Quoc and Tran Phu went to Shanghai together to report to the FEB. When Tran Phu returned to Hong Kong around 20 November, he brought a brief letter from Quoc, Ngo Duc Tri explained. The letter admitted that the party's unification had been carried out hastily, and that there had been many gaps in direction, due to the lack of information from inside the country. Quoc also gave his agreement to the party's change of name to Indochinese Communist Party.¹⁴⁵ A December 9 circular to party organizations made public Quoc's admission of his errors. It noted that none of the regions of Vietnam had implemented the Comintern's instructions, which had been sent out to them in February and March 1930; in fact, these directives had been 'coldly received'. Party members had not realized that the 'comrade who called the Unification Conference had been sent home to work by the Comintern without any particular instructions... he acted on his own initiative and made a series of mistakes...

¹⁴² RC, 495, 154, 615, p. 109, 28 Oct. 1930, 'Report'.

¹⁴³ RC, 495, 154, 616, p. 102, Russian version undated, received 23 March 1931 in Moscow.

¹⁴⁴ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri.

This comrade has already recognized his mistakes and has agreed to correct them.¹⁴⁶ This circular also pointed out the need to view all landlords 'as a class'. In opposition to the February programme of the Unification Conference, the circular stated that all landlords were enemies of the peasantry and that their interests were 'closely linked to the interests of imperialism'.¹⁴⁷

By late January of 1931, although new waves of demonstrations were taking place in Ha Tinh and Quang Ngai provinces, Ngo Duc Tri wrote to Moscow that 'the bloody terror is affecting the spirit of the masses and making our work more difficult'. Out of 90 party members in Haiphong as of October 1930, he noted, 17 had been arrested, 10 had had to flee, and 45 had left the party out of fear of repression. As of December 1930 the number of members there had risen slightly to 93 with the addition of new recruits, but the number of union members had dropped from 99 in October to 67 in December.¹⁴⁸ In the coal mining regions of Hongay, Campha and Hatu, where there are thousands of miners, he wrote, 'we have only 29 comrades'.¹⁴⁹ The party had not been able to penetrate the plantations since the Phu Rieng uprising, and in the countryside where the repression was especially harsh, the peasant unions 'had been annihilated'.¹⁵⁰ As a post script he added that the CC had started to establish communications with Shanghai, but that at the moment, the system was functioning badly. (It is probable that the discovery of the Chinese CP's Southern Bureau by the British police in Hong Kong in December 1930 disrupted communications, already slow, between Hong Kong and Shanghai. As the British would report in 1932, the bureau 'lived on in a moribund state, as a transmission and translation agency of the FEB, in the person of Nguen (sic) Ai Quac, the Annamite Communist.')

This depressing situation seems to have affected the CC's relations with Quoc. On 12 February he forwarded a letter to the FEB from the Vietnamese CC (in his own English translation), which began: 'What is the opinion of the CI concerning our draft resolutions? Has it any letter for us? If not, then what is the use to have an office at HK. At least the CI should have a letter for us... If you cannot help us connecting with the CI and the E.

¹⁴⁵ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri.

¹⁴⁶ RC, 495, 154, 616, p. 123. Letter of the ICP CC to the Party Organizations, 9 Dec. 1930. The most recent edition of *Van Kien Dang* (1998, vol II) includes this paragraph, which was omitted in the 1977 version.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-1.

¹⁴⁸ RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 2, 'Aux camarades du Secrétariat d'Orient de l'I.C., signed 'Pierre' (Leman), undated.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 3.

¹⁵¹ National Archives, Washington D.C., SMP Files, D2527/45 – Noulens Case Analysis, pp. 34-5.

Section, then what is the use of you being there?'¹⁵² The instructions and support which the renamed ICP desired always took a long time to arrive in Vietnam; it was not necessarily Quoc's fault, as the FEB was slow in responding to their requests. In a February note to the FEB, Quoc had emphasized the delicate position in which the CC leadership found itself and the importance of building up their authority. The reason the 'new directors of the Indochina firm' are so anxious to receive your promised letters, he said, is that 'they are newly arrived in the country and they do not yet have the necessary influence over their subordinates, who have been in the firm longer.'¹⁵³ But the FEB was far better at issuing general instructions and criticizing the reports they received than solving concrete problems. (In the winter of 1931 they may also have been fully absorbed by the task of ridding the CCP of Li Lisan's influence.) They had written to Quoc on 12 January to promise that 'a more thorough and detailed document' with instructions would be ready shortly, but this did not materialize until the end of March.¹⁵⁴ The FEB's 12 January letter also criticized his reporting, ignoring the fact that he probably had had to change his address and communications methods since the discovery of the CCP's Southern Bureau. 'Your connections with the places seems to us still insufficient and unsatisfactory. .. Also the information about the White Terror is too "dry" (only that so-and-so many are arrested); it is important to know on what work they were arrested, why they were arrested, etc.'¹⁵⁵ In the same letter, the FEB made demands for more demonstrations: 25 February was to be 'Unemployment Day', marked by 'the widest possible mobilisation of the masses in the shops and factories...'

Quoc seems to have told the FEB of his coming marriage plans sometime in the winter. The FEB informed him in their letter of 12 January that he should let them know the date of his marriage two months before it took place. As this letter uses none of the code of a business firm, we can assume that they were literally referring to Quoc's taking a wife. In February he mentioned that his wife was busy with preparations for the New Year and the planned reception of visitors from Saigon and Tonkin, so it seems that he ignored the FEB's instructions or that they arrived too late.¹⁵⁶ From other Comintern documents from 1934 and 1935, we learn that this wife was apparently Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, the former Tan Viet activist from Vinh who was assigned to work in Hong Kong after the party

¹⁵² RC, 495, 32, 95, letter no. 13 (no p. number).

¹⁵³ AOM, SPCE 367, letter of Victor 16 Feb. 1931; for correspondence which was less than secure the Comintern often used the cover of business-style terminology.

¹⁵⁴ RC, 495, 32, 95, pp. 24-26, 'Brief von FEB an IPC' in French, 29 March 1931. This letter is intended as a political document for a coming Congress, which was never held.

¹⁵⁵ RC, 495, 154, 569 (no p. no.), to 'Dear Friend', 12 Jan. 1931.

¹⁵⁶ AOM, SPCE 367, letter from Victor, 12 Feb. 1931.

unification.¹⁵⁷ She was later assigned to liaison work with the Chinese party. Whether she and Quoc remained man and wife after their arrests in April and June 1931 is not known.

8. The March Plenum and the End of the 'High Tide'

By 12 March 1931, when the Second plenum started in Saigon, the CC's relations with Nguyen Ai Quoc had deteriorated to the point that he would soon ask to be relieved of his assignment in Hong Kong. One of the items on the March plenum's agenda was the 'question of Nguyen Ai Quoc'. According to Ngo Duc Tri, the leaders in Annam and Tonkin complained that Quoc frequently demanded reports from them for the FEB in Shanghai, reports which were the responsibility of the CC's 'Standing Committee' to prepare. The meeting decided to write to Quoc to ask that he stop requesting these reports; when necessary, the CC would send reports to the FEB via Hong Kong, but Quoc would simply be asked to pass them on.¹⁵⁸ Later in April, Tran Phu would write to the FEB to announce that they should no longer use Quoc as a go-between, as 'he is too brief and sometimes he gives us his own opinions without consulting you.'¹⁵⁹

Quoc responded to these criticisms in a letter of 23 April to the CC, saying that he saw little point in simply serving as a post box. 'I know that circumstances are difficult and the CC has a lot of work. But "one" needs to understand our situation clearly, and that is why we have had to request reports from the local committees,' he explained.¹⁶⁰ At the end of March the FEB tried to persuade him to stay in Hong Kong, on the grounds that it would be no easier for him to maintain communications from Shanghai. They assured him that, 'You personally are indispensable and above all for the need we spoke of last November. Here is how we have defined your tasks: 1) to maintain the closest links possible with the party organizations in your country; 2) to inform us of everything that is going on where you are; 3) to prepare and educate the party for the future struggle.'¹⁶¹

The Comintern inspector Joseph Ducroux met Quoc in March and April, on his way into and out of Vietnam, where he held several meetings with Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri. He revealed very little about the tension between Quoc and the CC in a letter written just after meeting Quoc in April. But he remarked that Quoc felt isolated and suggested that the FEB

¹⁵⁷ See Chapter VI, notes 54 and 55.

¹⁵⁸ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri.

¹⁵⁹ RC, 495, 32, 95, p.10., 'Lettre du C.C. d'Indochine', unsigned, 17 April 1931; as this was written when Tran Phu was the only CC secretary still at large, I assume it was written by him.

¹⁶⁰ AOM, SPCE 365, 23 April 1931 letter to the CC.

¹⁶¹ RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 24, letter of 29 March 1931, addressed to 'Cher Camarade', signed 'vos amis'.

reinforce its guidance and the 'concrete assistance' which it gave to Quoc and his 'friends in-country'.¹⁶² Ducroux also reported that the ICP's 'central leadership has finally been recognized by everyone and has authority, in spite of some minor federalist tendencies...'. These tendencies, though, were so strong in the North that the CC decided at their plenum to replace the northern leadership. Both Ngo Duc Tri's confession and the Comintern correspondence from Ducroux and Tran Phu relate that a member of the Northern Regional Committee assigned to translate the Comintern's letter, '*Immediate Tasks of the Indochinese Communists*,' had included a preface which stated that the Third International did not understand the situation in Indochina. This dissident, identified as 'Ky', maintained his influence on the northern leadership, even after being removed from his position, and had attempted to form a rival fraction.¹⁶³ A letter from the FEB written following the March plenum reiterated that the ICP must fight against those 'elements in the north provinces' which think that the Comintern does not understand the concrete situation in Indochina. 'These arguments have been used in the past year by Li Lisan, who did not carry out the directives of the CI, which resulted in very serious damage for the company here.'¹⁶⁴

Where Nguyen Ai Quoc stood in relationship to this conflict over the Comintern line is a complex question. We can assume from his good relations with the FEB, his 1930 report from Malaya, as well as from his April 1931 correspondence, that he had no desire to become involved in disagreements with Moscow. But his position may have been weakened by Mif's assertion of control over the FEB in the autumn of 1930. From Tran Phu's point of view, Quoc's failure to impose a clear class line within the party was one of the chief causes of its disunity. In his letter of 17 April 1931, he held Quoc in large part responsible for the legacy of the 'old revolutionary organisations' within the Vietnamese party. He claimed that, '...the months which have passed have shown that all the elements of the ideology of the old groups have coalesced into resistance to the new line of practical and ideological unification of the party. The February 1930 unification conference had been imbued with the ideology of the old revolutionary organisations, he said. This ideology included the acceptance of small and medium landlords, as well as the nationalist bourgeoisie, as participants in the revolution. 'The work of this "unification conference"

¹⁶² RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 22, unsigned letter, 15 April 1931.

¹⁶³ AOM, SPCE 367, Ngo Duc Tri; RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 23, Ducroux letter of 15 April 1931; RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 9, Tran Phu letter of 17 April, 1931.

¹⁶⁴ RC, 495, 154, 569, p. 52, undated, unsigned letter identified as written after 4 April, in non-native English, so probably by Rylski/Osten, who returned to Shanghai around October 1930, perhaps at the same time as Pavel Mif's arrival.

carried the clear imprint of the period of collaboration between the GMD and the CCP, in particular the rightist policy of the CCP between 1925 and 1927,' he explained.¹⁶⁵

Tran Phu's advocacy of the class policies associated with Stalin's ascendancy may have had an unintended consequence. His efforts to impose a 'class line' at the March 1931 Plenum may have led to a new phase of extremism in Central Vietnam in the spring of 1931. The decisions taken by the two-week long March Plenum are often characterized as strongly critical of 'leftist tendencies' within the party in Central Vietnamese, for example by Ngo Vinh Long.¹⁶⁶ It might be more accurate, however, to describe them as the replacement of one set of extremist prescriptions by another. While the plenum did condemn individual terror and the premature use of violence, it called for a strengthening of the class character of the ICP. 'One of the greatest dangers is that party members still do not have a clear understanding of the position of the proletariat in the revolution and the duties of the party,' the resolutions read.¹⁶⁷ The first organizational tasks which had to be undertaken were: the solution of the crisis in party leadership in Bac Ky and the strengthening of the CC in the Center and South. It was necessary to gradually replace the representatives of the intelligentsia and conservative elements in the leading organs with workers or poor peasants.¹⁶⁸ The party was instructed to investigate the peasant unions and remove from them any elements who were not connected to the peasantry; to bring into the administration representatives of the poorest peasants and rural labourers. The class struggle in the countryside was to be broadened and any nationalist influence was to be uprooted.¹⁶⁹ Women's organizing was no longer to be aimed at 'women in general', but was to be carried out only among labouring women. The Women's Liberation Association was to be immediately disbanded.¹⁷⁰

One result of these class-based resolutions seems to have been a purge of the Trung-ky party organization in April. Again, there is confusion about the nature of this purge. Nguyen Duy Trinh portrays it as a removal of comrades 'who had committed grave mistakes of leftist tendencies'.¹⁷¹ Tran Huy Lieu, however, describes a circular dated 29 April 1931 from the Trung-ky committee as calling for opposition (*bai xich*) to the

¹⁶⁵ RC, 495, 32, 95, pp. 7-9.

¹⁶⁶ Ngo Vinh Long, 'The Indochinese Communist Party and Peasant Rebellion in Central Vietnam, 1930-1931', *Journal of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars*, December, 1978, p. 28.

¹⁶⁷ *Van Kien Dang*, pp. 234-5, 'An Nghi Quyet cua Trung Uong Toan The Hoi Nghi Lan Thu Hai, 3-1931', ['Resolutions of the Second CC Plenum, 3-1931'].

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 242-3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹⁷¹ Nguyen Duy Trinh, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

intellectuals, rich peasants, landlords and notables.¹⁷² This terminology recalls the well-known slogan of the most radical period of the Nghe Tinh movement: '*tri, phu, dia, hao, dao tan goc, troc tan re*' (intellectuals, rich peasants, landlords, notables -- dig them up, pull them out by the very roots!) As Tran Huy Lieu writes, this sort of divisive slogan enabled the French to win over a significant portion of the population, at a time when the French repression was at its height. When the 29 April Circular was issued, Le Viet Thuat had been entrusted with the leadership of the Trung Ky Party, according to Nguyen Duy Trinh. Nguyen Duc Canh and Le Mao had both been arrested on 9 April. (Le Viet Thuat probably suffered the same fate on 1 May, while Nguyen Phong Sac was captured by the French on 3 May 1931.)¹⁷³ This move against the bourgeoisie may have been intended as a non-violent purge. But it seems to have been transformed into a search for scapegoats, as the French brought more troops into Vinh and famine spread. French court records show that in Ha Tinh, beginning in November 1930 and throughout the first half of 1931, suspected informers and villagers accused of holding back the soviet movement were assassinated by a variety of means.¹⁷⁴ One party dissident was tied up, then thrown alive into a river, along with his wife and child; a thief of rice and potatoes was buried alive; a suspected informer was beaten to death. Whether these incidents were part of the purge mentioned by Tran Huy Lieu is unclear. In a situation which was daily growing more dangerous to party members, though, a 'class enemy' who had been removed from a position of influence in the party would almost automatically have been suspected of betrayal.

According to *Van Kien Dang*, a directive was issued on 20 May 1931 from the CC to the Trung Ky regional committee, which called a halt to the purge. This document claims that 'The Trung-Ky regional committee, in particular the Secretary, issued a directive to purge the party of intellectuals, rich peasants, landlords and notables; this directive has no foundation and is ill-defined, arbitrary and rash.'¹⁷⁵ The Trung Ky committee was instructed in the strictest manner to examine and correct its mistakes. Strangely, Tran Huy Lieu, writing in 1957, was not aware of this directive. As we have seen, Nguyen Duy Trinh, who claims to have been a direct witness to these events and to have attended the April Trung Ky committee meeting, places the correction of leftist errors in April, when in fact a more violent phase of the soviet movement may have begun. There appears to be a distinct possibility that what by 1935-6 came to be considered 'leftist errors' were not in

¹⁷² Tran Huy Lieu, op cit, p. 87.

¹⁷³ Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit, pp. 87-88.

¹⁷⁴ *Contribution*, 'Documents', Vol. V, 'La Terreur Rouge en Annam (1930-1931).

fact corrected in 1931. The extremist phase may simply have petered out as the party's structures disintegrated.

As we know from Tran Phu and Nguyen Ai Quoc's last letters to the FEB (before their arrests), in April and early May 1931 all ICP structures above the provincial level were destroyed by French arrests. Ngo Duc Tri was arrested on 1 April, along with the entire Nam Ky Committee. On 15 April the Saigon CC headquarters was discovered, which caused the loss of its correspondence and 1500 dollars recently brought by Ducroux to cover three months' expenses. Tran Phu escaped because he had been in the outhouse at the time of the raid.¹⁷⁶ Quoc wrote on 28 April that 'there are arrests every day'. Thai Binh and Nam Dinh provinces were hard hit as their liaison agent had been arrested and made a confession. In Saigon the new CC print shop was discovered and several more party members arrested.¹⁷⁷ Quoc reported Tran Phu's arrest at the end of April. He had been taken on the 19 or 20 of the month. After that only one young worker was left to the secretariat, Quoc wrote. In Hong Kong one of the 'comrades in charge of communications', Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, was captured on 29 April.

Given these widespread arrests, the authorship of the supposed 20 May 1931 directive to the Trung Ky committee poses a problem. Was there at the time a CC which could have issued such a document? Did Nguyen Ai Quoc himself write it and send it to central Vietnam in the name of the defunct CC? Would Nguyen Ai Quoc have been willing to take such an initiative, when the Comintern was to all appearances fully behind the policies articulated by Tran Phu? Was it actually received and put into effect in Trung ky? The only evidence from the French archives on this score is the unfinished circular which the Hong Kong police found in Nguyen Ai Quoc's typewriter at the time of his arrest on 6 June. The topic was the correct way to fight the French terror. The French described the letter as of 'no interest', but believed that it demonstrated Quoc's authority over his party.¹⁷⁸

From a letter in German which the FEB sent to Moscow on 10 June, it appears that *they* had decided to issue an appeal 'to all members of the party' in the name of the ICP CC. This appeal supposedly 'asserted that the party was restoring order and getting down to work'.¹⁷⁹ The writer, who may be Rylski, does not give any more details regarding this

¹⁷⁵ *Van Kien Dang*, vol. 1, pp. 285-288, 'Chi thi cua Trung Uong gui Xu Uy Trung-ky ve van-de Thanh Dang Trung-ky', 20 May 1931', [CC Directive to Trung-ky Committee on the Purge of the Party in Trung-ky']; Mkhitarian, op. cit., pp. 303-305.

¹⁷⁶ RC, 495, 32, 95, p. 10, Tran Phu letter, 17 April 1931.

¹⁷⁷ RC, 495, 154, 462, no page nos, letter of 28 April 1931, signed 'Victor'.

¹⁷⁸ AOM, SPCE 365, folder 'Arrestation de Nguyen Ai Quoc', serie F, document 18.

¹⁷⁹ RC, 495, 154, 462a, p. 205; letter to Eastern Sec., 10 June 1931, unsigned.

document. However, in a 12 May letter apparently addressed to Quoc, in non-native English, the writer delegates the task of writing an appeal to the party to him. ‘...We think it necessary that a letter be issued by you, an open letter to all comrades. In the letter you shall speak about the tasks of the party in the mass work, in organising the economic fights of the workers in the plantations, factories, agricultural workers, of organising the trade unions, Anti-imperialist League, Peasant’s Committees, Soldiers’ Committees, etc. You shall speak about the necessity to lead and organise the spontaneous actions of the Peasantry by our comrades, etc. You shall warn the party before the danger of putchist tendencies and first of all show the possibility for increase of the right danger as a reaction to the white terror...’.¹⁸⁰ Given the date of these instructions, it is possible that Quoc did issue a letter in the name of the CC on 20 May. It is also conceivable that he realized that the message the FEB asked him to convey was out of touch with reality. He may have finally taken matters into his own hands and written the directive which appears in *Van Kien Dang*.

We learn something of Quoc’s state of mind in April from his letters. On 28 April he complained to the FEB about the educational level of new party members. Both the students being selected for training in Moscow and the worker and peasant members are illiterate, he wrote. ‘This means that in spite of their courage and abnegation, they work badly, their ideological and political level being too low.’ He added that, ‘The result of this complete lack of education is that in the daily work the worker and peasant comrades depend entirely on the intellectuals.’ At the same time he noted that the majority of Vietnamese intellectuals sent to Moscow from France are ‘unusable’. They included spoiled children of the bourgeoisie, he complained.¹⁸¹ He also worried about the tactics being employed to fight French repression. Between the 12 and 20 of April he noted that 165 peasants had been killed during demonstrations. The imperialists had decided to stop the movement ‘by massacre’, he said. ‘What concrete plan of struggles shall we give our comrades? If we let them go on in that way there will be great danger of putchisme (sic),’ he wrote.¹⁸² Ironically, in the same letter, he mentioned that Reuters had published the news on 25 April that the ICP had been admitted as an ‘independent section’ by the Comintern. If the news were true, he wrote, ‘it would be a great moral boost to the party and masses....’¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ RC, 495, 154, 569, p. 50, letter addressed to ‘Dear Friend’, unsigned.

¹⁸¹ RC, 495, 154, 462, no p. nos, letter in French, signed ‘Victor’, 28 April 1931.

¹⁸² RC, 495, 154, 462, English letter written after 25 April 1931, signed ‘Victor’.

¹⁸³ RC, 495, 154, 577, p. 36 – From notes on the ICP’s history in this file, we learn that the ECCI passed a resolution on 5 April 1931 to accept the ICP as an independent party at its Eleventh Plenum. From the 6 Jan. 1930 until April 1931, the ICP had been a section of the FCP. (p. 35).

