

The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam

William J. Duiker

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The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam

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This first comprehensive history of the Communists' rise to power in Vietnam addresses the following key questions: How did Communist revolutionary strategy evolve in Vietnam? What were the role and significance of Ho Chi Minh as revolutionary leader? What was the relative importance of political, military, and diplomatic forms of struggle in Vietnamese doctrine? What were the major factors in the Communist success? How does the Vietnamese revolution compare with other revolutions of modern times?

Beginning with an analysis of political and social conditions in colonial Vietnam, Professor Duiker traces the birth of the Vietnamese Communist Party and its struggle to survive in the difficult years prior to World War II. He then analyzes the gradual development of the strategy of "people's war" from its origins during the period of Japanese occupation to the sophisticated and flexible doctrine that evolved during the war against the United States to the final drama in Saigon in 1975. In his concluding chapter, Professor Duiker attempts to isolate the major factors responsible for the Communist victory in Vietnam and for the failure of the U.S. effort to create a viable South Vietnam.

William J. Duiker is professor of East Asian history at Pennsylvania State University. He was formerly a foreign service officer with the Department of State in both Vietnam and Taiwan.



Vietnam, Laos,
And Cambodia

Acknowledgments

Until a little over a decade ago, there were few basic studies in Western languages of the origins and development of the Vietnamese Communist movement. In retrospect, it is clear that this lamentable ignorance was in no small measure responsible for the tragic involvement of the United States in the civil struggle in that country. The recent war spawned a new generation of Vietnam specialists, and it is through their labors that we now have a clearer picture of the Communist movement and the reasons for its extraordinary success. But there is still much to learn, and until the Party leadership in Hanoi indicates a willingness to open its archives, our knowledge of the dynamics of the Communist role in the Vietnamese revolution will remain incomplete. For that reason no study of the recent war—including this one—can be more than an imperfect effort to illuminate a murky and highly complex topic. I am grateful for the efforts of all those who have preceded me in this task.

One of the biggest problems involved in undertaking a study of this nature is to amass the scattered and diverse research materials relating to the rise of Vietnamese communism. Over the past few years I have become indebted to a number of individuals who have been of assistance to me in obtaining such materials. I am grateful to King C. Chen, Daniel Hemery, Chau T. Phan, Douglas Pike, Ronald Spector, John Tashjean, Carlyle Thayer, and Joseph Zasloff for furnishing me with useful documents and articles that I had been unable to obtain elsewhere. I would particularly like to thank King Chen for sending me copies of the recent Black Paper and White Paper issued by the governments in Phnom Penh and Hanoi respectively. I would also like to thank the staffs at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Wason Library at Cornell University, and the National Archives of France, Section Outre-mer, for their help in utilizing the resource materials at these institutions.

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Party. Mark Pratt provided comradeship and a *pied à terre* during several short visits to Paris. Ken Post made a number of valuable comments and suggestions on the manuscript. I am particularly indebted to the late William Gaussmann for his suggestions and his encouragement in carrying out this project. His advice and his friendship are sorely missed.

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W.J.D.

Abbreviations

ACP	Annam Communist Party
ANDPF	Alliance of National Democratic and Peace Forces
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASEAN	Association for the Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Groups
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CORDS	Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CRA	Committee of Resistance and Administration
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
D.R.V.	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FCP	French Communist Party
FEF	French Expeditionary Forces
FUNK	National United Front of Kampuchea
GRUNK	Royal National United Government of Kampuchea

GVN	Government of Vietnam
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
KCP	Khmer Communist Party
KNUFNS	Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NCRC	National Council of Reconciliation and Concord
NEA	New Economic Areas
NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
P.R.C.	People's Republic of China
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
PRP	People's Revolutionary Party
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organization
S.R.V.	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VNA	Vietnam News Agency
VNQDD	Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang
VWP	Vietnamese Workers' Party

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Introduction

On several occasions during the recent war, Communist leaders in Hanoi referred to the conflict in South Vietnam as a "sacred war" to unite the two regions of Vietnam for the first time in over a century. Whether or not such a description of the struggle taking place in the South was appropriate is, of course, a matter of personal opinion. What cannot be denied is that the victory of communism in Vietnam was a spectacular achievement and one of the most significant political events since the end of World War II. It was not simply that their seizure of Saigon in 1975, combined with nearly simultaneous victories in Laos and Cambodia, put the Communists in control of all of the old French possession of Indochina, an event that policymakers in Washington had frequently warned would lead inevitably to the ultimate fall of all of Southeast Asia to communism. It was that this victory had been achieved in the face of determined U.S. resistance. The results tended to throw into question the structure of the U.S. policy of containment of communism in Asia and throughout the Third World.

