

Nguyễn Khắc Viện

# THE LONG RESISTANCE

(1858 — 1975)

HANOI — 1975

NGUYEN KHAC VIEN

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## **THE LONG RESISTANCE**



## **Foreword**

*The great victory of the spring of 1975, which led to the complete liberation of South Viet Nam, was the result of more than a century of struggle waged by the Vietnamese people to regain their independence and freedom. This struggle was successively conducted against the French colonialists, the Japanese occupation troops, those of Chiang Kai-shek, British troops, and lastly American forces. It went through many stages. While the entire Vietnamese people took part in it at all times, the political line adopted, like the methods of action and the prospects for the future, differed from one stage to another according to the social classes, personalities, organizations and parties at the head of the national movement.*

*In this book we try to analyse this complex and eventful period which is but an introductory step to Viet Nam's contemporary history.*

*Hanoi, June 1975*



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## I — THE LOSS OF INDEPENDENCE

### The Can Vuong Movement

On April 15, 1847, French warships sank five armoured junks of the Vietnamese fleet in Da Nang port. On August 31, 1858, a French squadron attacked Da Nang again, thus marking the beginning of a war of colonial conquest by French imperialism, to be waged in many stages from 1858 to 1884, until the total annexation of the country. Facing that aggression, there were, on the Vietnamese side, two parties with opposite views: one standing for compromise, the other for resistance. The king and the high dignitaries of the Court were frightened by the modern weapons used by the French and misjudged the latter's intentions, believing that, coming from so far away, they were less interested in conquering the country than in wresting commercial advantages. Moreover, the Nguyen monarchy, retrograde to the core and constantly busy repressing internal insurrections, was neither able nor willing to mobilize all the energies of the nation to oppose the aggression. All these reasons urged the king and the high dignitaries to practise a policy of peace and negotiation, trying to placate the aggressors with more and more important concessions. On the other hand, a number of mandarins, the great majority of the scholars, and the people as a whole, heirs to a long tradition of struggle for national independence, put up a fierce resistance. While the royal troops offered only weak resistance, that of the popular forces was powerful and protracted, and compelled French

imperialism to wage a long and costly war. But the defection of the monarchy, the only force which could then play a guiding role on a national scale, undermined the efforts of the Vietnamese patriots.

The French colonialists used particularly cunning tactics. They began by gaining a foothold on a portion of the territory and having it ceded to them by the Court of Hue through a treaty in due form. The aggressors thus won a springboard to prepare for new annexations, and a respite to annihilate the people's resistance in the occupied zones. They then violated the treaty, and resumed the conquest. New concession by the Court, new treaty. New violation, new conquest. The same scenario recurred again and again until total annexation ; from concession to concession the monarchy ended in capitulation and betrayal. The king and the high dignitaries preferred selling out national independence in exchange for a few privileges that the conquerors left them to win them over. Responsible for the safeguarding of national independence and honour, they gradually became agents of the foreigners and put themselves at the latter's service by repressing the people's patriotic movement. The support that the Court of Hue tried to obtain from the Chinese empire – itself on the decline and exposed to Western aggressions – could not deviate the course of events.

### **Loss of Saigon and the Three Eastern Provinces of Cochinchina**

After having occupied Da Nang, the French troops burnt it down, but were not strong enough to threaten the capital city and compel the Court of Hue to make concessions. Bishop Pellerin proposed to the French command to attack the Red River delta where 400,000 Catholics, he said, were ready to rise up in support of the operation. The French command, however, preferred taking its troops to the South, where rice trade was thriving.

Saigon was beleaguered on the morning of February 17, 1859 ; in the evening the royal troops evacuated it. Meanwhile, reinforcements were pouring in from the neighbouring provinces, among them 5,800 volunteers recruited by local notables. Thus reinforced, the Saigon garrison encircled the French troops who had entered the town, putting them in a difficult position. However, the Court of Hue did not order any counter-attack, hoping for a compromise by negotiation. The French took advantage of this indecision to gain time. In 1860, after a new victorious offensive of the Western powers against China, France was able to concentrate the whole of its naval force operating in the Far East to break the siege of Saigon and conquer, in 1861, the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina, which comprised, besides, three western provinces.

The defeat of the royal troops did not put an end to the Vietnamese resistance. Under the direction of patriotic leaders, the population everywhere rose up against the French troops. The French officers who wrote the Military History of Indochina had to recognize that

The defeats of the Annamese army had no effect on the insurrectional state of the occupied territories.

The resistance was general. The French historian Pallu de la Barrière, an eye-witness, wrote :

The fact is that the resistance centre was everywhere, subdivided *ad infinitum*, nearly as many times as there were living Annamese. It would be more exact to consider each peasant who was fastening a sheaf of rice plants as a centre of resistance.

(History of the 1861  
Cochinchina Expedition)

The popular character of the resistance was also seen in the change in tactics. Whereas the royal troops operated in close formations and greatly feared French long-range weapons, the popular forces practised guerilla

warfare or surprise attacks with close combat. The troops commanded by the patriot Nguyen Trung Truc, attacking at close quarters, succeeded in setting fire to a French warship, *l'Espérance*, and inflicting on the French a bitter defeat at Nhat Tao. The popular forces managed to re-occupy many localities, and the French command had to ask for quick reinforcements.

It was the Court of Hue which got the French troops out of this fix by asking for negotiation. On June 5, 1862, Phan Thanh Gian negotiated with French Admiral Bonard a treaty by which the Court of Hue ceded to France the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina, consented to pay an indemnity of 20 million francs and open three ports of Annam and Tonkin to French trade. The Court immediately ordered the popular forces to withdraw from the aforesaid provinces.