Quoc's prestige within Vietnam may still have been great enough to influence the ICP's course at this stage, had he not been arrested in early June. But Tran Huy Lieu's 1960 description of the spring of 1931 does not leave one with the impression that Quoc was able to make a real impact on the course of events: 'The Soviet movement in Nghe An and Ha Tinh, far from petering out, gained in intensity and violence during its last months. Blood flowed more and more abundantly. In passing from the stage of economic and political demands to the struggle against the white terror, the demonstrations turned more and more frequently into armed engagements.'¹⁸⁴ One suspects that Lieu's judgment of these events many years later would not have been possible in 1931. 'The programme of action of 1930 made the error of calling for the overthrow of the national bourgeoisie along with the French colonialists and the feudal classes... they should have been pulled into the ranks of the democratic bourgeois revolution and not systematically kept apart,' he wrote. 'In the countryside, the struggles undertaken against the rich peasants, the middle peasants and the village elders and scholars were grave errors which discredited the whole movement and gave an opening to enemy propaganda.'¹⁸⁵

An anonymous rapporteur in Saigon, writing sometime in 1931 on the situation in Indochina, gives no hint that the ICP was making a correction of course. (The writer identifies himself as a member of a 4-person cell in a store where there are 200 workers. The report was stamped as received by the Comintern in June 1931.) At the time of writing there were 2,400 party members in the country, of whom 600 were in Cochinchina (not including the 200 Chinese in the Cochinchina-Cambodia group). Commenting on 'opportunist tendencies', he mentions that the national revolutionary elements who joined the party after the unification conference, and who had been excluded during the struggle, were 'attempting to form a Cochinchina section of the Independence Party'[Nguyen The Truyen's party]. There was also a newly-formed anarchist group, as well as an active Trotskyist group working among the intellectuals, and a new 'Communist League' formed by party members who had been expelled. The ICP was working against all of these tendencies, except for the anarchists, who were inactive. The 30 remaining members of the VNQDD in the South, he claims, were ready to join the ICP. But they had decided to organize a 'great night' of actions which would shake the imperialists before joining the party. The leaders were captured before any of these plans came about, he added.¹⁸⁶ As we can see from this report, fragmentation of the revolutionary movement lay ahead. The return of Nguyen Ai Quoc to a position of influence lay many years in the future.

¹⁸⁴ Tran Huy Lieu, *Les Soviets du Nghe Tinh*, (Hanoi: Editions en langues étrangères, 1960), p. 44.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

¹⁸⁶ RC, 495, 154, 462b, part 3, pp. 13 and 16.

CHAPTER VI

Death in Hong Kong, Burial in Moscow? (1931-1938)

1. *The Prisoner*

On 8 June 1931 the Governor General in Hanoi, René Robin, cabled the Ministry of Colonies to announce the arrest of Nguyen Ai Quoc two days earlier.¹ Quoc had been found thanks to the discovery of Joseph Ducroux's address book in Singapore, where the French agent had been caught exchanging documents with local communists. Robin's cable announced that Quoc's arrest was due to 'the liaison established by the *Sûreté Générale* with the British police in Hong Kong and Singapore, and the police of the French concession in Shanghai.' These links had enabled the French to capture Ho Tung Mau, Nguyen Huy Bon, a Moscow returnee, the worker Phan Duc who had attended the Fifth Profintern Congress in Moscow, and most of the Vietnamese communists working in Shanghai. (Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, arrested 29 April in Hong Kong, had been deported to a Canton prison, on the assumption that she was Chinese. There she joined Truong Van Lenh and three other Vietnamese who had been arrested earlier in 1931.) Ho Tung Mau's wife Ly Ung Thuan was arrested along with Quoc. The greatest blow to the Comintern's operations would come on 10 June, when their OMS agent Hilaire Noulens and his wife were traced via a Shanghai postbox address found in Ducroux's notebook. Although for many years they were thought to be the Swiss citizens Paul and Gertrude Ruegg, they have now been identified as the Russian couple Jakov Rudnik and Tatiana Moiseenko-Velikhaya.²

Robin's dispatch was full of self-congratulation. The arrest of 'all communist leaders in Vietnam', including nine Moscow returnees and the majority of Vietnamese activists in China, was 'the fruit of investigations skillfully carried out by the competent services', he wrote; they 'give us absolute mastery of the political situation.' He did not, however, anticipate Nguyen Ai Quoc's extradition to Indochina. The French consul in Hong Kong had already warned him that the Vietnamese arrested in Hong Kong might well be set free. Robin proposed that the best solution might be to persuade the British to intern Quoc in some 'distant possession', as a reciprocal gesture for the detention of any Indian or

¹AOM, SPCE 368, télégramme officiel, Gougal à colonies, Hanoi 8 June 1931.

²Frederick S. Litten, 'The Noulens Affair', *The China Quarterly*, no. 138, June 1994.

Burmese communists who might be captured on French territory.³ By late June the *Sûreté* detective Neron was considering how to allocate the reward money for these arrests (\$15,000 for Quoc and \$10,000 each for Ho Tung Mau and the activists arrested in Shanghai)⁴. But the course of British justice would run counter to French designs.

Nguyen Ai Quoc's fate hinged on the nature of the deportation order which would be handed down in Hong Kong. Neron believed that the documents found at Quoc's address would serve as evidence to have him deported for communist propaganda, with Shanghai as the probable destination. Not only had the British found an unfinished circular in Quoc's typewriter denouncing French imperialism, they had also found letters demonstrating that he played an active role in abetting the communist movement in Malaya. Yet some of the British legal advisers who commented on the case in the Colonial Office's dossier advocated a strict interpretation of the detainee's civil rights. He had committed no offense against Hong Kong law, and thus the only grounds for deporting him was the fact that he was a communist. One Walter Ellis wrote, for example: 'we cannot, it seems to me, insist on his going to Indochina any more than if we had occasion to deport an ex-official of the Tsarist government [illegible] insist on his going to a Soviet republic.' Ellis explained that if the French had had evidence that Quoc had committed 'any extraditable crime', they would have made a formal appeal for extradition.⁵

Quoc did not admit to any name other than Sung Man Cho, the name on the Chinese passport he had received in Singapore. In contradiction to his claim to be Chinese, though, he portrayed himself as a nationalist fighting for king and country, with a death sentence hanging over his head in Vietnam.⁶ As Dennis Duncanson has pointed out, this contradictory testimony may have been a defensive tactic advocated by the Comintern.⁷ By July 1931 he was receiving what appears to have been highly-skilled legal counsel, apparently arranged by the International Red Aid organization, from a team of lawyers led by Frank Loseby. His lawyers argued that deportation to Shanghai would be the equivalent of a disguised extradition to Indochina.⁸ (Ho Tung Mau and his companions were in fact deported to Shanghai at the end of June, without a formal identification having

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ AOM, SPCE 368, Telegram from Neron to 'Gougal', Hanoi, Hong Kong, 25 June 1931.

⁵ PRO, CO 129, 533/3, 27 July 1931, pp. 3-4, and 4 August 1931, p.8.

⁶ MAE 91, Affaires Communes, Annexe n. 4 à la Dépêche n. 52 à la Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, 12 Sept. 1931.

⁷ Dennis Duncanson, 'Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong, 1931-32', *China Quarterly*, Jan.-March, 1974, p. 91.

⁸ AOM, SPCE 368, Tel. from GOUGAL to Colonies, Paris, 28 juillet 1931, signed Pasquier.

been made. They were arrested in the French concession and shipped back to Vietnam.⁹) The defense strategy was to demand Quoc's rights as a political detainee under the Deportation Ordinance, which required that he be allowed to choose his destination and depart in secret. If this right was not guaranteed, the defendant would 'attack the proceedings in every possible manner and by every known step,' his lawyer Mr. Jenkin told the court.¹⁰

Thanks to the application of this strategy Quoc's case would drag on until January 1933. The mobilization of world-wide left-wing support for the mysterious Noulens probably gave Quoc's plight more attention than it would have received had he been arrested on his own. To judge by the press accounts, he also made a good impression in court, speaking in English without a translator, projecting sincerity in his declaration of his nationalist beliefs. The Colonial Office would clearly have liked to have handed him over to the French; one official referred to him as being 'one of the worst agitators who was put into the bag in the round up following the Lefranc [Ducroux] seizure...'.¹¹ After the Hong Kong judiciary rejected a defense appeal for a writ of Habeas Corpus, the French grew confident that they would finally get their man. On 24 August 1931, the *Sûreté* in Hanoi had cabled Saigon to announce that Nguyen Ai Quoc would leave Hong Kong on 1 September on the *General Metzinger* bound for Saigon. Two French policemen had been delegated to escort Quoc back to Vietnam.¹² But with just days to go before the deportation, Quoc's solicitors appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. They claimed that the deportation order was not valid under Hong Kong law. Thus on 23 October 1931 the Secretary of State announced that there would be no deportation until the results of the appeal to the Privy Council were known.¹³ Given the length of time needed to prepare the briefs, the appeal was not scheduled to be heard until November of 1932.

In the meantime the *Sûreté* began to pressure Lam Duc Thu to gather information on the Vietnamese who had been arrested in Canton, and perhaps to make contact with Quoc. After Ly Ung Thuan's release in late August 1931, on the grounds that she was a Chinese national, she went to stay with Thu for a time. In November 'Agent Pinot' claimed to have received a request from Quoc, for aid in getting the Vietnamese imprisoned in Canton

⁹ AOM, SPCE 368, Hong Kong 23 June 1931, Francsulat à Gougal, Hanoi. Ho Tung Mau would remain on Con Son island until 1945. This would seem to indicate that he was accused of a serious criminal offense.

¹⁰ *South China Morning Post*, August 1 1931.

¹¹ PRO, CO 129/535/3 (1931-2), p. 7, note by G.L.M. Ransom, 4 Aug. 1931.

¹² AOM, SPCE 368, Dirsurge à Dirsurge, Saigon, sent from Hanoi 24 August 1931.

released, as well as for help in carrying on the party's work until the new activists due from Russia arrived. Quoc was particularly eager that Truong Van Lenh be released to take over the party's affairs in China, according to Lam Duc Thu; Quoc may also have been concerned about the welfare of Minh Khai.¹⁴ It is indeed strange that he would have contacted a known informer at this point – perhaps he believed that there was no more damage that Thu could do, with the party's work so badly disrupted. These contacts may have resulted in criticism of Quoc's conduct after his release. They do not appear to have lasted very long in any case. From a report which Lam Duc Thu sent on 16 May 1932 we discover that Thu was getting information regarding Quoc indirectly, from Loseby's office.

Toward the end of 1931 Nguyen Ai Quoc was transferred to hospital, where he stayed under guard. In December Prince Cuong De sent him a letter, in response to the news that Quoc was gravely ill. The Prince sent 300 yen towards Quoc's medical expenses, and advised him to take good care of himself, for 'the sake of the country'.¹⁵ (At this stage the Vietnamese communists such as Le Hong Son maintained their links to Cuong De, perhaps for purely pragmatic and financial reasons.¹⁶) Dennis Duncanson's assertion that Quoc was not ill during his imprisonment appears, thus, to be incorrect.¹⁷ As we have seen, Quoc claimed to have suffered a severe TB attack in September 1930; the French consul in Hong Kong, Soulange Teissier, in 1932 confirmed in a letter to his foreign minister that Quoc was suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis of a slow-developing, controllable form. In the summer of 1932 press accounts of 'the little Vietnamese, with his body debilitated by consumption and the soul of a chief' began to appear.¹⁸ Later the communist press would announce that Quoc had died of TB in August 1932.¹⁹ The French were never taken in by these reports, however. Their Hong Kong consulate kept the authorities in Hanoi informed of each stage in Quoc's efforts to leave the British colony.²⁰

His departure would finally take place in late January 1933, after one false start. On 27 June 1932 the appeal to the Privy Council was withdrawn, when Quoc's lawyers agreed

¹³ CO 129/535/3, p. 27, letter from Howell (?) of 31 Dec. 1931.

¹⁴ AOM, SPCE 368, 'pour M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Gén.', Saigon, 19 nov. 1931.

¹⁵ MAE, Asie, Affaires Communes 91, p. 170, from Mission Noel, Envoi n. 645, 11 jan. 1932.

¹⁶ AOM, SPCE 368, Note Conf. n. 3435/S.G. from Hanoi, 2 Oct. 1931 describes Le Hong Son's attempt to get funds from Cuong De in the summer of 1930.

¹⁷ Dennis J. Duncanson, 'Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong, 1931-32', *China Quarterly*, 1-3, 1974, p. 96.

¹⁸ AOM, SPCE 368, press clipping from *l'Opinion*, 20 April 1932, story by Jean Dorsenne, 'Nguyen Ai Quoc: l'Illuminé'.

¹⁹ An announcement of NAQ's death appeared in the *Daily Worker* (London) on 11 Aug. 1932.

²⁰ AOM, SPCE 369, see cable of 20 Jan. 1933 from *Gougal*, Hanoi to Saigon; and 22 Jan. 1933 from the Hong Kong consulate to *Gougal*.

with the counsel for the Hong Kong government on new terms for his deportation. Quoc was eventually put on a ship to Singapore, where he arrived on 6 January 1933. The Straits Settlements authorities refused to allow him to remain, however, so he was sent back to Hong Kong where he was re-arrested as he disembarked on 19 January. The Hong Kong governor William Peel decided against imposing the one-year prison term meted out to illegal immigrants; he also refused to inform Teissier of the details of Quoc's subsequent departure.²¹ Loseby *this time* convinced the authorities to play a more active role in implementing their undertaking to help Quoc depart for a destination of his choice. As Peel himself explained in his dispatch, he arranged for Quoc to be taken by a 'non-government launch' to the S.S. *Anhui* lying at a berth outside the Hong Kong harbour late on 22 January.²²

2. In Hiding/ New Political Currents

Quoc travelled disguised as a wealthy Chinese with Loseby's secretary, Mr. Lung, to Swatow [Shantou].²³ At this point in 1933 the Vietnamese communists had not yet re-established official contacts with the Chinese party and, according to the rules of revolutionary discipline, a party member fresh out of prison was forbidden from returning to any of the addresses he had frequented before his arrest. So perhaps Quoc did, as is usually assumed, maintain his disguise of the wealthy businessman for the next months, as he lay low in Swatow. The Vietnamese who were still at large or who, like Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, had been released from prison, spent the latter part of 1932 and most of 1933 trying to restore their communications networks. Ironically, trusted members of Quoc's Hong Kong circle, Le Hong Son and Minh Khai, as well as the returnee from Moscow, Tran Ngoc Danh, brother of Tran Phu, found themselves under suspicion when they tried to contact the Chinese party in 1932.

The one Vietnamese party member who remained in contact with the CCP in Shanghai was Truong Phuoc Dat, a naval mechanic from Phan Rang who in 1929 had been an early recruit to the ICP faction in Saigon. After escaping from prison in Saigon and travelling to Hong Kong in 1931, he was chosen by the party to go to Russia for study. He and his two travelling companions had been turned back at the border in Manchuria, however, so Dat returned to Shanghai. Here the CCP's Jiangsu province military committee assigned him

²¹ AOM, SPCE 369, Francsulat a Gougal, Hanoi, 22 Jan. 1933.

²² PRO, CO 129/539/2, pp. 3-4, letter of 31 January, 1933 from Governor Peel to Sir P. Cunliffe-Lister.

²³ Duncanson learned these details from Loseby's assistant, Mr. Lung Ting-chang, Duncanson, op.cit., p. 100, note 81.

to restore the links with the French and Vietnamese military men which had been broken by the arrests of the Vietnamese propagandists in the summer of 1931. Thus by mid-1932, Truong Phuoc Dat found himself being asked to vouch for the Vietnamese who turned up in Shanghai looking for help and money from the Chinese party. Tran Ngoc Danh requested funds to support the union of Vietnamese domestics which he had reorganized from old Thanh Nien elements in Hong Kong. He and Minh Khai were attempting to rebuild the ICP's communications network there with the help of various sailors. Some French reports refer to her at the time as his concubine. Le Hong Son was planning to return to Siam, from where he hoped to reorganize the ICP Central Committee. The Vietnamese gathered in Shanghai decided to send Dat to Siam to work, along with Le Hong Son. As this decision displeased him, Truong Phuoc Dat sabotaged their projects by accusing them of 'petit bourgeois' behaviour (e.g. staying in a modern hotel with elevators) in his report to the Chinese CC. Moreover, he denied having known any of them before their arrival in Shanghai. In the end the Vietnamese group, which now numbered five, had to pawn some of their clothing in order to pay their hotel bills and travel to Nanjing, where they could count on the hospitality of Ho Hoc Lam.²⁴ Whether this episode reflects continuing tension between the former ICP and ACP factions of the Vietnamese party, or simply one case of double-dealing, we do not know. Tran Ngoc Danh and Le Hong Son were eventually arrested in Shanghai on 25 September 1932. Truong Phuoc Dat himself was captured in April 1933.²⁵ By March 1933 Minh Khai had returned to Hong Kong, from where she corresponded with the Vietnamese in Nanjing.²⁶

A French informer in Thailand claimed that Nguyen Ai Quoc was hiding in the Nakhon Phanom region from early January 1933, but this was later classified as a case of mistaken identity.²⁷ In September 1933 a French informer claimed to have sighted Quoc living in Nanning with a small group of Vietnamese. Agent 'Maria' said that among the four Vietnamese men living at 78 Cau Song Kai St. one matched the photo of Nguyen Ai Quoc. The informant also mentioned that three women, along with three girls and a boy, were living in the same house. Quoc was said to be using the name Ly Sin Sang (Mr. Ly).²⁸

²⁴ AOM, SPCE 367, Déclarations faites par Truong Phuoc Dat à la Sûreté Gén., 22 May 1933 and following days; pp. 43-53.

²⁵ Truong Phuoc Dat may be the Sino-Vietnamese who was planted in Singapore as a British agent in 1934, and who rose in the MCP to become the Secretary General known as Lai Teck. See Yoki Akashi, 'Lai Teck, Secretary General of the Malayan CP', *Journal of the South Seas Society*, vol. 49, 1994.

²⁶ AOM, SPCE 385, Envoi n. 92 du S.R. Changhai, translation of 3 letters sent 31 March 1933 by Nguyen Thi Minh Khai.

²⁷ AOM, SPCE 369, folder on Nguyen Ai Quoc in Laos.

²⁸ AOM, SPCE 383, Note Conf. n. 394/s, from Cao Bang, 5 Sept. 1933, signed Barthouet.

However, Le Hong Phong, who was living in Nanning and Longzhou during much of 1933, made no mention of contacts with Quoc when he reported to the Comintern in January 1935. Phong had planned to go up-country to meet the Siam-based Vietnamese when he arrived in Bangkok in February 1932, on his way home from Moscow and Paris. But finding himself under close police surveillance, he gave up this plan after ten days and by April had moved on to Canton and Nanning. Here he began to reconstitute the communist group in the Vietnamese border province of Cao Bang and also formed some new cells in Langson province. He propagandized among the cadets at the Nanning military academy, which since 1925 had been a source of communist recruits. In August 1933 he met his fellow returned students Ha Huy Tap and Nguyen Van Dut in Canton, and by June 1934 they had constituted an Overseas Bureau to manage the party's affairs until an in-country Central Committee could be created.²⁹

If Nguyen Ai Quoc had taken refuge in Nanning, we can assume that he had moved on by September. For it was at the end of September 1933 that his old acquaintance from the French CP, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, showed up in Shanghai for an Asian Congress Against War. Quoc later claimed that it was Vaillant-Couturier who helped him get back to Moscow by putting him in touch with Soviet representatives in Shanghai.³⁰ (The USSR had restored diplomatic relations with China at the end of 1932. The new ambassador presented his credentials in Shanghai on 2 May 1933.) The conference was held clandestinely in a private home on 30 September. The French reported that the participants included Lord Marley, Vaillant-Couturier, a Dr. Marteaux, the American journalist Harold Isaacs, a Soviet representative and fifty Chinese, including Mme. Sun Yatsen.³¹ Several of these personalities were leading members of the Berlin-based Anti-Imperialist League. Nguyen Ai Quoc may have stayed away from the proceedings, but it seems to be from this period that Harold Isaacs retained a memory of Quoc as, 'my Shanghai friend of long ago'.³² We can only speculate on how close Quoc's ties to Song Jingling, Mme. Sun, were. But there is no reason to discount his story that he made contact with Vaillant-Couturier by arriving at her house in his disguise as a wealthy Chinese, to leave a letter for her.

By this point in 1933, as Nguyen Ai Quoc began to plan for his return to Moscow, the left-wing of Vietnamese politics was once again making itself felt. Radical students returned from France had demonstrated the continuing anti-establishment sentiments of the Saigon

²⁹ RC, 495, 154, 686, pp. 1-12, 'On the work of the last three years and the internal situation of the ICP', dated 15 Jan. 1935, written in Russian, signed 'Hai An'.

³⁰ *Days With Ho Chi Minh*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965), p. 81.

³¹ SLOTFOM III, 127, folder 'Congrès Asiatique contre la guerre'.

³² Harold Isaacs, *No Peace For Asia*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1947, 1967), p. 163.

populace by winning two places in municipal council elections held in late April and early May. Although the election of Nguyen Van Tao, an ICP member, and Tran Van Thach, a Trotskyist, was annulled in August, their initial success pointed towards the future development of the *La Lutte* front between the Trotskyist and ICP communists.³³ The Stalin School student Tran Van Giau had returned to South Vietnam in early 1933, where he was rebuilding the ICP in line with the dictates of the radical 1932 *Action Programme* which he had helped to draft in Moscow.³⁴ ICP members in Siam, as well as Vietnamese who had become members of the Siam CP, were also actively supporting the rebirth of the ICP via a Committee to Aid Indochina.³⁵ Anti-imperialism, in the interpretation of the 'Third Period' had become an expression of world-wide proletarian solidarity, while nationalism was an out-moded concept. Daniel Hémery notes that in 21 months of publication, up to June 1936, *La Lutte* mentioned Vietnamese national aspirations in only 20 articles, and then often in the context of criticism of bourgeois patriotism.³⁶ Yet a meeting 'Against Fascism and War' held in Saigon's Khanh Hoi Theatre on 11 August 1933 was attended by over six hundred participants, according to a French report, and attracted a cross-section of activists ranging from Duong Van Giao and Trinh Hung Ngau, associated with the Constitutionals, to Nguyen Van Tao and Tran Van Thach. Vaillant-Couturier attended this meeting before travelling on to Shanghai, and received warm applause when he described actions in Paris in support of the Vietnamese political prisoners under sentence of death.³⁷ Ta Thu Thau, who had been an active member of the Anti-imperialist League in Europe, may have been involved in organizing this meeting. The French believed, however, that the legal political activities of Nguyen Van Tao and Tran Van Thach were connected to Tran Van Giau's return to Vietnam.³⁸

Although the full elaboration of the Comintern's revamped united front policy would not come until its Seventh Congress in 1935, by 1933 one can already observe a drawing-back from the class-against-class radicalism expounded in 1929. Nazi power in Germany had become a real factor to reckon with, while the designs of the imperialist powers in Asia appeared as an ever-growing threat both to the Soviet Union and the Chinese communists.

³³ Daniel Hémery, *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en indochine*, (Paris: Maspero, 1975), pp. 58-9.