The nature and shape of this victory has attracted considerable attention from scholars, journalists, and government officials, and in recent years a number of studies on the subject have appeared in Western languages.¹ What has been lacking is an analysis of the Communist rise to power, from the Party's origins in the colonial period to the final triumph in Saigon in the spring of 1975, in an historical context. What follows here is an effort to fill that gap.

This book is the outgrowth of a process that began well over a decade ago. As a foreign service officer serving with the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in the mid-1960s, I was struck by the extraordinary tenacity and impressive organizational capacities of the Viet Cong in the war that was then just under way. The contrast with the performance of the Saigon regime was noteworthy. After leaving government service for an academic career, I decided to study the topic. In a study published by Cornell University Press in 1976, I investigated the emergence of the Communist Party as a major factor in the Vietnamese nationalist movement prior to World War II. Some of the salient factors in the Communists' success and the corresponding weaknesses of their nationalist rivals began to emerge in that earlier study, but it was clear that what the Party

had achieved by the start of the Japanese occupation of Indochina in 1940 was no more than a promising beginning. By no means did it satisfactorily explain the success achieved in the struggles that followed. Thus gradually emerged my decision to continue my investigation of Vietnamese communism through the conflict with the French after the Pacific War down to its triumph in the recent war.

Important obstacles impede any serious study of this nature. First and perhaps foremost, it is a topic of considerable magnitude. In an effort to avoid superficiality I have restricted my concern to one of the central issues raised by the conflict—the nature of the Party's revolutionary strategy toward the seizure of power. This book is not a comprehensive history of the war or of the Communist movement *per se*. Nor does it deal with domestic policies in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (D.R.V.) except where such policies affected war strategy. Finally, it does not pretend to treat in detail French or American efforts to counter Communist activities in Vietnam, except where such efforts obviously relate to the evolution of Communist strategy. Although such issues are vital to an overall understanding of the war, they must be left for future analysis.

A second obstacle has plagued many scholars engaged in research on the war and its antecedents. Although materials exist in abundance, access to official documents on both sides has been severely limited. For the purposes of this study, the major problem is the relative paucity of reliable materials published in the D.R.V. A few studies have appeared on various aspects of the war and its origins, and some official Party or government documents have been published.² On the whole, however, much remains obscure, not only about the nature of the decision-making process but about the decisions themselves and the assumptions behind them. For years, it has been surmised that there were disputes within the Politburo over revolutionary strategy. On occasion the Party press has confirmed the existence of such disagreements. Yet, to this day, the views of individual members of the Politburo remain, for the most part, a matter of conjecture. The researcher is therefore reduced to foraging for material—in statements of the official press, in books or articles by leading Party officials in Hanoi, or in official documents, diaries, and training-session reports captured during the war. Such materials can only partially compensate for the lack of official documents on the subject; but until more is available, they must suffice.

Hanoi, of course, is not alone in restricting scholarly access to official materials. Neither the French nor the U.S. government has seen fit to publish all important documents relating to its role in the war. France has released archives dealing with the period leading up to World War II, but those dealing with the postwar period are still not available. Let us hope that a rich harvest will appear within the next few years. The situation is somewhat different in the United States. The fortuitous publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971

provided scholars with crucial insights into the early years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. More recently, the Freedom of Information Act has permitted access to individual documents upon request. I have used such materials sparingly in this study, as most relate to the nature of the war as seen from Washington and Saigon. They are nonetheless a rich source of information on the war and deserve intensive analysis.

A third problem is that of credibility. Most of the materials available on the war, official as well as unofficial, are colored by partisanship. Official documents issued in Hanoi, Paris, and Washington often reflected the government line. Books and articles by academics and journalists were frequently colored by the bias of the writer. Because of the sharp emotions involved, dispassionate judgments were difficult to come by. The key issue for this study, of course, is the reliability of materials published by the D.R.V. Obviously, much of this information is propagandistic. Some documents and official statements were deliberately designed to be misleading. For years, Hanoi denied that its troops were involved in the war in the South and described that conflict as an effort undertaken by the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam. More recently, the Party has dropped this pretense and asserts with pride that the full resources of North Vietnam were brought to bear in order to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion. (Washington and Paris, of course, were sometimes guilty of similar practices, although perhaps not on a systematic basis.) Under such circumstances, how can official statements or documents issued in the D.R.V. be considered trustworthy? There is no easy solution to this problem, but I believe that most official materials contain at least an element of truth and that a trained researcher can overcome this obstacle and (with an occasional exception) determine the reliability of the materials available. In my research, I have chosen to rely on the veracity of such materials unless there appeared to be persuasive reasons not to do so.³ As more information emerges from Hanoi, we will have ample opportunity to judge the accuracy of what is currently available.