³⁴ See R.C. 495, 154, 676, p. 34; letter to Cam. Vasilieva of 20 Dec. 1934 from 'Honam'. In this letter Giau defends himself against allegations that he was misinterpreting the 'Action Programme', which he says that he 'helped to edit'.

³⁵ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 54, *Note périodique de la Direction de la Sûr. Gén.*, first trimester 1935, Chap. I, p. 1.

³⁶ Hémery, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-107.

³⁷ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 127, from folder *Congrès Asiatique contre la Guerre*.

³⁸ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 54, *Note Périodique n. 34 de la Direction de la Sûr. Gén.*, first trimester 1935, Chap. I, p. 23.

Otto Braun claims that as early as January 1933 an ECCI directive recognized the need for a 'united struggle against Japan' with any Chinese army or group which would end attacks against the Soviet regions.³⁹ A Comintern pamphlet which appeared in July 1933 addressed to the Indian and Indochinese communists reverted to the Leninist strategy of emphasizing the national independence struggle over the goals of the socialist revolution. The pamphlet, first published in English by the *Pan Pacific Worker*, was the record of a question and answer session with 'Orgwald', who from Comintern documents can be identified as the old Bolshevik Osip Piatnitsky who headed the Comintern's all-important Organization Department between the Fifth and Seventh Congresses (1924-1935). It is not surprising that by mid-1933 the rise of Hitler was causing some Bolsheviks to re-examine their views on nationalism and united fronts. 'Orgwald' advised in his pamphlet that it would be unwise at present to call for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, as that would alienate the peasantry and the urban petty-bourgeoisie. A united front with nationalist parties would be acceptable if it followed the principle of 'fight together, but march apart'.⁴⁰ This material was not published in French until 1934 and we have no evidence that it was published in Vietnamese at all. It contradicted the policy line brought back from Moscow by key ICP leaders such as Tran Van Giau and Ha Huy Tap. This divergence between the class-against-class line of the 'Third Period' and the new tactics which began to be discussed in 1933 would become a serious stumbling block to ICP unity.

Evidence of this divergence can be seen in the long letter addressed to the Indochinese communists from the CCP's Central Committee in August 1934. It was given the Comintern's sanction as a political directive. (As late as March 1935, Vera Vasilieva would refer to it in correspondence to the ICP's Overseas Bureau as a document which laid out 'those basic tasks on which you must concentrate all your attention at present'.⁴¹) In all likelihood this letter was prepared in Moscow with Comintern support by the Chinese CC members there, led by Wang Ming. While it called for the creation of a legal press and the exploitation of other legal organizing possibilities, it sent a strong warning against cooperation with social democrats and the nationalist bourgeoisie. It cited the failure of the Austrian uprising of 1934 as an example of the 'traitorous influence' of social democracy. Although the letter acknowledged that many members of the Indochinese bourgeoisie were eager to fight French imperialism, the workers and peasants must never forget that the 'nationalist bourgeoisie, self-interested and cowardly, betrayed the movement of 1930-31...'. 'In the situation of general discontent which is growing in the country, national-

³⁹ Otto Braun, *Kitaiskie Zapiski [Notes on China]*, (Moscow: Iz. Politicheskoi Literatury, 1974), pp. 35-36.

⁴⁰ References from McLane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia*, pp. 161-162.

reformism will try more than once to take over the leadership of the mass movement, in order to behead it,' the letter read. 'This is precisely why we must constantly work to unmask all of the national-reformist groups and parties, no matter what "leftist" slogans they hide behind...'.⁴²

This Chinese letter might be interpreted as an effort by some Comintern leaders to combat the French party's decision to cooperate with the Socialist Party, which had been made at an FCP CC meeting 14 and 15 March 1934.⁴³ Nguyen Ai Quoc's old contact Jacques Doriot was among the most out-spoken advocates of this rapprochement with the French socialists. But in Saigon, where there was no socialist party, the united front of the left remained a joint effort of the Moscow-oriented and Trotskyist communists. The formal *La Lutte* front was launched at a September 1934 meeting led by Nguyen An Ninh. It was an alliance aimed against the colonial government and the Constitutionalist Party with a strongly proletarian orientation.⁴⁴

3. *Return to Moscow*

Nguyen Ai Quoc did not get back to Moscow until July 1934, by his own account.⁴⁵ There is no information about how he spent the autumn of 1933 and the first months of 1934. He returned to a Moscow which must have been quite changed from the place he had known in 1923-24 and again briefly in 1927. It was no longer the free-wheeling city of the NEP which he had experienced on his first visit; nor was it the politically charged communist capital where the final battles for control of the Soviet party were about to be played out in 1927. Stalin's cult of personality and control of all Soviet institutions was creating a deadened political climate dominated by paranoia and a siege mentality towards the outside world.

By 1930 purges (*chistka* or literally 'cleansings') in Comintern institutions such as the Sun Yatsen School, closed that year, and the International Lenin School had become a feature of Comintern life. A purge of the French section of the Lenin School, where Nguyen Ai Quoc would enroll in October 1934, was held in October 1933, presided over by Andre Marty of the Romance Secretariat. An essay by one of the students with the pseudonym

⁴¹ RC, 495, 154, 585, p. 5, Letter to Indochinese Comrades, signed 'Vasilieva', 17 March 1935.

⁴² *Inprecor*, nos. 73-4, 11 August 1934, pp. 1189-1192 (French edition); second part of letter printed in nos. 75-6.

⁴³ *Cahiers du Bolshevisme*, n. 7, 1 April 1934.

⁴⁴ Hémerly, op. cit., p. 63.

⁴⁵ RC, 495, 201, 1 p. 132, 'Autobiography' dated 17 April 1938, signed 'Lin'.

'Bretane' gives some idea of what was required during these 'cleansings'. Even among those who had not committed any political errors, or were not threatened with expulsion from the party, a high degree of self-abasement was required. In his essay titled, 'Purging as a Factor of Bolshevization', Bretane writes: 'What is important is to lay bare the weaknesses which remain in order to eliminate them. We have been able to see, via various biographies, that at the bottom of these weaknesses lie social origin and the foreign influence which is imprinted on the militant when he is working abroad'.⁴⁶ Yelena Bonner, whose step-father Gevork Alikhanov was a top official in the Comintern's Cadres Department, watched from behind a curtain in her home at the Lux Hotel, as he and others were investigated by a troika in 1933. They were expected to bare their souls and reveal even their most personal secrets, down to past romantic liaisons and any resulting children.⁴⁷

When Nguyen Ai Quoc turned up in the summer of 1934 there is reason to believe that he expected to be the object of an investigation of some sort. Vera Vasilieva's daughter, then a girl of ten, has a memory of him sleeping on the couch in the wooden house where her family then lived in central Moscow, as though he were trying to keep a low profile.⁴⁸ Quoc had, after all, been involved in a series of arrests which had been a major blow for both the Far Eastern Bureau and the Chinese CP in 1931. Vasilieva, a naïve and perhaps unimaginative Bolshevik, is known to have defended friends accused of political misdeeds, including her own husband, Mark Zorky.⁴⁹ But there is no record of any political difficulties for Quoc in the Comintern files, until the time of the Seventh Congress the following year. He recounts in his autobiographical questionnaire that he spent several months recuperating from his illness in the Crimea in 1934, then enrolled in the Lenin School in October.⁵⁰ At that time he was the only Indochinese registered at the school, although the Comintern planned to admit twelve Indochinese students for a short-term course for the 1935-36 term.⁵¹ It does not appear that these places were filled. The school was described at this time by its director, Kirsanova, as 'the only forge of cadres for the Communist International'⁵² and was viewed as a training institute for foreign communist leaders. Still, there was an element of disgrace for such leaders as Li Lisan and Quoc who

⁴⁶ RC, 531, 1, 260, *Bulletin de l'Épuration*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Yelena Bonner, *Mothers and Daughters*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1992), pp. 147-50.

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Neia Zorkaia, Moscow 1992.

⁴⁹ According to Vasilieva's Comintern biography, she defended her husband against accusations that he had been close to the disgraced Comintern operative Madyar. (RC, 495, 65a, 956).

⁵⁰ RC, 495, 201, 1, p. 132, 'Autobiography', dated 17 April 1938, signed 'Lin'.

⁵¹ RC, 531, 1, 50, Decree of ECCI Political Commission on the selection of students for the 1935-36 academic year, issued 15 Oct. 1934.

⁵² RC, 531, 1, 51, p. 36, letter from Kirsanova to Kaganovich, Secretariat of Soviet Party CC, 22 Aug. 1934.

were sent there. The fact is that (in Li's case in particular) they had earlier served in the top ranks of their parties and might have expected to be given work in the ECCI, had their status remained intact.

On 1 December 1934, as preparations for the Seventh Congress were underway, the Leningrad Party chief, Sergei Kirov, was shot by an intruder in his headquarters at the Smolny Institute. This murder provided Stalin with a pretext to begin a man-hunt for enemies of the state.⁵³ As the era of the Popular Front was dawning, then, a new round of suppression of Stalin's political enemies, real and imagined, was about to begin. When on 8 December the three Congress delegates sent by the ICP arrived in Moscow, a mini-crisis erupted at the Stalin School. Because the OMS failed to meet them at the train station, the three had had to make their own way to the hostel where the Vietnamese were housed -- this was viewed as a major lapse in conspiratorial technique. Three people filed reports on the incident: Vera Vasilieva, Kotelnikov of the Eastern Secretariat, and 'Kan Sin' (Kang Sheng), whose position is not given on his report.⁵⁴

The three Vietnamese delegates were Le Hong Phong, the senior member of the Overseas Bureau; a member of the Tay minority who went by the name Cao-bang or Van-Tan in Moscow, whose real name was Hoang Van Non; and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, referred to in a letter from Ha Huy Tap to the Comintern as 'Quoc's wife'. Quoc would also be designated as a Congress delegate by the ICP plenum held in March 1935.⁵⁵ On the autobiographical form which Minh Khai filled in after her arrival, she wrote that she was married and gave her husband's name as 'Lin'.⁵⁶ This would seem to show that theirs was more than a fleeting liaison, in spite of the French suspicion that she had been the mistress of Tran Ngoc Danh. (Nguyen Ai Quoc, however, never mentioned a wife on any of his official Comintern forms.) In Moscow she took the name 'Fan Lan'.

Between December 1934 and the end of March 1935 several reports on the situation of the ICP arrived in Moscow from Vietnam. In addition Le Hong Phong wrote a long account in Russian of his activities since his return to Southeast Asia in February 1932.⁵⁷ Quoc wrote his own critique of the ICP's failings during the 'revolutionary upsurge' of

⁵³ See Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*, (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

⁵⁴ RC, 495, 154, 543, 'Declarations made 15 and 17 Dec. 1934 to the Rector of KUTV, Eastern Secretariat, and the Political Commission of the ECCI' (in Russian).

⁵⁵ RC, 495, 154, 688, p. 14, letter from Overseas Bureau to Moscow, 31 March 1935.

⁵⁶ RC, 495, 201, 35, 'Ankieta' dated 14 Dec. 1934.

⁵⁷ RC, 495, 154, 686, pp. 1-12, see ref. on p. 196.

1930-31.⁵⁸ (He undoubtedly wrote other accounts of his activities from 1930 –1934, but these are not available in the archives.) With the Comintern’s policy now shifting back to where it had been in 1924-27, Quoc apparently felt safe in criticizing the ICP’s generally low level of theoretical understanding, and in particular the fact that, ‘the majority of comrades – even those in charge – do not understand the meaning of “the bourgeois democratic revolution”.’ ‘They repeat words without understanding their meaning...and very often find themselves caught out in their propaganda and agitation work’, he wrote. He also criticized the mechanistic way in which workers had been trained to organize a strike, without being encouraged to make decisions based on their own judgment of the situation. Another danger which he raised was that the workers who had been brought into the leading party organs, ‘always allow themselves to be influenced by the intellectual elements, because they have read everything in the theses or in books’. ‘This is what had happened in 1930-31,’ he said, ‘when our comrades were old and experienced militants. Now, all or almost all of these comrades are in prison or have been killed. The comrades today are younger and less experienced, and are as a result likely to make more serious errors,’ he wrote.

The remedy which he proposed was the production of a series of short brochures in simple language on themes starting with *The Communist Manifesto* and Comintern history, moving to ‘the national question’ and ‘the agrarian question’, and ending with ‘how to form a united front’ and ‘the Comintern’s theses and resolutions on the colonial question’. He had learned to quote Stalin at the appropriate moment – ‘Stalin is a thousand times right,’ Quoc wrote, ‘when he says that, “Theory gives the comrades... the power of direction, clarity of perspective, faith in their work and confidence in the victory of our cause.”’⁵⁹ One can assume that Quoc realized that the prevailing theory had changed since 1928-29, but was intelligent enough not to point this out in writing. His attitude as a teacher and student at the Stalin School, as we shall see, would seem to show that he did not take Moscow’s approach to theoretical training terribly seriously.

Le Hong Phong’s report of his activities from the end of 1931 until his return to Moscow at the end of 1934 is a factual, almost a-political account of his successes and failures. The reports which Ha Huy Tap (Sinitchkin in Moscow) sent back to Moscow between December 1934 and April 1935 have quite a different tone.⁶⁰ They show that he began to take a more active, even dictatorial role in shaping the ICP after Le Hong Phong’s

⁵⁸ RC, 495, 154, 686, p. 13, Lin’s letter of 16 January 1935 to Eastern Secretariat.

⁵⁹ Loc. cit., p. 14.

⁶⁰ E.g. R.C. 495, 154, 586, letter of 20 April 1935, to Bureau d’Orient, signed ‘Cin.’

departure for Moscow. A slight man known by the nickname 'Sniffles' (*Khit*) in Saigon and as 'Mr. Short' in China, Ha Huy Tap seems to have gone back to Asia with the full trust of the Comintern in mid-1933. One *Sûreté* report refers to him as a '*renifleur*', a 'sniffer' or 'bloodhound', perhaps a play on his nickname.⁶¹ He was for a time the only one in the Overseas Bureau whom the Comintern trusted with the cipher code for the radio messages which it was beginning to use for communications in 1934-1935.⁶² The security obsession induced in the Comintern by the Kirov murder would have made the Moscow apparatus appreciative of someone with Ha Huy Tap's penchant for detailed reporting. Moreover, for the Eastern Secretariat security had become a major preoccupation after the destruction of the CCP's Shanghai Bureau in December 1934. At that time the Comintern lost its only radio link with the CCP, which was in the middle of its Long March. (After that the ICP was instructed to cut off all contact with the CCP and the Soviet Consulate in Shanghai.)⁶³ In any case, Ha Huy Tap would eventually have the distinction of denouncing Tran Van Giau, Nguyen Ai Quoc, and a number of other ICP members, including one of Quoc's liaison agents Nguyen Van Tram (Cao Van Binh).⁶⁴ During the lead-up to the Seventh Congress (which originally had been scheduled for 1934, then for March 1935 and finally opened in July) Nguyen Ai Quoc was perhaps the one who suffered the most dramatic loss of trust.

The ICP's 27-31 March 1935 Congress in Macao passed a 30-page political resolution, selected a new Central Committee and permitted Ha Huy Tap to take control of the ICP in Le Hong Phong's absence. What it did not do, however, was reflect the currents of change in Moscow, which would only be articulated at the Seventh Comintern Congress in the summer. At the end of 1934 Tap had reported that the party had around 600 members, including those in Laos and Cambodia.⁶⁵ Thirteen had managed to attend the Congress, he claimed. It selected a Central Committee headed by the absent Le Hong Phong, including eight workers, one poor peasant from the Tay minority, three intellectuals and one member from Annam still to be selected (profession unknown).⁶⁶ Nguyen Ai Quoc was listed number 13 as a candidate member. The Moscow trainees in the CC included the worker 'Din-Tan' (Tran Van Diem), head of the party committee in Tonkin; and 'Svan' (Nguyen Van Dut), then head of the Inter-regional Committee in Cochinchina. Ha Huy Tap

⁶¹ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 54, Note Périodique n. 34 de la Direction Sûr. Gén., first trimester 1935, Chap. 1, p. 62.

⁶² RC, 495, 154, 585, undated letter signed 'Vasilieva', written before receipt of March plenum materials.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ AOM, SLOTFOM III, 54, Note périodique de la S.G., 2e trimestre, 1935, pp. 64-6, on Nguyen Van Tram. On Tran Van Giau see RC, 495, 154, 676, letter of 28 Dec. 1934 to Bureau d'Orient from 'Jos.'

⁶⁵ RC, 495, 154, 676, p. 15, letter of 20 Dec. 1934.

reserved for himself a position in the Overseas Bureau, which at this point had the power to give political guidance to the CC.⁶⁷

At the end of his report on the Congress, Tap brought up the issue of Nguyen Ai Quoc. He said that the Congress had designated Comrade Line as the ICP's representative to the Comintern. But at the same time he wrote that,

In Siam and in Indochina the communist organizations are carrying out an open struggle against the remnants of the national-revolutionary ideology, mixed with reformism and idealism, of the Thanh Nien association and of Comrade Nguyen Ai Quoc. These remnants are very strong and constitute a very serious obstacle to the development of communism. This pitiless struggle against the old opportunist theories of Quoc and Thanh Nien is indispensable. The two party committees in Siam and in Indochina will write a brochure against these tendencies. We propose that Comrade Line himself write a brochure to criticize himself and his past failings.⁶⁸

By the end of April 1935 Ha Huy Tap felt obliged to make his criticisms clearer. As the final point of a four-page letter hand-written in French, which dealt with various cases of suspected treachery in the ICP, he informed the Eastern Secretariat that several delegates to the Macao Congress had discussed Quoc's responsibility for the arrests of over 100 former Thanh Nien members trained in Canton. Tap listed their reasons as follows:

a) Quoc knew that Lam Duc Thu was a provocateur, yet continued to use him; b) Quoc was wrong to demand 2 photos of each student, his real name, address, the names of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents...; c) in the country, in Siam and in the prisons, they continue to talk about Quoc's responsibility, responsibility which he could never deny; d) the photos demanded by Quoc and Lam are now in the hands of the police; e) gradually as the party's line becomes clearer to party members and to the masses, they are criticizing more severely the policy followed by Com. Quoc. The general secretary of the Siam CP, formerly a convinced follower of Quoc, is one of those who says that before 1930, Quoc was not a communist!!!⁶⁹

In response to the ICP proposal that Quoc become their representative to the Comintern, Vasilieva gave a definite 'no'. 'Quoc will have to study seriously for the next two years and will not be able to undertake anything else,' she explained; 'after his studies we have special plans to make use of him.'⁷⁰ We do not know whether she had received the April denunciation when she wrote these remarks. The April letter appears to have affected Quoc's role at the Seventh Congress, however. On one list of Congress delegates, giving

⁶⁶ RC, 495, 154, 688, p. 19, letter of 31 March 1935 from Overseas Bureau to Comintern.

⁶⁷ See RC, 495, 154, 675, p. 32, Resolutions of Overseas Bureau Conference, (Russian version), 15-20 July 1934, on the role of the Overseas Bureau.

⁶⁸ RC, 495, 154, 688, letter in French from Overseas Bureau 31 March, 1935. The final remark on Lin does not appear in the Russian translation.

⁶⁹ RC, 495, 154, 586, p. 4 of letter, 20 April 1935, signed, 'Cin.'

the nature of their mandate, someone wrote, 'necessary to refuse' next to Quoc's name.⁷¹ Most lists of Congress delegates show three representatives from Indochina, one of whom was a woman – all three of these were listed as having full votes. The two Siamese delegates received consultative votes (*soveshchatelniie golosy*), which in communist practice meant that their votes did not count.⁷² But it seems that Quoc did not even receive that. One can argue that he was kept away from the public Congress proceedings to preserve secrecy, but then one has to ask why any Vietnamese, all of whom were expected to return to active political work in Indochina, should have been given public roles.

If an investigation or commission was organized to investigate the latest charges against Quoc, it is likely to have taken place just before the Seventh Congress. Given the concern with security lapses in the wake of the Kirov murder, it would be strange if no action at all had been taken. One account given many years later by a former staff member of the Soviet Central Committee's International Department, Anatoly Voronin, has it that Quoc was investigated by a troika composed of Dmitry Manuilsky, Kang Sheng and Vera Vasilieva. According to this version, Manuilsky was neutral, while Kang Sheng called for Quoc's execution. Vasilieva is said to have defended him, on the grounds that his mistakes in security procedure were made out of inexperience.⁷³ In 1935 it would have been more likely that Kang Sheng called for Quoc's expulsion from the party than for his execution, if he believed that Quoc shared the guilt for the 1931 arrests. But without some kind of documentary evidence, which may well be hidden in the archives of the former KGB, we have no idea as to how seriously Ha Huy Tap's accusations were taken. The Vietnamese communists themselves, though, were well aware that their party had been penetrated by the *Sûreté*. At the end of 1934, Ha Huy Tap had sent a list to Moscow which analyzed the record of the 37 Vietnamese students who had left Moscow for France or Asia. Of these, 12 were classified as having turned traitor or provocateur. Only ten were listed as 'professional revolutionaries'.⁷⁴

Some light is shed on the Comintern's handling of cases such as Quoc's by Joseph Ducroux's report of his treatment in Moscow, when he returned in January 1934. Ducroux wrote in 1970 that the OMS chief Abramov had been keen to lay the blame for his Singapore arrest on Ducroux's own technical errors. He was not treated as a returned

⁷⁰ RC, 495, 154, 585, undated letter signed 'Vasilieva'.

⁷¹ RC, 494, 1, 454, p. 264; From Seventh Congress file containing correspondence of the Commission on Mandates and lists of Congress delegates.

⁷² RC, 494, 1, 454, p. 205, list of country reps, dated 26 July 1935.

⁷³ Conversation with Anatoly Voronin, spring 1992.

⁷⁴ RC, 495, 154, 676, p. 37, letter of 28 Dec. 1934, signed 'Jos.'.

hero, and was only authorized to eat in the common dining hall at the Lux Hotel, not with the political leaders. He was summoned to a meeting in the ECCI, at which Manuilsky, Lozovsky, Piatnitsky and Bela Kun were present. Manuilsky made a 'violent attack' against him, and called for his expulsion from the party. Lozovsky showed more understanding of the difficult conditions he had worked in. After two days he was informed that he could stay in Moscow to work as a translator for the bulletin, *Communist International*. Instead, Ducroux asked to be sent back to France. Permission was granted, but he was forbidden to take on any work connected with the FCP's Central Committee.⁷⁵ Nguyen Ai Quoc would in a similar fashion be removed from work that involved political decision making. Quoc faced the added complication of involvement in the affairs of the Chinese CP, in particular in the difficult days of 1930. It is possible that Kang Sheng had a grudge against him, as someone who knew what his role had been in the period of Li Lisan's ascendancy, or as someone who may have known about the failures of his special security organization in 1933. After the Kirov murder, Kang is said to have begun to agitate for a new purge of the Chinese party in Moscow.⁷⁶ But again, without more documentary evidence there is very little that one can say with certainty about the relationship between Quoc and Kang Sheng.

4. *The Seventh Comintern Congress*

The Seventh Comintern Congress at last opened on 25 July 1935. It achieved a belated consensus in support of an alliance with the social democratic left in the fight against fascism in Europe. This consensus had been painstakingly prepared since the middle of 1934, when the French CP had agreed to carry out 'joint action' against fascism with the French Socialist Party. There appears to have been little in the way of spontaneous debate and all Congress resolutions were passed in unanimity. The political passions of the Sixth Congress, where the nature of the 'Third Period' and the effects of colonialism had been thrashed out, were now carefully channelled by the Comintern leadership. In a transformation apparently conceived by Georgy Dimitrov in July 1934, the Comintern would grant greater freedom of manoeuvre to individual communist parties, but would at the same time renew its apparatus and 'build a close link between the Comintern leadership and the Politbureau of the Soviet party'.⁷⁷ The Comintern was now leaving behind the extremism of 1929 and the Tenth Plenum, when the radical tactics laid down in Moscow were imposed without regard to local conditions on the worldwide communist movement. Dimitrov emphasized the necessity of taking into account the uniqueness of conditions in

⁷⁵ Joseph Ducroux, unpublished memoir dated 16 Sept., 1970, copy in author's possession.

⁷⁶ See Victor Usov, 'Kang Sheng – Chinese Beria', in *Far Eastern Affairs*, no. 4, 1991, pp. 146-7.

⁷⁷ Adibekov et al., *Organizational Structures of the Comintern*, p. 179.

different parts of the world and the unequal development within the communist movement; a standardized approach should not take the place of concrete analysis in various countries.⁷⁸ But at the same time the Comintern would continue to aid its member parties in training 'truly Bolshevik leaders'.⁷⁹ Dimitrov may have convinced Stalin to accept what was already happening in France and China, where the parties were making decisions in response to their own political situations, by agreeing to a tighter level of control by the Soviet leader at the top-most level of the Comintern.

A small, cohesive Secretariat of the ECCI was chosen in August 1935, whose members would each have their own secretariat, directing the affairs of a group of communist parties. Dimitrov, General Secretary of the Comintern, took charge of the Chinese party, while Wang Ming became responsible for the South American and Caribbean parties. Responsibility for Indochina was in the hands of Manuilsky's secretariat, which handled the countries of the former Romance Secretariat and their colonies. Thus, throughout most of the Popular Front period, at least until the autumn of 1937, the Vietnamese communists were in close contact with the French CP. Otto Kuusinen, a specialist in Indian questions, took on the parties of Japan, Korea, India and Siam. The Philippines fell under Andre Marty's secretariat, since he ran the affairs of the Anglophone countries and some of their colonies; the Netherlands and Indonesia became the province of Ercoli (Togliatti).⁸⁰ The interests of the Southeast Asian parties were in this way subordinated to the needs of the parties in the metropolitan countries.⁸¹

In 1935, as many authors have emphasized, the Comintern superimposed the concept of a united front on the radical policies of 1928 and 1929. The stage of renouncing socialist goals, even if temporarily, had not yet arrived. As McDermott and Agnew write, 'The close identification of Stalin with the sectarian tactics and theories of the Third Period precluded any far-reaching critical examination of the experience of the previous six years. As such the Popular Front era was marked by an unresolved tension between tradition and innovation, between inherited ideological and organizational structures and the initiatives of communist parties to re-engage with democratic national political cultures.'⁸² Nguyen Ai Quoc's desire expressed in January 1935, to look at the failings of 1930-31 in terms of a misunderstanding of the 'bourgeois democratic revolution', may have been ahead of the

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 180.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 188-9.

⁸¹ See Charles McLane, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-13, for a discussion of the Seventh Congress and subordination of the interests of the S.E. Asian parties to those of the metropolitan parties.

⁸² McDermott and Agnew, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

times. Dimitrov explicitly stated in his Congress report that the united front would not signal a move back to the concept of the two-stage revolution. It would be a mistake, he said, to see an anti-fascist coalition government as 'a special democratic intermediate stage lying between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat'.⁸³ At this stage there was still scant information in Moscow about the progress of the Long March. Wang Ming and the other Chinese leaders assumed that a new soviet district was being established in Sichuan, around Chengdu.⁸⁴ Wilhelm Pieck could, thus, still cite the creation of soviets in China as the 'outstanding event' in the Asian communist movement since the Sixth Comintern Congress.⁸⁵ But in the absence of a special commission on Colonial and Semi-colonial Countries, the Seventh Congress did not elaborate a clear message for the colonies of the western nations.

Le Hong Phong was the only Southeast Asian to become a member of the ECCI at the 1935 congress. This placed him in the elite company of the Chinese leaders Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhang Guotao and Wang Ming. (Kang Sheng and Bo Gu were made candidate members.)⁸⁶ When he addressed the Congress on the fourth day, under the pseudonym of Hai An, Phong emphasized the importance of the Chinese experience for Vietnam. The October Revolution in Russia had played a large role in the development of the revolution in Vietnam, he said. 'But it is the victorious soviet movement in China which is playing the decisive role,' he claimed. 'During our party's entire history, the Chinese PC has given us aid and support and shared its experience... Close fraternal ties bind our two parties,' he said.⁸⁷ The true relevance of the Chinese soviets for Indochina in this period is not clear from Hai An's speech, however. After the period of the ICP's 'maximum development' in 1930-31, he explained, there remained nothing more than isolated communist groups in Vietnam. But at the present moment, he said, 'the movement is developing on a much broader base than in the past. The most diverse strata of the population, the most backwards elements of the working class, the national minorities (Moi, Tho, Laos, etc...), the broad masses of the petite bourgeoisie, the intellectuals have all been pulled into the struggle.'⁸⁸ But he regretted the fact that his comrades had not yet considered the task of creating a united front based on 'a broad anti-imperialist front'.⁸⁹

⁸³ McDermott and Agnew, op. cit. p. 132, reference taken from G. Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism*, (London, 1935).

⁸⁴ McLane, *Soviet Policy and the Chinese Communists 1931-1946*, (New York: Columbia Univ., 1958), p. 56.

⁸⁵ Cited in McLane, *Soviet Policies in Southeast Asia*, p. 211.

⁸⁶ Adibekov et al., op. cit., p. 182-3; list of ECCI members footnoted to 494/1/399, 'The Report of the Commission on Mandates and the election of the ECCI', pp. 54-5.

⁸⁷ RC, 494, 1, 177, pp 39-40.

⁸⁸ RC, 494, 1, 177, p. 44.

⁸⁹ RC, 494, 1, 177, p. 48.

Nguyen Thi Minh Khai's intervention at the Congress on 16 August also demonstrates the intermediate state of progress towards the united anti-fascist front. She spoke on the anti-war themes raised by Ercoli's report to the Congress. She mentioned women's issues only briefly, to lament the small number of women at the Congress. Her main theme was the increasing danger of French militarism in the Pacific and the transformation of Indochina into a French military base. The task of the ICP was thus to 'mobilize all its forces to create a broad popular front to struggle for peace'. Although the Soviet Union had in June 1934 agreed to a mutual assistance treaty with France, the ICP vowed to 'unmask French imperialist policies, using the concrete example of Indochina'.⁹⁰ Only after the election of a Popular Front government in France in the spring of 1936 would the ICP begin to modify its opposition to French defence efforts.

5. The United Front in Indochina

In examining the results of the Seventh Comintern Congress, one is struck by the fact that the change to a new united front policy did not immediately bring about a reversal of fortune for Nguyen Ai Quoc. We do not know what Vasilieva had had in mind when she wrote of 'plans to use him after two years of study' – but we do know that Quoc remained in Moscow after the return to Asia of Le Hong Phong in 1936 and then of Minh Khai and Hoang Van Non in 1937. A note from Vasilieva to 'Dmitry Zaharovich' (Manuilsky), which must have been written in late 1935 or early 1936, confirms that in Moscow Le Hong Phong was taking the lead in developing the line of the ICP at this time. Vasilieva writes that, 'Hai An wants to hold a consultation on Indochinese questions in the coming days, as he has to 1) write a letter to the party... and 2) will probably have to spend several days in hospital...'.⁹¹ Eight Comintern staff members were invited to the consultation: Manuilsky, Kuusinen, Kon-Sin (Kang-Sheng), Wang Ming, Stepanov, Gere, Mirov and Vasilieva. At the bottom of this list Vasilieva has noted that the two Indochinese students from the Stalin School and 'Comrade Lin (Ai-kvak)' from the Lenin School can also be called on to attend.⁹²

During 1936 the ICP produced several letters on the subject of a united front in Indochina. The earliest of these may have been drafted in Moscow following the consultation referred to above. A letter in French from the Indochinese Section of the Anti-imperialist League to

⁹⁰ RC, 494, 1, 379, p. 47.

⁹¹ RC, 495, 10a, 138, p. 1, undated note.

⁹² RC, 495, 10a, 138, p. 3.

'Parties and Revolutionary Elements at Home and Abroad', dated 27 February 1936, can be found in the files of Manuilsky's secretariat. The letter calls on all parties, all revolutionary elements at home and abroad, to join the Indochina section of the Anti-imperialist League 'in order to unify the national liberation movement in Indochina'.⁹³ Another document titled 'Open Letter from the Central Committee of the ICP' appeared in April – a copy received in Moscow was translated into Russian on 6 June 1936. It was addressed to 'the Vietnamese Quoc Dan Dang, and to all nationalist revolutionary groups and organizations, to anti-imperialist groups, to reformist and opposition groups and to isolated revolutionary elements in Indochina'.⁹⁴ The letter proposed a flexible framework for a united front, which would give lower level communist organizations the power to make decisions regarding joint actions on the local level. It suggested that other parties either join the Indochinese section of the Anti-imperialist League or that each group elect a number of delegates to a coordinating committee. The Overseas Bureau of the ICP would be responsible for holding talks with the overseas branches of other parties.⁹⁵

It is not clear who was the actual author of the above letter. Its inclusion of 'reformist groups' in its appeal is, however, one of the first signs of a shift to a new sort of united front strategy for the ICP. One *can* say with some certainty that the letter was not a joint production of Le Hong Phong and Ha Huy Tap. For when Ha Huy Tap wrote a report to Moscow covering ICP business from May 1935 to June 1936, Le Hong Phong had still not made contact with the Overseas Bureau, then situated in Macao.⁹⁶ One can guess that the February and April letters advocating an anti-imperialist front with other nationalist parties were connected to the original founding of the *Viet Minh Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi* (Viet Minh Independence League) in Nanjing. As reported by Hoang Van Hoan, this event took place with Ha Huy Tap's approbation, sometime in early 1936.⁹⁷ However, in his own report to the Comintern of 1 July 1936, Tap writes that 'a so-called Revolutionary Vietnamese Independence League had been founded in Nanking', and that a 'fake congress was even held'. 'We have excluded from the party all the communists who created this league with Min [aka Phi Van, Nguyen Huu Cam]; it has already been dissolved, as we have unmasked it,' he reported.⁹⁸ (Hoang Van Hoan, however, writes that the League lapsed into inactivity due to the hostility of certain nationalist Vietnamese and the difficulty

⁹³ RC, 495, 10a, 139, no page numbers, 27 Feb. 1936.

⁹⁴ RC, 495, 10a, 139, pp. 1-6.

⁹⁵ RC, 495, 10a, 139, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁶ RC, 495, 10a, 139, pp. 86-91, report written 1 July 1936, signed Overseas Bureau, acting CC.

⁹⁷ Hoang Van Hoan, op.cit, p.84; p. 86.

⁹⁸ RC, 495, 10a, 139, p. 6 of report of 1 July 1936.

of raising money.⁹⁹) Conceivably, Le Hong Phong went directly to Nanjing from Moscow with his united front message: he had longstanding ties with Ho Hoc Lam and Nguyen Hai Than, two of the members of the first Viet Minh group. As subsequent events would show, even after Le Hong Phong and Ha Huy Tap made contact in 1936, Tap would continue to resist elements of the post-Seventh Congress strategy.

At a meeting held in late July in Shanghai, often referred to as a Central Committee plenum, the two Vietnamese leaders finally made contact. It was at this meeting that the outdated resolutions of the Macao Congress were suspended. The plenum in reality may have been a gathering of the Overseas Bureau, which since September 1935 had also been acting as the Central Committee; it may not have been attended by any party members from in-country.¹⁰⁰ It issued a new open letter on the formation of a united front, now referred to as 'a United Anti-imperialist Popular Front'.¹⁰¹ The gathering followed the June formation of a Popular Front government in France, which opened the way for Ha Huy Tap to move to Saigon in August to establish a new Central Committee.¹⁰² He in theory took with him the July 'Open Letter' and a set of resolutions which reflected the ICP's acceptance of the Seventh Congress line. But as it transpired, he would later be accused of refusing to implement the Comintern's new policies and failing to publicize the decisions of the July meeting in Shanghai. In a retrospective report which he apparently wrote in the late summer of 1937, he mentioned that 'Litvinov (Le Hong Phong) is staying abroad as a reserve agent; due to his absence he is not playing any role in the work of the CC...'.¹⁰³ Someone in the Far Eastern Secretariat wrote a commentary on this report in January 1938, and noted that 'Litvinov (Hai-An) received the assignment when he left Moscow to return to the country and organize the transfer of the CC of the ICP to the interior. After the transfer organized by Ha Huy Tap took place, Hai-An was instructed by Lozeray [a French communist visiting Asia with a parliamentary commission of inquiry] ... to try to regain the leadership of the party in-country. Evidently he did not succeed.'¹⁰⁴ It may be, then, that Ha Huy Tap was acting on his own initiative in 1936. I will discuss the further development of this disagreement in the next chapter.

⁹⁹ Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁰⁰ R.C. 495, 10a, 140, pp. 23, letter to Vasilieva of 10 Sept. 1937, Vietnamese text signed 'F.L'; refers to the meeting as an 'overseas conference'.

¹⁰¹ *Van Kien Dang*, 'Tho Cong Khai cua Trung Uong Dang Cong San Dong-Duong gui cho cac Dong Chi Toan Dang,' [Open letter From the ICP CC to Comrades in all Parties], pp. 56 – 69; dated June 1936 here; the letter cited in note 99 refers to it as the 'letter of 26 July 1936.

¹⁰² RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 33, from 'Sinitchkin' letter written in approx. Sept. 1937.

¹⁰³ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 33..

¹⁰⁴ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 30, 'Explanation of the document received from Indochina', dated 17 Jan. 1938.

The effects of the Leon Blum government in Vietnam have been well documented, particularly for Cochinchina, where *La Lutte* flourished as a joint publication and political alliance of the ICP and local Trotskyists until the summer of 1937.¹⁰⁵ The Indochina Congress movement, which began with a proposal by Nguyen An Ninh printed in *La Lutte* on 29 July 1936, brought a new wave of political activism across the political spectrum. Action committees were organized, first in southern towns and villages, to collect the peoples' demands and prepare for the holding of a Congress, conceived by the communists and Trotskyists as a body which would have broad popular representation. An amnesty for political prisoners resulted in the release from July 1936 to August 1937 of over two thousand activists, 643 of them from the prison island Poulo Condore.¹⁰⁶ Many of these, including an important group of the ICP's leaders, were soon integrated into the movement to demand better working conditions and democratic freedoms for the people of Indochina. But the colonial administration's lack of enthusiasm for the Popular Front meant that the first wave of Vietnamese optimism regarding the new French government did not endure for long. By September 1936 the socialist Minister of Colonies, Marius Moutet, had informed Hanoi that the holding of a large-scale Congress in Saigon was out of the question.¹⁰⁷ Following the visit of Popular Front representative Justin Godart to Saigon and Hanoi in early 1937 and the mass demonstrations to welcome him, the colonial authorities began a new campaign of repression. A 1937 report from the Overseas Bureau to Moscow, however, placed some of the blame for the Congress movement's failure on the Trotskyists: this letter criticized *La Lutte* for driving the 'national bourgeoisie' away from the united front with excessive criticism.¹⁰⁸ The 'united front from below' between the ICP and the Trotskyists did not survive the general disappointment with Leon Blum's government. In May 1937 the ICP was pressured to withdraw from the alliance by the French CP, which was now involved in Stalin's all-out war against Trotskyism. But it was, in large part, the Comintern's growing commitment to anti-fascist alliances which brought about the dissolution of the *La Lutte* front in June 1937. By August the ICP would begin a period of reorganization which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The activities of Le Hong Phong in China have been less well-documented than the history of *La Lutte* in Saigon. *Sûreté* reports show, however, that from the autumn of 1936 through the first part of 1937 he was moving around southern China and renewing contacts with, among others, Nguyen Hai Than, the nationalist leader who had fallen out with the

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Hémerly's *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens* provides in-depth coverage of the *Lutte* front.

¹⁰⁶ Sud Chonchirdsen, Ph.D. thesis, *The Indochinese Communist Party in French Cochinchina (1936-1940)*, (Univ. of London, 1995), p. 56; on figures for Poulo Condore, Hémerly, op.cit., p. 310.

¹⁰⁷ Hémerly, op. cit., p. 323.

¹⁰⁸ R.C. 495, 10a, 140., p. 3, 'Summary of a report on the Situation of the ICP, October 1937.

Thanh Nien group in 1927. According to Agent 'Konstantin' Le Hong Phong visited Than around 23 September 1936. The two were said to be planning to hold a large meeting in Shun-tac (Shunde).¹⁰⁹ Phong was sighted again by *Sûreté* informers in March and April 1937 – he was said to be constantly on the move between Shun Tac, Fat Shan and Canton.¹¹⁰ Le Hong Phong's activities may have influenced the creation of a Popular Front among the Vietnamese emigres in Yunnan, an event which was the subject of a French military intelligence report of March-April 1937. This report noted that the three most important cells of the 'Nationalist Party', those in Hekou, Amitcheou (Kaiyuan) and Kunming had joined this front, which the report called a 'sub-section of the Tonkin section of the Indochinese Popular Front'.¹¹¹

Here we have one of the early signs that the united front in Tonkin (as well as central Vietnam) would take a different form from that in Saigon. Obviously there was no escaping events in China for party activists in the North. But it was also true that in Hanoi the Trotskyists did not possess a strong organization and do not appear to have penetrated the workers movement. Moreover, there was no local equivalent of the bourgeois Constitutionalist Party. Thus when the amnestied communist prisoners began to show up in Tonkin at the end of 1936, the ICP had little competition in organizing the labour movement. At the same time they had an open field when it came to making political alliances with middle-class forces, and seem to have actually played the key role in creating the Vietnamese branch of the Socialist Party, the S.F.I.O., in the North. In March 1936 the bi-monthly socialist review *L'Avenir* began to appear. Among its staff were Vo Nguyen Giap, Phan Anh, Dang Thai Mai, Vu Dinh Huynh and Bui Ngoc Ai, most of whom would play important roles in the Viet Minh.¹¹² In November 1936 a mixed group of ICP communists and Trotskyists established *Le Travail*, a paper which gave aid to released political prisoners and organized the preparations for Justin Godart's visit. By January 1937 the *Travail* group was cooperating with the SFIO and the Radical Party (both French organizations) on a plan to create a Tonkin section of the SFIO.¹¹³ This group was joined in April 1937 by Pham Van Dong, who had been living in Hue under restricted residence, as a recently released prisoner. A *Sûreté* report noted that he had a reputation as an excellent journalist, and was being made a permanent editor of *Le Travail*.¹¹⁴ However, the paper had to close down soon after Dong's arrival, due to a series of fines and law suits

¹⁰⁹ AOM, SPCE 383, Envoi no. 195 of 7 Oct. 1936.

¹¹⁰ AOM, SPCE 383, Envoi no. 74, 22 April 1937.

¹¹¹ SHAT, 15H Troupes de l'Indochine, Bulletin Mensuel de renseignements No. 32., 28 May 1937, p.2. My thanks to Chris Goscha for making this document available.

¹¹² AOM, SPCE 377, Note conf. no. 2470/S, Hanoi 7 March 1936.

¹¹³ AOM, SPCE 377, note conf. no. 90/S, 5 Jan. 1937.

against its publisher. By the summer of 1937, disagreements between Trotskyists and ICP communists had broken up the first attempt at a united front in Hanoi. But the ICP would continue to pursue an alliance with nationalist intellectuals and other members of the bourgeoisie in Tonkin.

6. Nguyen Ai Quoc's Last Years in Moscow

After the Seventh Congress Nguyen Ai Quoc stayed on at the Lenin School until the end of 1935. By 1936, however, he was working as an instructor within the Indochinese section at the Stalin School, where the two remaining Vietnamese delegates to the Seventh Congress were enrolled. A report of a meeting of teachers and students of this section in April 1936 shows that 'Lin' and Vera Vasilieva were working together, apparently to develop a course of study on Indochina. She served as the senior lecturer in the Indochinese Section. 'Working with him is pleasant, as he is not a novice in the study of his country,' she commented; 'he knows the country but not systematically.' They were working on political problems such as the agrarian question. 'He has a large amount of revolutionary experience, but as he has, like other Indochinese comrades, made many errors, we are now paying a lot of attention to these questions.. . he has made significant progress,' she said.¹¹⁵ Some Vietnamese sources claim that Quoc was planning to write a thesis on the agrarian question, but I have seen no references to this, beyond Vasilieva's report. One of Quoc's students, 'Van-Tan' (Hoang Van Non) complained that Comrade Lin was putting him through a 'Stakhanovite' course of study – in one month he had had to complete a course on the history of the Soviet communist party, and as there was no literature available, he had had to memorize everything. 'Comrade Lin speaks quickly, like a spinning wheel,' he said; 'that is the reason for the state of my knowledge.'¹¹⁶ (One can speculate that Quoc had no real interest in teaching the young Tay the Stalinized 1935 version of party history. When Quoc wanted to teach something, we know that he would go to great lengths to make the subject matter clear and simple.)

At the close of 1936 Vasilieva drew up a training plan for Indochinese students which provided for a new contingent of ten Vietnamese students to come to Moscow. It also called for the creation of a new training school in China, to offer two-month political courses to lower-level party activists from Vietnam. She projected a budget of 3,000 US dollars to train ten students for each two-month session. Point nine of her proposal

¹¹⁴ AOM, SPCE 377, 10 April 1937, note signed 'Arnoux'.