Given such limitations, it is inadvisable to claim that a definitive analysis of the Vietnamese revolution as seen through the eyes of the Party leadership is now possible. There will undoubtedly be errors of fact and interpretation in this analysis, and all conclusions reached here should be treated with a healthy degree of skepticism. Some will say that the historian should not step in until a more definitive judgment is possible. I disagree. The talents of the historian can and should be put to good use, even in cases in which many of the relevant documents are lacking or are of dubious veracity. Too often, writing by Western social scientists on the war has tended to be of the problem-solving variety. Stimulated by a sense of immediate crisis, it has frequently lacked historical perspective and a sense of proportion.

The effects of this historical myopia were unfortunate. Analysis and policymaking during the war were often undertaken in almost total ignorance

of the long-range cultural and historical factors involved. Scholars and journalists speculated about the possibility of Ho Chi Minh becoming an "Asian Tito" but had only a limited understanding of his relationship with the Soviet Union. Or they drew conclusions about the independence of the NLF from Hanoi's control but had only sketchy notions of the Party's traditional use of the united front to disguise its role in the national liberation movement. High civilian and military officials innocently predicted that the war would end in two or three years in apparent ignorance of the Party's open reliance on the strategy of protracted war. Or they viewed the Vietnam conflict, and the entire policy of containment of communism in Asia, through the distorted image of the Munich Conference of 1938 and the appeasement of Hitler immediately prior to World War II, as if conditions in postwar Asia mirrored those in prewar Europe.

Such ignorance of the historical and cultural factors involved in the war has continued to plague American attitudes in the years since the fall of Saigon. The Vietnam War and its aftermath have had a traumatic effect on U.S. foreign policy and now color the attitudes of a generation of Americans toward the U.S. role in world affairs. In recent years Americans have frequently succumbed to the temptation to view all international crises (or at least those in the Third World) through the prism of the Vietnam experience, much as an earlier generation looked at the Cold War from the perspective of the appeasement of Hitler at Munich. Each new crisis is labeled another potential Vietnam, either for the United States or for its rival, the Soviet Union.

Such concern is understandable. The United States does not need, indeed cannot afford, another Vietnam. And there are, of course, lessons to be learned from Vietnam, among which is the proposition that the United States should not rush blindly into international involvements with little understanding of the factors involved. On the other hand, Americans also do not need a "Vietnam syndrome" to replace the earlier "Munich syndrome" that guided U.S. foreign policy for nearly three decades. One of the primary lessons of Vietnam should be that each international crisis must be judged on its own merits, and not on spurious comparisons with past experience. Although the Vietnam War does suggest certain serious risks in U.S. military intervention in the Third World, it does not demonstrate that such intervention will necessarily result in a repeat of the Vietnam experience.

I do not wish to imply that useful historical lessons cannot be drawn from international crises. Munich certainly illustrated the danger of appeasing an aggressive nation. Vietnam convincingly demonstrated that U.S. firepower had limited effectiveness when applied with some restraint against a determined and well-organized national liberation movement. Comparisons across time and space should not be made without due attention to the local historical and cultural factors involved.

There are persuasive reasons, then, for extensive historical research into the

background of the Vietnam conflict, even though such analysis may be flawed by imperfect knowledge. Several questions relating to the war still cry out for answers. What were the underlying causes of the Communist victory in Vietnam? Were there cultural factors involved that, a priori, doomed the attempt to impose a "Western solution" to failure? Was Saigon's defeat the result of a faulty strategy or, as some maintain, of a lack of U.S. determination? Can the Vietnamese revolutionary model be effectively applied elsewhere, or is it a unique expression of the Vietnamese revolutionary art? Does the result of the Vietnam conflict suggest the futility of U.S. efforts at "nation-building," or might a similar effort be successful in a more propitious environment? These questions are of more than academic importance; they go to the heart of postwar U.S. foreign policy toward the Third World.

This study cannot hope to provide definitive answers to such questions. Its objectives are more limited—to search into some of the factors that led to the Communist victory in Vietnam and, specifically, to explore the role played by revolutionary strategy in that process. It is hoped that the insights produced by studies such as this one will assist in obtaining answers to some of the larger questions alluded to above. To the degree that such insights are forthcoming, the historical ignorance that led the United States into Vietnam will not lead it into future crises of similar, or greater, magnitude.