¹¹⁵ RC, 532, 1, 386, Record of meeting of teachers and students of Section 7, 1 April 1936.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

mentioned that, we have to 'decide the question of sending Comrade Lin, who has finished his studies in Moscow, to organize and run this school.' However, at the end of her memo, someone had scribbled, 'All these proposals have been cancelled, following the clarification of the problem.'¹¹⁷ What the 'problem' was is not explained, but we know that Comrade Lin stayed on in Moscow for further studies.

In 1937 the Stalin School was reorganized, with the non-Soviet students being placed in the 'Scientific Institute for the Study of National and Colonial Problems'. The more neutral name did not mean that the school had changed its function, however. In a letter to the 'Soviet Control Commission' in April 1938, a school administrator explained that the Institute's function was to prepare cadres for foreign parties – the name was a cover and did not reflect the true nature of the institute's work, he wrote.¹¹⁸ Quoc was still registered as both an instructor and as a graduate student, now in the 'first course' of the Institute's History Department. He did not show a great deal of enthusiasm for his studies: his marks for 'Dialectical Materialism', 'Ancient History' and 'Middle History' were all just 'satisfactory'. Only in 'Modern History' did he receive 'excellent'. His status as an instructor was seemingly relatively low – he was teaching Indochinese Studies in the Vietnamese language. By contrast, 'Minin', Nguyen Khanh Toan, who had studied at the University of Hanoi, was listed as 'acting lecturer' in 'Political Economy', 'General History', and 'Country Studies'.¹¹⁹ (Nguyen Khanh Toan's extended residence in Moscow has never been explained. He would return to China in 1939.)

By mid-1938, when Nguyen Ai Quoc was preparing to leave Moscow, the Institute was being closed down. Pavel Mif, the Institute's Director and since 1928 Stalin's hatchet man for Chinese affairs, was arrested as 'an enemy of the people' sometime in 1937. He was executed in 1938. Throughout 1937 and 1938, a long list of Russian party leaders and Comintern activists were arrested and shot. The Comintern operatives who had helped to implement the hard-line of 1928-29 were particularly hard hit. These included the Pole 'Rylski', 'Gailis' – the compiler of the book *Armed Insurrection*, Volk, Vasiliev, Safarov and Piatnitsky (Orgwald) himself. The peasant experts who had overseen Nguyen Ai Quoc's work in the mid 20s – Dombal and 'Volin' – were also swallowed up by the purges.¹²⁰ At the same time, the three Russian communists – Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin -- who had led the Comintern up to 1929 had all been swept from the scene.

¹¹⁷ RC, 495, 30, 1175, typed document dated 8 Dec. 1936.

¹¹⁸ RC, 532, 1, 265, p. 24.

¹¹⁹ RC, 532, 1, 246, p. 49.

It is difficult to imagine how an old communist like Nguyen Ai Quoc could have kept functioning through this period of madness. But in January 1938 he was still translating the rare letter that arrived in Moscow from Indochina. His survival through the worst years of the purges is often taken as a sign that Quoc was protected by one of the higher ranking survivors, Manuilsky, or that he was a dutiful Stalinist. On the latter score, we know that Stalin had made so many changes of course that it was almost impossible not to have been in conflict with one of his policies at some stage. Quoc, as he showed in 1924, was willing to cooperate with whichever group held the current Comintern leadership in order to promote his goal of independence for Vietnam. Yet even quiet compliance would probably not have been enough to save him had he been a Pole, Balt, German, or Turk. These latter parties received the full force of Stalin's vengeful attentions in 1937-8. Comintern representatives from legal parties, such as the French, British and American CPs, were largely spared in this period.¹²¹ In Nguyen Ai Quoc's case, the fact that he came from a distant country with a low priority for Soviet foreign policy must have been at least part of the reason that he was not arrested. At the same time, he had made it a long-term practice to keep a low-profile in Moscow and had never presented himself as a theoretician, as had M.N. Roy, for example. In a biographical questionnaire which he filled in when entering the Lenin School in 1934, he was typically secretive. He wrote that he had no adult family members, no wife, no profession or specialty, was not acquainted with any branch of industry and did not know what kind of work he could do. At the end of his short essay on his life, he wrote tersely, 'I think that is all about my biography for the time being'.¹²²

As far as his relationship with Dmitry Manuilsky is concerned, we learn from a letter sent to Manuilsky's Secretariat on 6 June 1938 that the two had not met for quite sometime. 'I would be very grateful, dear Comrade, if you would grant me an interview,' Quoc wrote; 'You have not seen me for a long time.' Quoc pointed out that it was the seventh anniversary since his arrest in Hong Kong as well as the beginning of his eighth year of 'inactivity'. 'Send me somewhere. Or keep me here. Use me in whatever way you judge useful. What I am requesting is that you not let me live too long without activity, outside the party,' he wrote.¹²³ The records of the Institute for the Study of Colonial and National Questions show that his wish was granted and that on 29 September 1938 he was officially

¹²⁰ Adibekov et al, op. cit., p. 193.

¹²¹ Milorad Drachkovitch, *The Comintern: Historical Highlights, Essays and Recollections*, (Paolo Alto: Hoover Institution, 1966), p. 141

¹²² RC, 495, 201, 1, p. 163.

¹²³ RC, 495, 10a, 140, 92.

discharged.¹²⁴ Not long afterwards he seems to have departed for China. Once again, we are in the dark as to what Quoc's job description was when he departed from Moscow for China. But we do know that he went back as an official emissary of the Comintern to the ICP. Vasilieva intervened with Dimitrov to have Quoc granted an audience before his return. In a brief note she explained: 'It is essential that someone from the leadership should speak with Comrade Lin before his departure, about those questions which were the subject of disagreements within the Party (Indochinese) leadership and which now still face the party. Lin is a member of the Central Committee, enjoys great authority in the Party, and as he is coming from here (Moscow), they will listen to what he says very attentively. It is important that he speak correctly,' she said¹²⁵. (It would seem that at this stage Quoc was still considered at least a candidate member of the ICP CC.)

As it turned out, Vasilieva's confidence in Moscow's authority was somewhat misplaced. In the following chapter I will review the disagreements within the ICP leadership which divided the party from 1936 to 1940. It would not be until May 1941, after Quoc had spent two-and-a-half years in China, that he would officially deliver his message to the party's Central Committee.

¹²⁴ RC, 532, 3, p. 5.

¹²⁵ RC, 495, 74, 261.

CHAPTER VII

The Return of Nguyen Ai Quoc and the Path to the Eighth Plenum (1937—1941)

By the time Nguyen Ai Quoc had received the go-ahead to return to Asia in the autumn of 1938, the Soviet Union and the nationalist Chinese government had re-established an alliance. The drawn-out negotiations between the two sides in Moscow and Nanjing led to the signing of a non-aggression pact in August 1937. As in the early 1920s, this diplomatic achievement was not received with entirely good grace by the Chinese communists. But it did result in a new in-flow of military aid to help the GMD slow the Japanese advance from the coastal cities into central China. Charles McLane estimates that between the end of 1937 and November 1940, Russian aid to Chiang Kaishek reached an amount somewhere between \$300 million and \$450 million.¹ The Russian-GMD understanding led to the revival of the united front between the nationalist and communist Chinese, as well. This meant a return to legality for the CCP for a few years, and a chance to establish a presence in the GMD's capitals, first Nanjing and, briefly, Wuhan; then Chongqing. In September 1937 the Chinese Red Army was reorganized under the command of the GMD's Military Affairs Commission, with the Eighth Route Army formed to operate in the northwest and a New Fourth Army created to fight south of the Yangtze. The CCP was authorized to run two Guerilla Training Courses in southern China in cooperation with the GMD. As early as June 1938, overseas Vietnamese communists were able to meet the CCP general Ye Jianying, who was liaising between the Eighth Route Army and the Military Affairs Commission, in Wuhan.²

Nguyen Ai Quoc was thus returning to China at an auspicious moment of Sino-Soviet cooperation. His assignment on returning to Asia was to bring the ICP into a 'broad national democratic front', which would include progressive French residents of Indochina and the nationalist bourgeoisie as well.³ The Comintern's eight-point directive, which he had had to commit to memory, called on the Vietnamese communists to place the aims of the anti-fascist front before the aims of the proletarian revolution. This was the nature of the fronts which had been established in France in 1936, and then in China in 1937. The ICP was asked not to make demands which were too extreme, for full independence, for example, or a parliament. 'This would be to fall into the trap of the Japanese fascists,' the directives

¹ Charles McLane, *Soviet Policy and the Chinese Communists 1931-1946*, (New York: Columbia Univ., 1958), p.129.

² Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., pp. 98-99.

³ R.C., 495, 10a, 140, p. 106, NAQ's own rendering of his directives as he remembered them in July 1939.

cautioned. The party should organize a front to press its demands for freedom of speech, press and the right to assemble, as well as a full amnesty for political prisoners. Regarding the national bourgeoisie, the party was advised to act 'with suppleness'; to draw it into the front and push it to act, or if necessary, to isolate it politically. The party should not claim the right to direct the democratic front. It should earn that right by showing itself to be one of the 'most active, sincere and devoted' parties. Towards the Trotskyists no concessions or entente were permissible. They were to be politically exterminated.

1. The Political Prelude to Nguyen Ai Quoc's Return (1937-1938)

By 1938 within Vietnam a complex configuration of political forces had evolved, a fact which made Quoc's organizing task even more difficult than it had been in 1924-27. The ICP had only re-established a unified leadership in 1935. Now the Vietnamese party was being asked to sign on to a world-wide anti-fascist crusade which would require that it moderate its opposition to the French colonialists. But without the unifying force of a Japanese invasion, the Vietnamese communists found it very difficult to agree on the nature of the united front which they should enter. The immediacy of the Japanese threat would be much more strongly felt in Tonkin and Annam than in Cochinchina. Some Vietnamese viewed the Japanese as potential liberators. As we have seen, when Le Hong Phong returned to China from Moscow in 1936, his message regarding the united front met with opposition from an unexpected quarter – from Ha Huy Tap. Tap had returned to Asia when the *proletkult* was still a powerful force; he was apparently surprised by the Comintern's about-face. However, the ICP's resistance to the Comintern's orders only became known in Moscow in January 1938, when they received a report dated 10 September 1937 and signed by 'F.L.'. This report recaps some of the developments which followed the Central Committee meeting held in July 1936 in Shanghai. Given the author's description of her return journey to Asia via Paris, we can be fairly sure that the writer was Nguyen Thi Minh Khai or 'Fan-Lan'.⁴ The letter was written after the ICP's Enlarged Party Conference and Second Plenum, held outside of Saigon from 25 August until 4 September 1937, when the Vietnamese CC fell into line with the Comintern's policy.⁵

Minh Khai and Hoang Van Non had travelled back to Hong Kong via France and Italy in the late spring of 1937. They had memorized a nine-point list of policy directives, which they were to transmit to the Overseas Bureau on arrival. I have not found a copy of this list,

⁴ R.C., 495, 201, 35, *Ankieta [Questionnaire]* for Fan-Lan, 14 Dec. 1934 -- written across the top are the words, 'Left for her country 2 Feb. 1937'.

⁵ RC, 495, 10a, 140, pp. 23-7, French translation of letter of 10 Sept. 1937.

but we can assume that it was close to the eight points which Nguyen Ai Quoc was called on to implement in 1938. The two travellers found Le Hong Phong in Hong Kong in July and passed on the Comintern's recommendations. As 'F-L's' letter relates, he explained to them that the Central Committee had been critical of the Comintern's new emphasis on legal and semi-legal methods of organizing and viewed it as, 'liquidationist, opportunist and rightist'. The Overseas Bureau had written a brochure explaining the new policies, but this had been kept out of circulation by Ha Huy Tap. According to Le Hong Phong, Ha Huy Tap had written to tell him that 'the comrades overseas were far from the practical reality of the country, and that the CC must be responsible for the work in-country.'

Le Hong Phong sent Minh Khai to Saigon in August 1937 to deliver the Comintern's latest directives in person. (Hoang Van Non was sent to Hanoi to do the same.) In response to these instructions, Ha Huy Tap once again stated that the tactics being promoted by Moscow and the Overseas Bureau were 'reactionary'. (As 'F.L.' explains, she discovered that the CC in Saigon had sent the party organizations a letter on March 26 1937 to annul the decisions of the 1936 Shanghai meeting.⁶) 'I wanted to write to explain all this to the comrades overseas,' she writes, 'but comrade Sinitchkin told me that if I did, I would be expelled from the party.' At a conference held before the CC plenum, however, the northern party members, Hoang Quoc Viet and Nguyen Van Cu, supported the Comintern recommendations. They claimed that they had not seen the 26 July 1936 letter on new methods of organizing, and that Ha Huy Tap had given a false explanation of Comintern policy at the preceding CC plenum in March 1937. Phung Chi Kien represented the Overseas Bureau at the August plenum. The presence of the French communist Maurice Honel in Saigon at this time seems to have been critical in overcoming Ha Huy Tap's resistance to the new line. F.L.'s letter says that Honel criticized Tap's 'sectarianism', and that he encouraged her to write to the Comintern to make clear what was happening within the ICP.

The reason for the bitterness of this disagreement is hard to fathom from the political jargon used by the Comintern trainees -- on the surface it would seem to have been fairly insignificant. Personal animosity may have accounted for some of the tension. (F.L.'s September 10 letter does not mention disagreements over policy towards the Trotskyists.) We know that the Comintern and Overseas Bureau advocated placing greater emphasis on legal organizing and joining a front with non-proletarian parties. (They do not seem to have

⁶What appear to be extracts from this letter can be found in the French military archives in Vincennes, SHAT, microfilm 15H, 'Annexe II au Bulletin de Renseignements no. 33, 31 July 1937, Troupes de

questioned the need for the party leaders to remain underground.) One other item of contention was the nature of youth organizing. Ha Huy Tap wanted to transform the Communist Youth into an illegal Anti-imperialist Youth League to develop cadres for youth work. Eight of the party members who attended the Plenum supported this point of view, while the remaining five supported the transformation of the Communist Youth group into a popular, legal organization. In this latter scenario, the best of its members would be brought into the communist party and, at the same time, would form the backbone of the legal youth organizations. The whole debate on methods of organizing could reflect the continued presence within the communist movement of the tensions which had surfaced in 1928-29, when the cult of proletarianization began.

The final decision on youth organizing was left to the Comintern. Otherwise, F.L. judged that the August-September plenum had been successful in unifying the party and combatting 'sectarianism'. Ha Huy Tap reacted quickly to the Plenum decisions, to judge by a letter which came to the *Sûreté's* notice. On 7 September 1937 he informed the writers of the *Avant-Garde* newspaper that from now on all brochures in French and *quoc ngu* would have to be submitted to party censors; all newspaper articles would have to be written one or two days in advance. (*Avant-garde* was the paper formed by the ICP after their separation from the *La Lutte* group in May 1937. Around this time its name changed once again to the more inclusive *Le Peuple*. By the following March the Stalin School trainee Tran Van Kiet, aka Remy, would return from France to take over *Le Peuple* and start its Vietnamese-language version, *Dan Chung*.⁷) As Tap explained, *L'Avant-Garde* had published several articles 'whose extreme left-wing tendency has served as a pretext for repression'. He warned that the press in Tonkin was also distorting the party's policy. 'All these actions will inhibit our legal action or turn against us those groups with whom we could form alliances,' he wrote.⁸

A French summary of the resolutions adopted by a Congress of the Southern Regional Committee gives some more information regarding the policy changes which were decided in September 1937. Held from 22 to 25 September 1937, this congress declared that the party's propagandists had been talking over the heads of the masses with their 'scholarly dissertations'. Their 'incendiary goals' had either 'intimidated the "unconscious masses" or created antipathy among the religious elements, or wounded the amour-propre of the rich peasants.' The party line, however, was to 'use all efforts to enroll these elements in popular

l'Indochine, Service des Renseignements Central. My thanks to Chris Goscha for providing a copy of this document.

⁷ AOM, SPCE 384, Note n. 2057-S, Cochinchine, Iere Section; Ultra-secret, 14 April 1938.

⁸ AOM, SPCE 384, Police de Cochinchine, première section, note of 20 Sept. 1937.

organizations (friendship circles, mutual aid associations, etc...).' ⁹ Rich peasants were in future to be won over or neutralized. '...But if there are those who, sacrificing their interests, ask to join our organizations, we should open the doors wide to them so as not to upset them and force them into the arms of the reformists, the reactionaries and the Trotskyists,' the resolutions said. ¹⁰

Soon after the CC's August plenum, Le Hong Phong moved to Saigon, in part to establish contacts with the Central Committee of the Chinese Party, apparently via their Saigon committee. ¹¹ At the end of March 1938, when the ICP held a Third Plenum at Ba-Diem in Gia Dinh, with seven people attending, Ha Huy Tap was removed from the post of General Secretary. (He would be arrested in May and expelled to Ha Tinh under restricted residence.) Nguyen Van Cu, a young protégé of Ngo Gia Tu from Bac Ninh province, an amnestied political prisoner who had served time on Poulo Condore, became the new General Secretary. A new Secretariat of the Standing Committee was established, including Ha Huy Tap, Nguyen Van Cu and, as the *Sûreté* noted, 'a returnee from China'. This last member was most likely Le Hong Phong, as Phung Chi Kien had returned to Hong Kong after the September 1937 plenum. The Standing Committee itself included five people: Ha Huy Tap, Nguyen Van Cu, Gia or Anh Bay from the South (apparently Vo Van Tan), Nguyen Van Trong or Nguyen Chi Dieu, a released prisoner who was rebuilding the Annam regional committee, and again the 'Returnee from China'. At this time Nguyen Thi Minh Khai was identified as a member of the Cochinchina Regional Committee, as well as of the Saigon Committee. She was also put in charge of the education of party members. ¹²

We can assume, then, that by the time of this March 1938 meeting the Comintern line and its supporters were beginning to have a stronger influence within party structures in Cochinchina. The CC report on the March Plenum mentions, in fact, that some party members in the South had been excluded for 'lack of activity', while others had left of their own accord. The total number of party members in Cochinchina had remained steady at 655 since the Second Plenum. ¹³ However, the selection of Nguyen Van Cu as General Secretary shows that the Moscow-trained communists had to compromise with the ICP structures already existing inside Vietnam, as Tran Phu and Ha Huy Tap had done before. With the released political prisoners being brought back into the party, former activists of

⁹ Vincennes, SHAT 15H, Troupes de l'Indochine, Annexe I au Bulletin de Renseignements no. 36, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ AOM, SPCE, 383, Note Confidentiel, n. 5701, S.G., Hanoi, 26 Nov. 1938; from document found in a police raid on Phung Chi Kien's Kowloon residence on 25 Oct. 1938.

¹² AOM, SPCE 384, Note confidentielle n. 144-ss; Hue, 14 April 1938.

the Tan Viet party appear, in particular, to have begun to play a major role in the leadership. Preparations for a May Day meeting to be held in Saigon also show that, although the ICP was now trying to become an acceptable partner to bourgeois parties, they were still countenancing some cooperation with the Trotskyists. The organizing committee for this meeting was composed of one socialist (French), one Trotskyist, and two 'Stalinists'. But Ha Huy Tap insisted that leaflets announcing the meeting list only 'workers' as the organizers. According to the *Sûreté*, he was afraid that if the VNQDD saw that Trotskyists were involved, they would break their links with the ICP.¹⁴

From the ICP reports to Moscow written in late 1937 and early 1938, we can see that the party's links with the Comintern and the French CP had weakened since the first days of the Popular Front. Maurice Honel had returned to France in 1937, promising to raise the profile of Indochina within the FCP. But nothing had been heard of him six months after his return. As the CC report sent to Moscow in April 1938 makes clear, lack of support from the PCF was eroding the ICP's influence in Cochinchina. Following the June 1936 formation of the Leon Blum government, the report said, the PCF had stopped paying attention to the problems of Indochina. On the other hand, the Trotskyists in France attacked the colonial policies of the Popular Front, a fact which helped the Saigon Trotskyists gain influence among the masses, especially among intellectuals.¹⁵ The Trotskyists had also publicized the FCP role in the ending of the *La Lutte* front in May-June 1937 and printed brochures on the show trials taking place in Moscow.¹⁶ Still, the ICP CC remained committed to the concept of the anti-fascist front and continued to try to establish regular contacts with the Comintern. (They did not seem to have any idea of the havoc which the Moscow purges were working within the Third International – they may have been unaware that Comintern leaders such as Piatnitsky and Mif had been arrested in 1937.) In their April 1938 report they requested that the Comintern send regular directives on political and organizational questions, and that a 'leading comrade' be sent to Vietnam every five or six months to bring these directives, along with financial aid. In addition to an immediate advance of 5,000 dollars to print books, they requested advisers and funds to open a legal training center in China, along the lines of what had existed in 1926-7.¹⁷ The dispatch of Nguyen Ai Quoc to Asia in the autumn of 1938 may have been a response to this request.

¹³ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 68, report dated Saigon, 6 April 1938.

¹⁴ AOM, SPCE 384, note. n. 2246-S, Iere Section, Information provenant de la police de Saigon, 23 April 1938.

¹⁵ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 72, report dated Saigon, 6 April 1938.

¹⁶ Daniel Hémerly, op. cit., p. 415; Huynh Kim Khanh, op.cit., p. 227.

¹⁷ RC,495, 10a, 140, pp. 70-70b, 'Proposals and requests'.

By this time the ICP's communications with the Comintern via China had become extremely difficult as a result of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict. The Chinese ships on which the ICP had liaison agents were no longer able to sail to Vietnam due to a Japanese blockade.¹⁸ When Phung Chi Kien wrote to the Comintern in November 1937, he requested permission to open official contacts with the Southern Bureau of the CCP, as the Chinese party had become, 'more or less legal'. As he explained it, 'Even though for more than a year, we have had relations with the Southern Bureau, this link, although close, remains irresponsible because it has not received your approval...'. He also asked to transfer his responsibility for communication with the Siam CP to the Southern Bureau.¹⁹ At the time of writing this letter, Kien seems still to have been in Hong Kong. By June 1938, he was in Wuhan to consult with the Chinese general Ye Jianying, according to Hoang Van Hoan. Kien was probably already acquainted with the general from his days as a Whampoa cadet, when Ye Jianying commanded the Training Regiment. After October 1938, as the Japanese were moving into Wuhan, and after his Kowloon residence had been raided by the police, Phung Chi Kien was said to have gone to Shantou for guerilla training.²⁰ For the Vietnamese communists in southern China at this juncture, the role of the Comintern in their day-to-day decision making must have been growing negligible. Yet, as noted above, the ICP in-country was eager to re-establish regular links with Moscow, partly for financial reasons, and in March 1938 was trying to raise the money to send a party member abroad for consultations. One *Sûreté* report claimed that Phung Chi Kien had volunteered to be the emissary, but that the CC had decided to send a legal communist instead.²¹ It does not appear that anyone made the journey, either to France or Russia.

2. *Nguyen Ai Quoc's Travels/ Vietnamese Politics: 1939*

Nguyen Ai Quoc embarked for China in the autumn of 1938 and must have arrived in Xi'an by November or December. He travelled via Urumchi and Lanzhou and would have been part of a larger movement of advisers and materiel which was being transported to China to support the war effort. It seems probable that he made most of the journey by train and plane, as he managed to spend a month in Yan'an, and still arrive in Guilin by February 1939. He later wrote that, with the outbreak of war in China, he had 'fallen into a vast maelstrom which is changing the fates of hundreds of millions of men...'.²² In the same

¹⁸ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 33, undated report signed 'Sinitchkin'.

¹⁹ RC, 495, 10a, 140, 'Letter from Kan', 13 November 1937.

²⁰ Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., p. 108.

²¹ AOM, SPCE 384, Police de l'Indochine/Annam, Service de la Sûreté, note conf. n. 144-ss, 14 April 1938.

²² RC, 495, 10a, 140, p.102, Lin report in French sent July 1939 from Guilin.

letter he reported that he had lost his luggage in Yan'an, including the notes he had made on his Comintern instructions. Chinese sources say that Nguyen Ai Quoc, now known as Ho Quang, stayed in the CCP's guesthouse for foreigners in the Date Orchard region in the northwest of Yan'an, where Kang Sheng was his host.²³ Quoc would have arrived there soon after the CCP's Sixth Plenum in October, which is believed to have ended with a rough balance in the leadership between Mao and the leaders such as Wang Ming and Zhou Enlai, who were more enthusiastic supporters of the united front.²⁴ The battle for Wuhan had finally ended with a Nationalist retreat at the end of October, a fact which seems to have increased Mao's influence. We can assume from a long report and request for aid which Quoc would address to the Chinese party in mid-1940 that he maintained his low-profile behaviour in Mao's base -- in that report he would not demonstrate any intimacy with the Chinese leadership, or assume that they knew the history of his role in the ICP.²⁵

Throughout China armies and refugees were on the move. Chiang Kaishek's army was retreating south and west at the end of 1938. Hoang van Hoan's memoirs describe his travels with the GMD bureaucracy beginning with the 1937 evacuation from Nanjing to Wuhan; then in late 1938 to Changsha and Guiyang, where the north-south highway to Xi'an intersects the east-west route; and finally west to Kunming in early 1939. At roughly the same time, Nguyen Ai Quoc moved south-east across China, from Yan'an to Guilin in Guangxi province, which was now a front-line city, regularly bombed by the Japanese. Quoc had been made a major in the Eighth Route army, which seems to have facilitated his travel through the chaos. After his stay in Yan'an Quoc first made his way south to Chongqing, where he was sighted in Zhou Enlai's company in early 1939.²⁶ King Chen recounts that he moved in the entourage of General Ye Jianying, who after the retreat from Wuhan had been appointed to run the Southwest Guerilla Training Class in Hengyang, in Hunan province.²⁷ A Chinese account of Quoc's activities in the Eighth Route Army emphasizes that he was moving under CCP patronage and protection, yet depicts him as fulfilling routine tasks in what is sometimes referred to as a club or a liaison office, in Guilin and then in Henyang, 350 miles to the north. The Guilin liaison office may have served in part as an intelligence gathering point for the CCP, as it was outside the area of operations of the Eighth Route Army. Quoc was said to have been in charge of 'sanitation', perhaps meaning that he was a public health officer; he ran a club museum; he produced a small

²³ Hoang Tranh, op. cit, p. 94.

²⁴ Thomas Kampen, *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2000), pp. 93-98.

²⁵ RC, 495, 10a, 140, pp. 123-139, report written in Chinese dated 12 July 1940, translated into Russian on 27 Feb. 1942.

²⁶ King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1969), p. 34.

newspaper for the unit; he listened to foreign language radio broadcasts, all the time remaining in the disguise of a Chinese officer with a Cantonese accent. This account says that Quoc moved to Henyang from 20 June 1939 until 20 September that year, as an instructor for the second training session at the Guerilla Center.²⁸

This depiction of Quoc's activities in China does not accord with the picture of an acclaimed communist leader returning home to take up the reins of power in his party. The confusion created by war in China had certainly complicated his task. But the rivalries and conflicting political views within his own party may also have contributed to the difficulty he had in establishing contact with the ICP. By his own account, Quoc arrived in Guilin around February 1939. He was clearly discouraged when he wrote a long report to Moscow in July that year. Seven months since his arrival in China, he wrote, he still had not managed to accomplish his mission.

'What have I done in these seven months?' he wrote. 'With the help of friends I have begun my search, which has not produced any results. Then I tried to build some links; that has had certain results... While waiting and so as not to waste time, I am working in the Eighth Army as a translator (listening to radio broadcasts), as secretary of the cell, as president of the club, and now as a member of the club committee. At the same time ... I have written a brochure on the Special Region and articles on political and military events, on Japanese atrocities, on the heroism of the Chinese combattants, on the anti-Trotskyist struggle, etc...'

He explained that since 12 February 1939 several of his articles had been published in the Hanoi weekly of the 'legal Indochinese P.C.', *Notre Voix*. 'These articles are date-lined "Kweilin" with the signature "Line", in the hope that the responsible comrades might guess who the author is and where he is. But this hope has not yet been realized,' he wrote. He had established good links with the paper's editor, who assumed that he was a Chinese journalist. It was only at the end of July, he said, that he had been able to send on his address and the Comintern's directives to the ICP CC via a friend and the editor of *Notre Voix*.²⁹ The report to Moscow which follows this explanatory letter, on the political situation in Vietnam since 1936, is an eight-page, typed document full of information on the press, elections, strikes and other political movements. He claims he has gleaned these facts and figures from his reading of *Notre Voix* and *Doi Nay (These Times)*, another legal party paper from Hanoi which was edited by Tran Huy Lieu. But one wonders if he had a more direct source of information.

²⁷ King C. Chen, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

²⁸ Hoang Tranh, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-99.

²⁹ 495, 10a, 140, p.102.

Quoc's explanation of his contacts with Vietnam leaves a few questions hanging. Was it really possible that between February and July the 'responsible comrades' in the ICP had not figured out who 'P.C. Line' was? As it happened, a leading journalist at *Notre Voix* was Võ Nguyen Giap, who in 1939 married the younger sister of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai.³⁰ In 1937, *Sûreté* reports show that he had taken a forceful stand on the need to form a united democratic front and at one point had even advocated forming a mixed section of the French CP in Vietnam to engage in legal organizing activity.³¹ There is in my opinion some ground to suppose that Quoc was in independent contact with Minh Khai, or some of the legal activists who shared her point of view, throughout 1939. As we shall see, by late 1939 she appears to have made a trip to China to contact him. Another possible source of information for Quoc at this time would be links via the CCP to Le Hong Phong in Saigon. The latter, however, was arrested on 22 June 1939 and sentenced to six months' imprisonment, followed by three years of restricted residence, for using a false identity card.³² Hoang Tranh's book on Quoc's time in China, cited above, claims that he was in contact with a Chinese liaison agent who travelled between Guilin, Haiphong and Hong Kong. This agent, Ly Boi Quan, on one of his trips to Haiphong is supposed to have procured a Baby Hermes typewriter with a French keyboard for Quoc. But he does not claim to have contacted the ICP on Quoc's behalf until the autumn of 1939.³³

The ICP's internal conflict over tactics flared up again in the summer of 1939. After the United Democratic Front candidates Nguyen An Ninh, Nguyen Van Tao and Vu Cong Ton were defeated by the Trotskyists in the elections to the Saigon Colonial Council in April 1939, a polemic began in the communist press. The debate pitted three of the so-called Stalinist communists, Nguyen Van Tao, Le Hong Phong and Nguyen Van Cu, against each other. Once again the main issue was how the ICP should relate to the bourgeois reformist parties. Nguyen Van Tao, the legal communist who had represented the Vietnamese at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, wrote in *Dong Phuong tap chi (The Far East Review)* that the communists should take a harder line against the Constitutionalist party, which had won three seats in the assembly. A writer now identified as Le Hong Phong, using the pseudonym 'T.B.' or 'Tri Binh', wrote in several issues of *Dan Chung* to defend the ICP

³⁰ Tran Huy Lieu, *Hoi Ky*, (Hanoi: NXB Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1991), p. 216. The other leading writer (*cay but chinh*) was Phan Boi, also known as Hoang Huu Nam, a former prisoner from Quang Nam.

³¹ AOM, SPCE 377, Note conf. n. 7964-S, signed P. Arnoux, Hanoi, 22 June 1937.

³² AOM, SPCE 383, PROCGAL Saigon à DIRJUST Hanoi, telegramme off. N. 335-Pg, 30 June 1939.

³³ Hoang Tranh, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-8. The purchase of this typewriter is one of those events which has taken on symbolic importance in accounts of this period. Vu Anh, in his memoir *Tu Con-Minh ve Pac Bo*, in *Bac Ho - Hoi Ky*, p. 148, says that the typewriter was purchased by Phan Boi, the journalist on *Notre Voix* mentioned in note 31.

policy.³⁴ This author took the line that there was no need to attack any indigenous party or class, so long as it was not reactionary. He placed most of the blame for the ICP's electoral failure on the harrassment of the colonial government. (In fact, *Dan Chung's* main personnel had been arrested during the campaign.)³⁵

However, the ICP General Secretary, Nguyen Van Cu, wrote a pamphlet titled, *Tu Chi Trich (Self-Criticism)*, in which he took to task both of these viewpoints. In an introduction to his pamphlet, he mentions that he had originally sent it as an article for publication to *Dan Chung* in Saigon. But for one reason or another, he writes, the article did not get printed. He then had it published in pamphlet form by the *Dan Chung* publishing house in Hanoi, which was more amenable.³⁶ He criticizes Anh T.B. for expressing an 'individual opinion', not 'the united opinion of the whole Party'.³⁷ Part of the blame for the failure in the elections, he says, lies in the fact that the ICP placed too much emphasis on the peril of Japanese fascism and did not speak enough about the oppression of the masses by 'the reactionary colonial forces'.³⁸ The mistake made by T.B., he writes, is that he does not distinguish between a reformist party and a reactionary one.³⁹ (The author does not mention that in Hanoi's April municipal elections a single list of candidates was presented by the left under the SFIO umbrella, and ran unopposed.) Around this time, June 1939, the *Sûreté* got wind of a ten-chapter '*Draft for Discussion*' which was being circulated by the ICP's Regional Committee for Annam to its provincial committees. According to this document, the party's policy was to support the formation of a democratic front – but this front would have to be formed within 'powerful mass struggle movements'. The Democratic Front would be a form of class struggle as well as anti-imperialist resistance.⁴⁰ This conception would seem to be the one held by Nguyen Van Cu.

When one reads the articles which Nguyen Ai Quoc was sending to *Notre Voix*, one can see that his situation in the middle of the Sino-Japanese war was a world apart from that of Saigon and its elections. He was engaged in producing war-time propaganda to build support for China and faith in its ability to resist the Japanese. At the end of February he

³⁴ Marr, *Tradition on Trial*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1981), p. 394 identifies Tri Binh as Le Hong Phong.

³⁵ *Notre Voix*, 9 April 1939.

³⁶ The details of these publications appear in the introduction to *Tu Chi Trich*, republished in Hanoi in 1983 by the *Su That* Publishing House. The latter pamphlet is the only one which I have had access to. Tran Huy Lieu explains that after the closure of *Tin Tuc* in late 1938, two members of the *Tin Tuc* group opened a book shop which published books and pamphlets with the *Dan Chung* imprint. (Tran Huy Lieu, op.cit., p. 215.)

³⁷ *Tu Chi Trich*, p. 18.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁰ AOM, GGI 65459, activites politiques en Annam, June 1939.

wrote about the third session of the Chinese National Political Council. This was the first session after the defection of its ex-president, Wang Jingwei, former leader of the Left GMD. Quoc cited statements by Mao and Chiang Kaishek to show that there was close collaboration between the major parties in the anti-Japanese national front. The council had met 'at the moment when the defeatist tendencies personified by Wang Jingwei – which had raised their heads after the loss of Canton and Hankou – had been definitively crushed by the unity and determination of our people,' he explained.⁴¹ At this point many communists believed that the GMD's will to resist Japan was hanging in the balance. Those ICP members who identified most closely with the Chinese struggle (Le Hong Phong, originally a CCP member, would have been one of them) would have been less inclined than in the pre-war period to worry about the exact political complexion of the Vietnamese parties which were willing to join them in an anti-fascist front. But within Vietnam, especially in the South, other issues such as the increasing recruitment of Vietnamese for military duty in Europe and the tax levies of the colonial regime had more immediacy than Japanese aggression in China.

Quoc was apparently keen to demonstrate his loyalty to Stalin and distance himself from the left-wing GMD leaders who had fled to Hanoi at the end of 1938. His letters to *Notre Voix* include some fairly crude anti-Trotskyist propaganda quoting from the Moscow show trials. He mentioned trials of accused Trotskyists in the Yan'an Special Region in 1937 as well. What he actually thought about these trials remains a mystery. But he made the point that in 1937 the Chinese Trotskyists had condemned the communist call for a united front with the Guomindang as treachery.⁴² Altogether he wrote four anti-Trotskyist articles from Guilin. In his 1939 pamphlet Nguyen Van Cu also emphasizes the Trotskyist danger, as something which should be viewed very seriously. In Vietnam, we should remember, the anti-Trotskyist struggle was still a political contest for influence in which both sides had roughly equal weaponry – the spoken and written word.

3. *The Changing International Situation*

In August and September 1939 international politics would intrude more forcefully than ever into the internal debates of the ICP. On 23 August the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, which overnight brought the Moscow-aligned communists into alliance with Nazi Germany. War broke out in Europe when the Germans attacked Poland on 1 September. On 28 September the French Governor-General of Indochina outlawed the ICP and all their

⁴¹ *Notre Voix*, 'Lettre de Chine', 9 April 1939.

publications. In the next weeks the French began a round-up of communists, both Trotskyists and Stalinists, which continued throughout the autumn and into 1940. But while the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Germany is usually viewed as a near disaster for the ICP,⁴³ there is evidence that many ICP cadres had gone into hiding by the end of September and found ways to take advantage of the new political situation. The fact is that the Nazi-Soviet Pact allowed the communists to once again take an uncompromising stand against French imperialism. During the Democratic Front period, they had been forced to support France's national defence programme and recruiting efforts in Indochina. Now they could once again work to stir anti-military sentiments within the Vietnamese troops in the French army at a time when recruitment was becoming increasingly unpopular.⁴⁴

The issue of party leadership becomes increasingly complicated in this period, as leaders inside Vietnam were arrested one after another and communications between north and south became more difficult. In China, the Japanese advanced west from Canton in November 1939 to Nanning and Longzhou, virtually to the Vietnamese border. The communist Chinese source relates that Nguyen Ai Quoc attempted to make contact with an ICP envoy in Longzhou at some point in the autumn of 1939, but that the emissary had to return to Vietnam prematurely when he was robbed and ran out of money.⁴⁵ After a wait of three days, Quoc is said to have returned to Guilin. This story may well be true, but it probably does not give us a full picture of Quoc's efforts to contact the ICP CC. In April 1940 the *Sûreté* would find a curious letter which they believed to be in Nguyen Thi Minh Khai's handwriting, when they searched a party member's house in Gia Dinh. Its peremptory tone and criticism of the CC are quite surprising. It is written to participants in a meeting which she had the right to attend, but where she would not have had the right to vote. She mentions that she has been working for the past two years with the 'directing organs', so one can guess that the letter was written around the time of the ICP's Sixth Plenum, held in Hoc Mon in November 1939. It reads:

Comrades!

We need to appoint someone urgently to bring back L! Why all this disorder? You haven't decided on the rendez-vous. Which means that L. has waited a long time, without

⁴² *Notre Voix*, 'L'activite des Trotskyistes en Chine', 11 August 1939.

⁴³ See Huynh Kim Khanh, op. cit, p. 250. Khanh cites arrest figures from Tran van Giau, *Giai Cap Cong Nhan*, 3.

⁴⁴ See Sud Chonchirdsin, *The Indochinese Communist Party in French Cochinchina (1936-1940)*, Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of London, 1995; pp. 261-65.

⁴⁵ Hoang Tranh, op. cit. p. 102.

anyone going to get him. I was counting on bringing him back, but I didn't know the meeting place, and anyway, I hadn't received any instructions about this...

In China events of exceptional seriousness are now taking place, which could have repercussions for our Central Committee. We have to resolve this question, as well as the financial question, which is very important. We have several hundred piasters at our disposal and are awaiting the decision of the CC or the Regional Committee. You must send a trustworthy comrade to come and get the money. The CC will be asked to assign tasks more clearly. As it is, sometimes we make a lot of effort without obtaining any results, because of the bad division of labour.

I know that the idea of a woman, even if she is just or has a good political character, does not inspire great confidence. However, I feel that since I have begun working with the comrades here, I have not made any suggestions or begun any activities which are against the principles or the policy of the Party. ..⁴⁶

This letter's tone of authority leads one to suppose that Minh Khai saw herself as a representative of the Comintern or the Overseas Bureau of the ICP. With Le Hong Phong under arrest this responsibility could have fallen on her shoulders. But as her letter makes clear, her fellow party members did not like to be given orders by a woman; they may have viewed her as insubordinate for making unauthorized contacts with 'L.' or with her allies in Tonkin, such as her brother-in-law Giap. By the time this letter was written, the *Sûreté* was referring to her as 'the concubine of Le Hong Phong'. The two had been sharing a house in Cholon and had at least been posing as husband and wife. In 1937, however, the French had described her as already married, but separated from her husband.⁴⁷ From what we know of Nguyen Ai Quoc's difficulty in making contact with the CC, it seems highly possible that the 'L.' referred to in her letter is indeed 'Lin'. The letter could have been written just after the failed attempt to make contact in Longzhou, which must have occurred before the Japanese occupied the town in late November 1939.

4. The Sixth Plenum and the 1940 Uprisings

Nguyen Van Cu came to Saigon from Hanoi in the autumn of 1939 for the Sixth Plenum of the ICP. (He had been expelled to Tonkin in the summer of 1938, not long after he took over his post.⁴⁸) This would be the final CC meeting before the uprisings of 1940, which were to create an upheaval in the party's leadership structures. Nguyen van Cu himself would be arrested in January 1940, along with Le Duan, another ex-prisoner from Poulo

⁴⁶ AOM, SPCE 385, translation of a letter seized during a search made on 21 April 1940 in the home of Nguyen Van Cho, Hoc Mon, Gia Dinh. A photostat of the Vietnamese original is in this file, along with the French translation.

⁴⁷ AOM, SPCE 385, Note n. 5819-S, *Activite communiste Rev. en Cochinchine*, Saigon, 6 Sept. 1937, signed: Campana.

Condore who had moved to Saigon to work in 1939.⁴⁹ Phan Dang Luu, Le Duan, and Vo Van Tan are the three other cadres usually mentioned as having taken part in this meeting held from the 6–8 November in Hoc Mon. Hoang Quoc Viet does not seem to have taken part, as he had gone into hiding north of Hanoi; the Annam CC representative Nguyen Chi Dieu may have already succumbed to tuberculosis by this time. Ta Uyen, a northerner from Ninh Binh, who had been working in the South since his escape from Poulo Condore in 1935, is another cadre likely to have participated. A member of the original ICP faction from 1929, his biography identifies him as secretary of the Southern Regional Committee at the time of his arrest in October 1940.⁵⁰ Minh Khai does not seem to have been a full CC member at this stage, although by 1940 the French identified her as a CC secretary.

The Sixth Plenum reacted to the changed international circumstances of late 1939 by calling for the creation of an Anti-imperialist United Front. National liberation now became the major goal of the ICP. In a circular published in December, the CC called on the 'struggling forces of the proletariat, of the labouring peoples, of the small and weak nations' to unite with the Soviet Union. They would have to rise up and struggle, 'to stamp out the flame of war by eliminating its root: the capitalist, imperialist system'.⁵¹ This manifesto called for a halt to the sending of Vietnamese soldiers to France or other foreign countries; it also called on communists to support the Soviet Union, as well as the revolutions in France, China and the world.⁵² According to a version of the Sixth Plenum Resolution published in 1983, the meeting revived Nguyen Ai Quoc's moderate policy of 1930 with regard to land confiscation.⁵³ But in contrast to the statements of the Eighth Plenum in 1941, the documents of 1939 still are aimed primarily at workers, peasants, and *dan-chung*, 'the masses'. The ICP was, on the one hand, returning to familiar terrain for those activists such as Nguyen Ai Quoc who could recall the European anti-war movement of the First World War. At that time, left-wing socialists and Bolsheviks had refused to adopt the war aims of their respective ruling classes. On the other hand, the CC was now taking a stance which would bring it closer to the party's own left-wing, as it prepared the ground to return to a violent struggle to overthrow French power.

⁴⁸ *Nhung Ngươi Công Sản*, p. 63. Tran Huy Lieu says that Nguyen Van Cu was a member of the *Tin Tuc* group in Hanoi. (Tran Huy Lieu, op. cit., p. 201).

⁴⁹ Ngo Nhat Son, *Dong Chi Phan Dang Luu, [Comrade Phan Dang Luu]*, (Nghe Tinh: NXB Nghe Tinh, 1987).p. 46.

⁵⁰ Nguyen Chon Trung et al., *Con Dao ky su va tu lieu*, p. 164.

⁵¹ 'Chu truong cua nguoi cong san doi voi viec bat linh' ['The Communist Position on Forced Recruitment'], 30 Dec. 1939, *Van Kien Dang, II (1930-1945)*, p.389.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 394-395.

⁵³ *Nhung nghi quyet co ban dan den thang loi cach mang thang tam, [Basic Resolutions Leading to the Victory of the August Revolution]*, (Hanoi: NXB Su That, 1983), p.8.

After the January 1940 arrest of Nguyen Van Cu it is unclear how the void in the leadership was filled. Cu's removal from the scene seems to have created a succession crisis in the ICP which was not fully resolved until the Eighth Plenum in 1941. It may be that in 1940 two wings or tendencies within the party once again developed, in a way that echoed the split in the Thanh Nien association in 1928-29. In March or April Vo Van Tan was arrested, which eliminated another key leader.⁵⁴ In May 1940 two legal activists from Tonkin, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong, began to play a new role as a link between the CC and the communists in southern China. Meanwhile, in Cochinchina a reinvigorated anti-French movement sprang up, which made recruitment inside the army a major part of its mission. How closely what was happening in Yunnan and Guangxi was coordinated with activities in Cochinchina and other parts of Vietnam is impossible to say. The communists who made the effort to travel to Kunming to meet Nguyen Ai Quoc and the Overseas Bureau in 1940 were some of those who had been most closely associated with the policies of the United Democratic Front. They would include, in addition to Giap and Dong, the former Tan Viet activist Phan Dang Luu. A woman known as Ly Thi Lan in Yunnan was also sighted with Nguyen Ai Quoc in May and June 1940. It is noteworthy that a French report written that June mentions that the ICP has 'the intention to make more use of its female elements for propaganda and liaison work'.⁵⁵

In June of 1940 the in-country and overseas sections of the ICP finally began to come together. Nguyen Ai Quoc had arrived in the Yunnan capital of Kunming early in the year. After his failed attempt to rendez-vous with the ICP in the autumn of 1939, he is believed to have returned to Guilin, then made his way to Guiyang and Chongqing. There he once again met Zhou Enlai, according to Hoang Tranh.⁵⁶ With the sudden change of policy in Moscow in August 1939, the Vietnamese would have been eager to consult on how to adapt their own tactics. (Presumably Quoc met Zhou before the latter's visit to Moscow in early 1940.⁵⁷) The Vietnamese say that Quoc also met Ho Hoc Lam, still attached to the GMD General Staff, in Chongqing.⁵⁸

The Vietnamese communists who were now making Kunming their center of operations were a combination of old Thanh Nien trainees from Canton and former members of the VNQDD who had taken refuge in Yunnan in 1930. Among the Thanh Nien group Hoang

⁵⁴ Ngo Nhat Son, op.cit., p. 46. Other sources, such as *Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, place his arrest in 'mid-year'.

⁵⁵ AOM, GGI 65461, Annam, June 1940.

⁵⁶ Hoang Tranh, op. cit., pp. 105-6.

⁵⁷ McLane, *Soviet Policy and the Chinese Communists*, p. 144.

⁵⁸ *BNTS*, p. 88.

Van Hoan and Phung Chi Kien were the most prominent. Kien, like Nguyen Ai Quoc, had still been considered a member of the ICP CC as of 1938.⁵⁹ In Kunming he had become the head of the party's reconstituted Overseas Bureau. The antecedents of two other members of this group, Vu Anh (Trinh Dinh Hai) and Cao Hong Linh or Lanh are less clear. Both were apparently communists in good standing and fluent in Chinese, who may have earlier been part of the Nanjing circle around Ho Hoc Lam. In 1935 Vu Anh and a former VNQDD cadre, Tran Quoc Kinh, had been sent by the ICP to build a communist group in Yunnan. They recruited two students at the Kunming officers training school, Bui Duc Minh and Le Tung Son, who had grown disenchanted with the VNQDD leadership.⁶⁰ These two became stalwarts of the overseas communist group, Bui Duc Minh serving as the guide for Giap and Dong when they made their trip to Kunming in May 1940. There may still have been a considerable number of VNQDD-affiliated workers in Yunnan in 1940, along the railway line between Hanoi and Kunming. In spite of their theoretically legal status conferred by the united front in China, the communists generally used some sort of front organization to protect themselves from persecution by the local GMD. Several Vietnamese sources recount an inspection tour along the Yunnan railway which Nguyen Ai Quoc undertook with Phung Chi Kien in April 1940.⁶¹ Quoc encouraged the Vietnamese communists to increase their propaganda along the railway, to call on the Vietnamese to 'fight the French and to support China's resistance to Japan', using the cover of the 'Association of Vietnamese in Support of China's Resistance' for their activities.

Vo Nguyen Giap relates that he and Pham Van Dong departed from Hanoi for Kunming in the beginning of May 1940. In Yen Bay they met Bui Duc Minh, who took them by river boat on the next stage of the journey. After crossing the river into China at Lao Cai, they changed into Chinese clothes to continue their trip to Kunming.⁶² On 13 May, however, the Sûreté received a report that 'an émigré recently arrived from Sian [Xi'an], Tran Ba Quoc', and Ly Thi Lan had left Yunnanfou by train on 12 May. They were planning to travel to the Vietnamese border and cross on foot, this report said. The man was dressed as a scholar and the woman as a Hakka Chinese.⁶³ The French identified the man as Nguyen Ai Quoc. It seems possible that Quoc was hoping to meet the two envoys from Hanoi at the border. According to Giap's account, however, he and Dong waited in Kunming until early June before Quoc, whom the Vietnamese referred to by his old Hong Kong alias of Vuong,

⁵⁹ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 68b; CC report of 6 April 1938 to Comintern.

⁶⁰ Le Tung Son, *Nhat Ky Mot Chang Duong [A Stage in the Journey]*, (Hanoi: N.X.B. Van Hoc, 1978), pp. 42-3.

⁶¹ Hoang van Hoan, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁶² Vo Nguyen Giap, *Nhung Chang Duong Lich Su [Historic Journeys]*, (Hanoi: N.X.B. Chinh tri quoc gia, 1994), pp. 14-8.

turned up. At this point the Vietnamese accounts are uninformative about the discussions which ensued. However, a long report and request for aid which Quoc addressed to the CCP in July 1940 may well have been the product of a joint decision made that month. The *Sûreté* reported in December 1940 that Phan Dang Luu had admitted after his arrest that he, too, had been in Yunnan in June.⁶⁴ Another *Sûreté* report of 9 June 1940 referred to 'Indochinese communists in China returning to Indochina'. It mentioned four people as travelling together: Tran Ba Quoc, Ly Thi Lan (whom it said was not Nguyen Thi Khai), Duong Ba Linh, and Nguyen Cong Nam.⁶⁵ Giap's alias in China is usually given as Duong Hoai Nam and Dong's as Lam Ba Kiet. So we cannot say with any certainty who these four were. The identity of the woman remains a mystery, but the French may have been too quick to assume that it was not Minh Khai. They did not have any confirmed sightings of her between the autumn 1937 plenum and her arrest in Cholon at the end of July 1940, although they believed she gave birth to a daughter in Saigon in early 1939. By May of 1940 she was being identified as a CC secretary by informers of the *Sûreté*, so it would have been quite logical for her to join the group which travelled to Yunnan.⁶⁶

Quoc's report on Indochina and request for aid, dated 12 July 1940, is presented in the exhaustive style favoured by the Comintern. It includes an analysis of the strategic situation in Indochina and international attitudes regarding its future. As it is written in the first-person by someone who mentions that at the end of 1929 he returned to Hong Kong to call a meeting of communist factions, we can assume that the author is Nguyen Ai Quoc. He refers to the French capitulation to Germany on 16 June 1940 as a moment when all Vietnamese rejoiced, believing that the propitious moment for the overthrow of French rule had come. 'For this we are only lacking organizers and leaders. And why doesn't the CP take up this organization and its leadership? Because 80-90% of the old cadres have been arrested, and the new cadres do not have enough experience or strength. The problem is that in order to arouse the people to rise up we need an influential man, who will boldly and decisively go on the attack.'⁶⁷ Quoc's analysis of Japan's intentions shows that he did not foresee the Japanese-Vichy French partnership for control of Indochina which was to be

⁶³ AOM, SPCE 369, Yunnan fou 13 May 1940, Dirsurge Hanoi, n. 104.

⁶⁴ AOM, SPCE 385, Fiche de Reference, *Sûreté* Cochinchine, n. 7624-S, 5 December 1940.

⁶⁵ AOM, SPCE 385, pour m. le Commissaire de Police spéciale, Langson, en communication a Mess. Le Chef des Services de Police de Tonkin, Hanoi, Les Commissaires de Police spéciale Laokay, Caobang, Moncay, Hanoi 9 June 1940.

⁶⁶ AOM, SPCE 385, Activités communistes/arrestations d'agitateurs, signé Castrueil, chef local des services de Polices; in May 1940 the French arrested a Nguyen Duc Hung, who confessed that he worked as a liaison agent between several organizations in Cholon and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, 'member of the CC of the ICP and head of the Saigon-Cholon Committee.'

⁶⁷ RC, 495, 10a, 140, p. 134: quoted from a Feb. 1942 Russian translation of the 1940 Chinese-language document.

cemented in September 1940. 'At present,' he wrote, 'Japan is making efforts to grab this country [Indochina].' The Japanese were already within three hours of Hanoi, while their special forces were ready at any time to land in Haiphong, he said. Although the government in Indochina had declared its support for the London Committee of the Free French, he noted that they were in reality making concession after concession to the Japanese.⁶⁸ Yet he concluded that, although Japan was strong, she could not use her full force to pacify Indochina, as her enormous military might was tied down by the war in China. The French troops in Indochina, on the whole, were made up of indigenous soldiers, he pointed out, and 'if we can appeal to them, they – or at least some of them – will fight the French (or even the Japanese).' He also noted that the anti-French forces had strong allies: in addition to the USSR, these included China and India. A situation had been created when it would be enough 'for one person to cry out loudly, for all the rest to rise up'. 'In a word', he wrote, 'objective conditions favour our success, but our subjective force – our party – is very weak. .. at present our old, experienced cadres are groaning in prison. Thus the masses are leaderless and cannot make use of this 'once-in-a-thousand years propitious situation'.⁶⁹

In order to change the situation, in order to help the party fulfill its historic mission, he explained that its forces would need to attack from the outside. For this they required: 1) freedom to cross their border; 2) some weapons; 3) some financial aid; and 4) a few advisers. When we have these things, 'we can definitely create an anti-fascist, anti-Japanese base,' he claimed. 'Further,' he said, 'if we can use the contradictions among the imperialists and create and broaden a united front of oppressed peoples, then the bright future will not be far off,' he concluded.⁷⁰ This request would appear to be the first formulation of plans for the armed Viet Minh. It may also be the first sign that Nguyen Ai Quoc was preparing to transform himself into the nationalist leader, Ho Chi Minh, 'the influential man who would boldly go on the attack'. The weakness of the ICP would seem to have dictated a time-frame of at least six-months to a year for the planned uprising to reach its take-off point.

The GMD Sixth Section (for information) picked up news of a Vietnamese communist approach to the CCP in the summer of 1940. They reported that a communist from Cochinchina, Tran Van Hinh, had arrived in Yan'an and that in August the Chinese and Vietnamese concluded an aid agreement. (It is not clear whether he was delivering Nguyen Ai Quoc's request, or whether this was a separate approach to the CCP.) King Chen lists the

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 135-6.

⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 137-138.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

following items as part of this agreement: 1) to establish a United Front of the Sino-Vietnamese people against Japan; 2) to enlarge the communist's armed organization and begin guerilla activities; 3) to unite the ICP with all political parties in an effort to set up a 'United Front for National Independence', 4) to make the goal of the ICP struggle 'Anti-French Imperialism and Anti-Feudalism'; 5) to send ICP cadres to Yan'an for training at the Resistance-Japan University; and 6) for the CCP to serve as representative of the Comintern's Asian Information Bureau to guide the ICP, and to offer \$50,000 Chinese per month to the ICP.⁷¹ This agreement would have reflected the inability of the French CP to continue advising the Vietnamese, and the return to an arrangement of ICP subordination to the Chinese party. Such an arrangement may have been inevitable at this point in the ICP's development, as direct communications with the Comintern seem to have ceased. (Quoc's aid request to the CCP was not translated into Russian until 1942; how it eventually arrived in the Comintern's files is not clear.) Giap's memoirs mention that in Tonkin the party had been discussing the need to revive an Asian League of Oppressed Peoples⁷², an idea which Quoc also raised in the conclusion to his aid request. It appears that the same kind of front organization which had been used to unite the Asian communists in 1925-26 and 1928-30 was being considered as the vehicle for a Chinese-led anti-Japanese front.

In July 1940 the French had begun to collect evidence in Cochinchina that some sort of uprising was in the offing. They believed that at the end of June 1940, the ICP CC had passed an order instructing party members to prepare for an armed insurrection.⁷³ This report could refer to the meeting which was held in Kunming in June 1940, as there may actually have been more CC members there than remained at large in Cochinchina. These would have included Phung Chi Kien, Nguyen Ai Quoc, Phan Dang Luu, and perhaps Nguyen Thi Minh Khai. The *Sûreté* also reported that the ICP had sent a Chinese member of the ICP to China, to request CCP support for an insurrection.⁷⁴ We do not know whether this refers to Phan Dang Luu's trip to Yunnan, the travels of the 'Tran Van Hinh' noted by the GMD, or whether there was another link to the CCP from Cochinchina, for example via the CCP organization in Saigon. The French gained their first hard evidence of the planning for an armed movement when they arrested Nguyen Thi Minh Khai at the CC headquarters in Cholon on 30 July 1940, along with the escaped political prisoner Nguyen Huu Tien. They seized documents which they described as, 'concerning the insurrection which the ICP

⁷¹ King C. Chen, op. cit., p. 41; whether there really were plans to form an 'Asian Information Bureau' at this date is uncertain.

⁷² Vo Nguyen Giap, op. cit., p. 24.

⁷³ Sud Chonchirdsin, op. cit., p. 282, citing AOM, Direction des Affaires Politiques, rapports sur les mouvements subversifs de Cochinchine et d'Annam, Nov. 1940 - May 1941.

plans to start when the "favourable moment" comes'. Most of these documents had not yet been mimeographed and distributed among party members. Some passages in the confiscated materials were aimed against the French military, so the newly arrested prisoners were handed over to the military courts.⁷⁵ Sud Chonchirdsin describes the seized documents as covering the 'forming of an insurrection organization, sabotage plans and guerrilla tactics.'⁷⁶ The party member arrested along with Minh Khai, Nguyen Huu Tien (Giao Hoai), was like Ta Uyen a former member of the 1929 ICP faction from Ha Nam province. The two had escaped together from Poulo Condore in the spring of 1935.

There would seem to be a connection between the gathering in Kunming in June 1940, not recognized in party history as an official ICP meeting, and the beginning of an insurrectionary movement within Vietnam. Yet from subsequent developments in Cochinchina, one has room to question whether the plans which Nguyen Ai Quoc discussed with his colleagues, and the aid request he sent to the CCP, really provided the masterplan of the Nam Ky Insurrection, which began on 23 November 1940. Nguyen Ai Quoc, as the cautious planner, most likely did not endorse the rapid timetable for the insurrection which took shape in Cochinchina between September and November 1940. As in 1930, it would appear that the voluntarist wing of the party, which retained its predilection for symbolic violence and revolt within the military, set the pace of the events which occurred in the autumn months. A Vietnamese source claims that at a meeting of the Cochinchina Regional Committee held in Mytho in July 1940, one group of delegates favoured delaying the insurrection due to the weakness of the party's forces. This group included delegates from Saigon-Cholon, the eastern provinces and Phan Dang Luu, now described as representative of the CC for Cochinchina. The majority, however, voted to go ahead with the insurrection. It was at this point that Phan Dang Luu suggested consulting with the rest of the Central Committee.⁷⁷ After Phan Dang Luu had been arrested in November 1940, he would confess that the insurrection had been led by the extreme left in the party, 'who were ignorant of the advice given by the Standing Committee of the Cochinchina Committee concerning the preparedness of the party.'⁷⁸

Some Vietnamese sources, Tran Huy Lieu in particular, claim that the Anti-imperialist Front in the South was extremely successful in attracting indigenous soldiers. In his article on the

⁷⁴ Chonchirdsin, *op. cit.*, p. 283, citing AOM, Note sur l'activité des intrigues politiques pendant le mois de juillet 1940, Sûreté 7F 27.

⁷⁵ AOM, SPCE 385, Note postale, conf., Gouverneur Cochinchine a Gouverneur général de l'Indochine (Direction des Affaires Pol.), Hanoi, 21 August 1940.

⁷⁶ Chonchirdsin, *op. cit.*, p. 284, citing CAOM, Sûreté 7f-27, July 1940.

⁷⁷ Ngo Nhat Son, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-3. Cited by Chonchirdsin, *op. cit.*, p. 284-5.

Southern Insurrection he says that groups of soldiers in Gia Dinh and Cholon, up to 300 at one time, fled into the jungle with their weapons in order to prepare resistance to the French.⁷⁹ In November 1940, as the French were preparing to send troops to the Thai-Cambodian border to defend against Thai incursions, Lieu claims that up to 15,000 (sic) Vietnamese soldiers in Saigon, including two artillery units, were prepared to protest against their involvement in the conflict. As many as two-thirds of the Vietnamese soldiers were ready to 'follow the revolution' at that point, Lieu writes, as well as 15,000 ordinary southerners. Other sources claim rapid rates of growth for the southern party in this period after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁸⁰ Yet it appears that the French were able to suppress the insurrection fairly easily when it broke out in November.

The Japanese and French came to an agreement on military cooperation on 22 September 1940, which permitted the Japanese to station six thousand troops in Tonkin, to use four Tonkin airfields and to move their troops through Tonkin to Yunnan.⁸¹ But the night the agreement was signed, a Japanese attack on the French border post at Dong Dang led to three days of fighting between French and Japanese troops. Vietnamese in the Japanese-backed Viet Nam Phuc Quoc Dong Minh Hoi (Vietnam National Restoration League) took part in fighting at Lang Son, while in the district of Bac Son an ICP-led insurrection broke out on 23 September. Resistance in the area of Vu Lang carried on sporadically until 28 October, when the French returned to disperse the revolutionary fighters.⁸² Once it had become clear to the communists that the Japanese were not going to dislodge the French in support of Vietnamese nationalist forces, the short-term aims of the Anti-imperialist United Front would have to be re-evaluated.

When Phan Dang Luu went north to Tonkin for consultations in October 1940, it is not at all clear what sort of meeting he would have been attending, or whether its authority would be recognized by the party in the South. William Duiker writes, based on interviews in Hanoi, that Luu met with the members of the Tonkin Regional Committee, who at their meeting in early November 1940 reconstituted the Central Committee, making Truong Chinh the acting General Secretary.⁸³ The other members included Hoang Quoc Viet (who, in 1937 at least, had served on the CC), Hoang Van Thu, and Tran Dang Ninh, who had taken charge of the

⁷⁸ Chonchirdsin, op. cit., pp. 300-301, citing CAOM, Sûreté 7F 27, Nov. and Dec. 1940.

⁷⁹ Tran Huy Lieu, *Cac Cuoc Khoi Nghia Bac Son, Nam Ky, Do Luong*, (Hanoi: NXB Van Su Dia, 1957), pp. 19-20.

⁸⁰ Ngo Nhat Son, op. cit, p. 47, says the ICP grew by 66% in the period leading up to the insurrection.

⁸¹ David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1995), p. 19.

⁸² Tran Huy Lieu, *Cac Cuoc Khoi Nghia*, pp. 12-5.

⁸³ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, p. 66. For more discussion of this issue see Stein Tonnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, (Oslo: PRIO, 1991), p. 115-6.

Bac Son insurrectionary movement. This seems the most plausible explanation of how the ICP succession crisis was resolved, although it is not clear when the November meeting became identified as the CC's Seventh Plenum, or whether the CC members in Kunming had any input in its decisions. Curiously, in the Museum of the Revolution in Ho Chi Minh City, there is an 'urgent communique' in pamphlet form sent from the Standing Committee of the ICP CC asking for support from the Central-Northern party committee (*Dang bo Trung-Bac ky*) for the Southern Insurrection. The uprising had begun on 23 November, the pamphlet says; it was the duty of the Central-Northern Committee 'to bring more renown to the soldiers of the uprising by diverting the imperialist forces'.⁸⁴ If this is authentic, it shows that the southerners still considered the Standing Committee to be in Cochinchina. As noted above, Ta Uyen is mentioned in one French report as being the head of this committee.⁸⁵ However, the *Sûreté* reported in December 1940 that Phan Dang Luu had admitted that he had gone to Tonkin in October 1940, 'doubtless in order to attend the ICP CC meeting which is believed to have been held on the 5,6, and 7 November.'⁸⁶

In any case, the meeting which Phan Dang Luu attended voted to delay the insurrection in the south, but to develop the armed forces in Bac Son.⁸⁷ Either the CC advice failed to reach the southern party in time, or as some sources have it, the plans were too far advanced to abort. Phan Dang Luu was arrested on arrival in Saigon, shortly before the capture of Ta Uyen. The French had managed to keep abreast of the insurrection plans, thanks to arrests of key participants. Thus most elements of the uprising, such as the raid on the Central Prison in Saigon, were prevented. The mass uprising of indigenous troops was nipped in the bud when they were locked into their encampments. One suspects that the French were simply waiting for the organizers to show their hand, before moving in to arrest them. A 1941 telegram to the Vichy colonial authorities listed the damage from the insurrection as follows: thirty deaths, including three Frenchmen, as well as thirty wounded, with again three Frenchmen among them. Some of the victims had been savagely attacked. Of the 130 rifles and revolvers which had been stolen, 40 had still not been recovered. Numerous buildings had been burned down, bridges and telegraph and telephone lines had been sabotaged. Admiral Decoux considered the violence to be so abhorrent that none of the accused ICP leaders was to be shown clemency.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ The author saw a copy of this pamphlet on a visit to Ho Chi Minh City in February 1995.

⁸⁵ Chonchirdsin, op. cit., p. 305 citing AOM, *Sûreté* 7F 27, Nov. – Dec. 1940.

⁸⁶ AOM, SPCE 385, fiche de ref., *Sûreté* Cochinchine, n. 7624-S, 5 and 12 December 1940.

⁸⁷ *Nhung Nguoi Cong San*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ AOM, SPCE 385, projet telegramme d'Etat à Colonies Vichy, signed: Decoux, 17 May 1941.

The arrests and executions which followed this still-born uprising destroyed the ICP infrastructure in the South. As many as 100 leaders were executed, according to Tran Huy Lieu.⁸⁹ Ha Huy Tap, Nguyen Van Cu, Phan Dang Luu, Vo Van Tan, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, and Nguyen Huu Tien were all executed by firing squad in August 1941. Le Hong Phong, Le Duan and most of the legal communists such as Duong Bach Mai and Nguyen Van Tao were imprisoned. (Le Hong Phong would die on Poulo Condore in 1942.) This left the newly-constituted CC in Tonkin to reorganize the communist infrastructure, which in theory should have been preparing for a long-term independence struggle. The party's center of gravity would now shift over the border to China, where Nguyen Ai Quoc and the overseas party members were beginning to make the links which would enable them to take part in the GMD-sponsored Vietnamese liberation movement. The legitimacy of the new party leadership now derived from Nguyen Ai Quoc and his comrades from the days of the Canton training courses. Even Truong Chinh would seem to have required Nguyen Ai Quoc's blessing in 1941 to be confirmed in his post as party leader. To party members of the 1928-35 generation, Quoc's entourage would have perhaps had weak credentials: they had been involved in united fronts with the bourgeois Guomindang on two occasions and few of them had been 'proletarianized'. Vo Nguyen Giap, who would become one of Quoc's right-hand men, had only become an official party member in 1937.⁹⁰ His background as a Tan Viet student activist in 1928-30 and a united front journalist in Hanoi may have been suspect in the eyes of some ICP members. Only Phung Chi Kien had really seen action with the Red Army in China. But these were the men who played the key roles in 1941, when the Viet Minh began to take shape.

5. *The Move to the Border and the Eighth Plenum*

In October 1940 Nguyen Ai Quoc and his entourage moved to Guilin from Kunming. It was at this point that the communists abroad decided to use the mantle of the Viet Nam Independence League (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*), Viet Minh for short, for their nationalist front. This was the same organization which had been founded in Nanjing by Ho Hoc Lam, Hoang Van Hoan, Le Thiet Hung, Phi Van, Nguyen Hai Than and others in 1936. As it was still an officially registered organization in China, it was a structure ideally

⁸⁹ Tran Huy Lieu, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

⁹⁰ Cecil B. Currey, *Victory At Any Cost*, (Washington D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 1997), p. 37, quoting two western sources; this date appears probable, as a *Sûreté* document of Jan. 1938 lists Giap as a member of a peasant organizing committee of the Tonkin ICP Executive Committee. (SPCE 377, Note conf. 1533-S, 28 Jan. 1938.) Vu Thu Hien in *Dem Giua Ban Ngay (Darkness at Noon)*, (Fed. Rep. Of Germany: Thien Chi X.B., 1997), p. 120, presents the view that Pham van Dong was not considered a party member until 1940, when he underwent a training course on the Chinese border led by NAQ. (I am grateful to Judy Stowe for bringing this to my attention.)

suited to Quoc's purposes. Ho Hoc Lam, although now ill in hospital in Guilin, remained a respected figurehead, with good contacts in the GMD General Staff. Via Ho Hoc Lam the Vietnamese communists were able to make contact with General Li Jishen, head of the GMD Southwest Field Headquarters in Guilin.⁹¹ Ironically, Li Jishen was the general whom Quoc had accused of being behind the destruction of the Guangdong peasant movement in 1926-27; he had also crushed the Canton Commune in December 1927. However, he had over the years been an opponent of Chiang Kaishek and may now have found that cooperation with the Viet Minh nationalists was essential to the extension of anti-Japanese activities. Quoc helped to enhance the Viet Minh's legitimacy by promoting the formation of an 'Association of Sino-Vietnamese Cultural Comrades', composed of what were then known as 'progressive writers'. Ho Hoc Lam and Pham Van Dong became members of its board of directors.⁹² Quoc's experiences within the earlier united front in Canton, when he formed the first League of Oppressed Peoples, were now being brought into play.

In late 1940, as a flow of refugees from the unsuccessful uprisings in northern Tonkin arrived in China, the Vietnamese nationalists moved south to Jingxi, a town just 65 miles from the Vietnamese border. Zhang Fakui, now Commander-in-Chief of the Fourth War Area, sent Truong Boi Cong to Jingxi to enlist the refugees in a 'border work team'.⁹³ There were already a few communists such as Le Quang Ba and Hoang Sam in this refugee group and Nguyen Ai Quoc quickly sent three of his best cadres south to join them. These were Vo Nguyen Giap, Vu Anh and Cao Hong Lanh. They advised Quoc that he should proceed to Jingxi to join them. When Quoc travelled south, accompanied by Pham Van Dong, Phung Chi Kien and Hoang Van Hoan, he carried three pieces of identification, all dated 1940. According to Zhang Fakui's account, these identified him as 1) a member of the Young Chinese Newsmen's Association; and 2) Special Correspondent of the International News Service; the third I.D. was a Staff Travel Permit of the Headquarters of the Fourth War Area. All of these documents were issued under the name of 'Ho Chi Minh'.⁹⁴ The name, which means 'Ho the Most Enlightened', marked the creation of a new persona, that of the wise patriarch and monk-like disciple of the nationalist cause.

After Quoc arrived in Jingxi in December 1940, he sent Vu Anh to the border of Cao Bang province to choose a secure area to serve as a revolutionary base, according to Vu Anh's

⁹¹ Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., pp. 112-3.

⁹² Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., p. 114.

⁹³ King Chen, op. cit., p. 46, from information based on an interview with Zhang Fakui.

⁹⁴ King Chen, op. cit., p. 147; from *Report of Zhang Fakui* dated 23 Jan. 1944.

own memoir.⁹⁵ It was at this time that Quoc opened a training class in two border villages, for around 40 of the Vietnamese refugees who had been selected from Truong Boi Cong's 'Border Work Team' by Giap and his comrades. Vu Anh claims to have selected the cave at Pac Bo as a secure hide-out across the border for the communist nationalists. In view of French reports from 1941, however, it seems likely that the cave was mainly used as a hide-out for guerillas moving back and forth between Vietnam and China.⁹⁶ Nguyen Ai Quoc is said to have returned to Vietnam in February 1941, but he may actually have spent most of his time in the villages on the Chinese side of the border.

Nguyen Ai Quoc and his communist core group continued to function successfully within a united front structure in 1941, while at the same time rebuilding links to the ICP in Tonkin and Annam. In early 1941 Bui Duc Minh and Hoang Van Thu came across the border to discuss plans for an Eighth Plenum of the ICP Central Committee.⁹⁷ This plenum would be one of two important meetings held in the spring of 1941 in the Jingxi area, meetings which would strengthen the cross-border communists' ties on both levels. In April a meeting of the Vietnamese National Liberation League (*Viet nam Dan Toc Giai Phong Dong Chi Hoi*), yet another united front group, organized by Truong Boi Cong and Ho Hoc Lam, took place. According to King Chen, the nucleus of this grouping was the Viet Minh.⁹⁸ Chen says that Dong, Giap and Hoang Van Hoan were the key organizers of the Liberation League, as they had first broached the idea with Li Jishen in late 1940, and had set up a preparatory office in Jingxi. The League was clearly identified with the GMD united front and took Sun Yatsen's 'Three Peoples' Principles' as its basic philosophy. It would continue to be a useful vehicle for the Viet Minh communists until the end of 1941, when strains in the united front between the CCP and GMD had nearly reached the breaking point.

The organization of the ICP Eighth Plenum may also have required delicate diplomatic work on the part of the Viet Minh collective. This would be remembered as the first official meeting of Nguyen Ai Quoc and the Central Committee since Quoc's arrival in southern China. By the spring of 1941, with the party in all three parts of Vietnam under strong pressure from the French, it appears that the Tonkin ICP leaders were in no position to refuse the leadership of the overseas communists. The fragility of the links among communists who remained at liberty in Vietnam is demonstrated by the way that participants in the Eighth Plenum were recruited in Annam. One of them, Bui San, later arrested by the

⁹⁵ Vu Anh, *Tu Con-Minh ve Pac-Bo* ('From Kunming to Pac Bo') in *Bac Ho - Hoi Ky (Memories of Uncle Ho)*, (Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1960), p. 152.

⁹⁶ AOM, SPCE 369, report of informer 'Ursule', 10 June 1941.

⁹⁷ Hoang Van Hoan, op. cit., p. 119.

⁹⁸ King Chen, op. cit., p. 49.

French, told the *Sûreté* that he had met Phan Dang Luu in Vinh towards the end of 1940. Luu sent him to Hanoi to restore contact between Annam and the Tonkin party structure. At the end of December 1940, Bui San received a letter telling him to send two delegates to attend a congress. He made the trip to Cao Bang at the end of January 1941 with Ho Xuan Luu.⁹⁹ According to the police statements of the two communists from Annam, the meeting which they attended was held near Longzhou; this could have been a way of putting the *Sûreté* off the track, but according to other statements which the *Sûreté* received, the plenum was definitely held outside of Vietnam. An informer code-named 'Ursule' reported to the Tonkin police that the meeting was held in a two-story hut, built on a mountainside four or five kilometres from Trinh Tay (Jingxi) in Guangxi. The CC met on the first floor, while the Tonkin Regional Committee met on the ground-floor level. The two meetings were held simultaneously, with Nguyen Ai Quoc attending the CC meeting in the morning and the Regional meeting in the afternoon.¹⁰⁰

The discussions at the Eighth Plenum have been recorded by the Vietnamese party to demonstrate Nguyen Ai Quoc's foresight.¹⁰¹ Whether or not he actually predicted the German invasion of Russia, which would come on 22 June, is unknown. What he did accomplish, however, is the integration of the ICP into the united front with the GMD and the nationalist Vietnamese parties represented on the Chinese border. Bui San told the French that a cadre called Phong (identified as Quoc) presided over the CC meeting, while 'Manh' (identified as Hoang Quoc Viet) served as secretary. 'Xuyen' or Dang Xuan Khu, (Truong Chinh), reported on affairs in Thai Binh and Ha Dong provinces. Dang Xuan Khu would be confirmed as General Secretary of the ICP at this meeting. When 'Phong' spoke on behalf of the Overseas Party, he criticized the work in the interior of Vietnam. 'He said that at the present moment, it was necessary to appeal to the entire population without making any class distinctions'. He recommended that the party appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the Vietnamese. They must encourage patriotic feelings and encourage people to read about the history of Vietnam. For organizational purposes the meeting decided to establish a 'Vietnam Salvation Association'. When questioned about the strength of the world communist movement, 'Phong' told the delegates that 'the Party did not plan to take power in any country immediately, but to inspire a world-wide revolutionary movement.' 'For this purpose,' he said, 'we must wait for the end of the European war and the weakening of the imperialist countries, because while the warring sides are killing each other, in Russia there

⁹⁹ AOM, SPCE 369, Note Conf., n. 3392-C, *Sûreté* Annam, 5 June 1941.

¹⁰⁰ AOM, SPCE 369, Gougal à colonies, Vichy, n. 4061 a 4067, Hanoi 28 July, 1941. report of informer 'Ursule'.

¹⁰¹ E.g. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 168.

would be security to prepare the worldwide revolutionary movement.¹⁰² This explanation, if accurate, would demonstrate that Quoc was still having to explain Comintern policy in terms of the *détente* with Germany established in 1939. It does not suggest that he anticipated the German attack on the Soviet Union.

At the Eighth Plenum the primacy of national liberation as opposed to class struggle was stated without ambiguities. If the Vietnamese people did not force out the French and Japanese, the resolution said, they would never in 10,000 years be able to demand their class rights or resolve the agrarian question.¹⁰³ The appeal to the Vietnamese people which Nguyen Ai Quoc would date 6 June 1941 was the first example of the new face of the ICP. It called explicitly on Vietnamese patriotism, exhorting the people to follow the examples of their anti-French heroes: Phan Dinh Phung, Hoang Hoa Tham and Luong Ngoc Quyen. The 'great work' of regaining independence had not yet been achieved, the letter said, because the propitious moment had not yet arrived, but also because the people had not yet 'joined forces'. He called on the people to follow 'the great example of the Chinese people' and organize anti-French and anti-Japanese national salvation associations. After this, there would be only one more document using the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, another appeal to the Vietnamese people in August 1945. But by then the name by which his Comintern associates had known him would have been set aside. By that time Quoc needed to jettison his previous identity and its links to the Comintern. He would be presented to the world as Ho Chi Minh, the President of the newly independent Vietnamese state, on 2 September 1945.

As Nguyen Ai Quoc constructed the Viet Minh coalition in Guangxi, the Comintern receded from the field of vision of the Vietnamese communists. Although the Soviets resumed their place in the world-wide anti-fascist coalition in June 1941, they were now involved in a life-and-death struggle with the invading Germans which shifted their attention away from Asia. On 16 October 1941 the Comintern staff began to evacuate eastward to Ufa and Kuibyshev, as the Nazis continued their advance on Moscow. At the end of that month Dimitrov wrote to Stalin to suggest that the Comintern start to operate under cover, using the 'Institute for the Study of International Problems' as its public name.¹⁰⁴ But it wasn't until May of 1943, after Dimitrov had returned to Moscow, that the discussion of dissolving the Comintern began in earnest. At a meeting held by Dimitrov,

¹⁰² AOM, SPCE 369, note conf., n. 3392-C, Sûreté Annam, Hue, 5 June 1941.

¹⁰³ *Lich Su Dang Cong San Viet Nam, I* [History of the Vietnamese Communist Party, vol. I], *Truong Dang Cao Cap Nguyen Ai Quoc*, (Hanoi: NXB Sach Giao Khoa Mac-Le-nin, 1983).

¹⁰⁴ Marina, V.V., 'Dnevnik G. Dimitrova' ('Dimitrov's Diary'), *Voprosy Istorii* [Problems of History], 7/2000, p. 44.

Molotov and Manuïlsky, it was agreed that the Comintern had outlived its usefulness and had become 'an obstacle to the independent development of the communist parties'.¹⁰⁵ The official announcement of dissolution appeared in *Pravda*, on 22 May. Although many of the Comintern's functions continued to be carried out by two 'scientific research institutes', we have no evidence that the Vietnamese communists received any guidance or funding from Moscow between 1941 and 1947.¹⁰⁶

The policies set at the Eighth Plenum became the framework for the war-time activities of the Viet Minh. But as studies of the Viet Minh seizure of power in August 1945 have shown, these policies were not evenly propagated within Vietnam; nor were they universally accepted by ICP members.¹⁰⁷ In the years to come the pragmatic Ho Chi Minh, who valued unity above political purity, would continue to face opposition within his own party to his efforts to build a nationalist coalition.

¹⁰⁵ Adibekov et al., op. cit., p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Adibekov et. al., op. cit., p. 232.

¹⁰⁷ See David Marr, op. cit.; Pierre Brocheux, 'Les sentiers de la révolution' in *Saigon 1925-1945*, (Paris: Editions Autrement, 1992); Stein Tonnesson, op. cit.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction I described the way in which Cold War attitudes have influenced our understanding of Nguyen Ai Quoc and his efforts to develop a communist party in Vietnam. Although the period examined here technically falls outside the Cold War era, in fact one can make a case that it needs to be critically re-evaluated using the criteria for a 'New Cold War history' as defined by John Lewis Gaddis.¹ Much of the earlier writing on Ho Chi Minh reveals the sort of political commitment which, as Gaddis puts it, 'showed little of the detachment that comes from following, not reflecting, a historical epoch...'.² Political commitment, personal involvement, or the use of sources slanted towards propaganda has led many authors to see Nguyen Ai Quoc as an all-important national saint or evil genius. Not only was he the paramount leader of North Vietnam – he was seen as an influential communist from the moment he joined the FCP. Yet Quoc's stature within the Comintern and Asian communism before 1945 was, as I have tried to show, less marked than was later supposed. He did not emerge as an influential communist on the world stage in 1920 or 1930, and he had a good deal of difficulty in getting the ICP's attention in 1939-40. His ascendancy in 1945 as the symbol of the Vietnamese independence movement was by no means an inevitable development. I would agree with Robert Turner that Nguyen Ai Quoc should share much of the credit for bringing Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam.³ But we should remember that his approaches to the Russians were not immediately successful. Moreover, his efforts to create a Vietnamese communist party with Comintern support must be understood within the context of French repression and the long Vietnamese search for aid from abroad. It was Lenin's views on the obligation of the western proletariat to support nationalist revolutions within colonial countries which persuaded Quoc to join the Third International. Quoc had no romantic attachment to violent revolution or personal heroism. He was not a henchman of Stalin and may never have had a personal audience with him until 1950.

This leads to another of Gaddis's prescriptions for the 'New Cold War history': the need to take ideas seriously. The early Comintern theory on national and colonial questions was an extremely important intellectual tool for Nguyen Ai Quoc. It gave him a strong framework within which to combine his anti-colonialism and his desire for social justice. However, Leninist ideas on imperialism and colonial questions were not just an analytic

¹ See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially the final chapter, 'The New Cold War History'.

² *Ibid.*, p. 282.

³ Robert Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), p. 1.

tool – his discovery and transmission of these ideas was an important source of his legitimacy within the Vietnamese communist movement. When these ideas were supplanted by the new analytical framework of 1928-29, Quoc's leadership was called into question. In order to gain respect and maintain their leadership, rival claimants to power regularly tried to show that they possessed a superior grasp of ideology and the Comintern line. This line may at times have been a barely comprehensible pastiche of ideas taken from Marx, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and other pre-communist thinkers, but that did not lessen its importance as a means to gaining legitimacy. As Arno Mayer says, 'Ideology is the lifeblood of revolution'. 'It is tied to the need of a [new] social group to project an image of itself...'.⁴ The importance of theoretical expertise in establishing oneself as a leader may also have been connected to the Confucian tradition, which valued the ability to compose a classically orthodox text above any practical skills.

While in the West Ho's post-World War II efforts to project himself as a nationalist were met with scepticism, within the ICP his lack of commitment to 'proletarian communism' continued to be viewed as a shortcoming. As in the period from 1931 to 1935, when first Tran Phu and then Ha Huy Tap called into question Quoc's ideological credentials, there was renewed criticism of Ho's nationalist outlook from other party members beginning in 1948-49. For the left-wing ICP view of Ho's nationalist policies during the Second World War and his dissolution of the party in November 1945, we can turn to Tran Ngoc Danh, the DRV representative in France from 1945 to 1948 (as well as a Moscow trainee and the younger brother of Tran Phu). He abruptly closed the Paris representative office in late 1948 and fled to Prague.⁵ From there he sent at least two letters to Moscow. In one of these he writes the following:

After the Cominform's criticism, I am at present in total disagreement with the opportunist and nationalist line followed by my party since its official dissolution. This dissolution, which goes against the will expressed several times by our comrades, could not have been carried out without the energetic intervention of comrade Ho Chi Minh, at present President of the DRV. The authority of comrade Ho with the Vietnamese people is without question very great; they consider him as the symbol of the anti-imperialist struggle and the main promoter of our democratic attainments. This confidence is reinforced by the fact that the Vietnamese communists still see him as the former delegate of the ECCI; or to use a Vietnamese expression, 'He is the International's man'. And the current degenerate policy was inspired by his doctrine, which dates from the time of the Tours Congress in 1921.⁶

⁴ Arno Mayer, *The Furies*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 2000), p. 35; he quotes Paul Ricoeur, *Du Texte à l'action: Essais d'hermeneutique*, vol. 2, (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p. 306.

⁵ Hoang Van Hoan, op.cit., pp.252-3.

⁶ Christopher Goscha, *Le Contexte asiatique de la Guerre franco-vietnamienne: Réseaux, relations, et économie d'août 1945 à mai 1954*, Thèse de doctorat, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (IVe section), Paris, 2000, pp. 678-9, citing Archives of Czech CP CC, collection 100/3, vol. 207.

In another letter of 10 January 1950 addressed to 'Comrade Iudin' (who after Zhdanov's death had become the chief ideologist in Stalin's retinue) Danh wrote that the ICP was dominated by its 'nationalist, petty-bourgeois element', which 'lacked faith in the revolutionary force of the proletariat'. 'The decisive, divisive element is the personality of Ho Chi Minh. To have an idea, it is enough to refer to the ICP's policy of 1941, that is to say at the moment when he entered the Indochinese political arena directly.'⁷

Nguyen Ai Quoc's rivals – from the original ICP faction of 1929 to Tran Ngoc Danh – all tried to show his inadequacy for leadership by pointing out his theoretical 'mistakes'. According to Tran Ngoc Danh's chronology, these mistakes began with Quoc's adherence to the *Theses on National and Colonial Questions*, which Danh dates to 1921 but which seems to have become a *fait accompli* by late 1920, even before the Tours Conference in December 1920. Quoc himself remained more in tune with, if not committed to, the line of 1920-27 and enjoyed another period of being 'ideologically correct' from 1938-1947, when the Soviet-led communist movement opted for nationalist communism and a degree of self-determination for individual parties. By 1949-50, though, Stalin had re-imposed his ideological control over most of the world communist movement and advised the Vietnamese communists to turn to the victorious CCP for guidance. Yet again Quoc/Ho Chi Minh found his leadership being undercut by others more in tune with the current orthodoxy.

Ironically, in the 1990s the Vietnamese party maintained its claim to legitimacy after the East European communist parties had been thrust from power, by claiming to represent 'Ho Chi Minh Thought'. This claim has been met with a certain amount of cynicism, however, as many Vietnamese are aware that Ho Chi Minh left behind no body of theoretical writing. Ho Chi Minh can with more justice be seen as a consummate politician and skilled diplomat, who bequeathed to his country a model of coalition building and compromise which any modern nation state would value.

A third Gaddis prescription for the 'New Cold War history' is that it be 'multi-archival'. I have tried to fulfill this demand by using as much of the documentary evidence on Quoc's early political career as is currently available in the Russian and French archives. There are without doubt still many discoveries to be made about Quoc's activities in this period from Chinese and Vietnamese archives, which may eventually become more accessible to

researchers. Still-classified documents in Russia and France, as well as in Britain and the US may also add to our knowledge of Nguyen Ai Quoc. But I hope that my research has demonstrated the value of the Comintern sources, in particular for the light they shed on the important influence which political changes in Russia exerted on the different stages of Quoc's activity.

Documentary evidence in both Moscow and France shows that the Comintern was far from being the efficient tool for spreading communist power which Cold War political science and history would have had us believe. There can be little doubt, however, that the Comintern in its day played a major role in fomenting or encouraging communism in Vietnam. It provided Quoc and his comrades with a methodology and financial support for the training of propagandists and organizers; it gave them an analysis to make sense of their predicament at the hands of the French. Even though its advice and intervention were not always accepted, during its existence it remained the ultimate arbiter of internal political quarrels, which helped the communist party to remain more-or-less unified. It also provided sanctuary in Moscow for communist trainees, who were able to rebuild the ICP on their return to Vietnam in the early 1930s. Even Quoc's unwelcome sojourn in Moscow from 1934 to 1938 kept him alive to fight another day. But to view Nguyen Ai Quoc and the ICP as purely the creations of the Comintern would be an egregious distortion. They existed simultaneously within many spheres – traditional Vietnamese society, the French empire, the Nanyang and a world community which in the 1920s and 1930s was already being shrunk by modern communications, travel and economic interdependence. It was Nguyen Ai Quoc's ability to move between these different realms which finally secured his place as the most successful leader of the independence struggle.

⁷ Goscha, *op. cit.*, p. 680, citing doc. 89357/425, letter received 14 April 1950 in Moscow, Archives of the CP USSR.

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