The order was not obeyed. The French historian F. Vial wrote :

At the very moment the admiral thought he had brought the war to a victorious end, he found that it had become perhaps even more active and redoubtable than a serious war against the King's regular troops.

(The First Years  
of French Cochinchina)

The insurrection was led by Truong Dinh, who was head of an agricultural settlement when the French attacked Saigon. Together with volunteers he came to the rescue of the town. After its fall he withdrew to Go Cong province where he recruited a 6,000-strong army, and was appointed deputy-commander by the Court. After the signing of the 1862 treaty, the king ordered him to retire to An Giang province and give up the resistance (appointing him commander). Truong Dinh hesitated for a long

time. A sincere patriot, he did not want to renounce the struggle, but, brought up as a Confucian, he did not feel he could disobey the king. He was about to obey the latter's order, when delegates of the popular forces and the people flocked to his camp and besought him to remain leader of the movement, dubbing him "Commander-in-Chief, Pacifier of the French." Truong Dinh complied with the people's will and took command of the insurrection.

The patriotic resisters fought heroically

The Annamese, armed with weapons ineffective against our carbines, rushed at our men with a blind energy that testified to a rare courage and extraordinary abnegation

(F Vial, op cit)

Their guerilla tactics put the French troops to a hard test. Pallu de la Barrière wrote .

There is no more painful, dull and tiring sight than that of the French moving over land and water. One of the adversaries is continually in sight, the other never. As the enemy persistently slips away, it seems as though we were hitting only a vacuum.

(op cit)

Civil resistance was also organized in all forms. The majority of notables and mandarins refused to collaborate with the enemy. The poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu, though a blind man, left the occupied regions and, together with other scholars, wrote highly patriotic works.

However, the order coming from the Court to stop all resistance sowed confusion in the people's minds. It had sent to France a mission led by Phan Thanh Giap to negotiate the retrocession of the lost provinces. France, then, entangled in the Mexican war, gave some promises.

On August 20, 1864, Truong Dinh, wounded during an engagement, committed suicide in order not to fall into the enemy's hands. His son Truong Quyen continued the resistance. Meanwhile, in 1863, France had imposed a treaty of protectorate upon the king of Cambodia. Cambodian patriots, led by the bonze Pokumpo, then joined forces with the Vietnamese insurgents against the French.

In 1867, France, having settled the Mexican affair, switched to the offensive in Viet Nam. French troops marched on the three western provinces of Cochinchina. Judging all resistance to be hopeless, Phan Thanh Gian, the governor of these provinces, ceded them to the French, then committed suicide. Popular resistance in the western provinces brought together Vietnamese, Khmers and other nationalities - Cham, Mnong, Stieng - and covered a vast territory extending from the Cambodian Great Lakes to the vicinity of Saigon. From 1866 to 1868, fierce fighting occurred in Tay Ninh province, and Khmer insurgents came very close to Udong, the capital. Unfortunately Pokumpo was killed and the resistance in north-western Cochinchina and the Cambodian border areas gradually died down. In the west of the Mekong delta two of Phan Thanh Gian's sons took the lead of the popular movement, while the patriot Nguyen Trung Truc, who had set fire to the frigate *l'Espérance* in 1861, conducted the operations. On June 16, 1868, in particular, he seized the Kien Giang post in Rach Gia province. Captured some time later, he refused to submit, and, facing the firing squad, cried out :

"As long as grass grows on our soil, there will be men to resist the invaders."

After the occupation of Cochinchina the French hastened to explore the Mekong river in the hope of draining all the trade of South China towards Saigon. This was soon proved impracticable.

## **The Embarrassing Plight of the Court of Hue. The Fall of Hanoi**

The loss of Cochinchina caused great concern in Viet Nam. Many patriots sent petitions to King Tu Duc advocating reforms apt to strengthen the defence potential of the country. Nguyen Truong To in particular recommended reforms in all fields : political, administrative, agricultural, commercial, industrial, educational, financial, diplomatic and military. Many urged that the country be opened to international trade, handicrafts renovated, industry and trade developed, the educational system changed, students sent abroad, and the army re-organized along Western lines.

The Court, stuck in its conservatism, refused to take those recommendations into consideration. Ignorant of the international situation, it did not know how to capitalize the difficulties encountered by France and wrest back the initiative of operations. With its policy of "peace and negotiation" it was still hoping to come to terms with the aggressor, and also counted on the support of the Manchu Ching dynasty, then reigning in China.

The deep reason for this conservatism and weakness lay in the fact that the reactionary feudal regime of the Nguyen was facing many popular uprisings. In 1862, near Hanoi, Cai Vang led a movement of protest against waste by the administration ; in 1866 the workers and labourers employed in the construction of Tu Duc's tomb revolted. The French missionaries took advantage of this instability to foment unrest within Catholic communities in the Red River delta. This turmoil came to a head with Le Bao Hung's open rebellion.

Another difficulty was the penetration into Viet Nam from China of Taiping bands pursued by Ching troops. Taking refuge in Upper Tonkin, these bands, known as White, Yellow and Black Flags carved out fiefs for themselves. Only the Black Flags led by Luu Vinh Phuc submitted to the authority of the Court of Hue.



Thanks to the Catholic missionaries, the French command was well aware of this situation. The impossibility of reaching southwest China by the Mekong led the French to demand the opening of the Red River and the ports of Tonkin, if need be by force. In 1872, without asking for the permission of the Vietnamese authorities, hundreds of mercenaries headed by the French adventurer Dupuis sailed up the Red River towards Yunnan, carrying weapons for the Chinese general Ma. On his first trip, the mandarins showed conciliation, but on his second passage Dupuis was blocked.

The pretext which the French command had been looking for was immediately exploited. Lieutenant-Commander Francis Garnier was at once sent to Hanoi with an armed escort, and soon got in touch with Bishop Puginier, who gathered the routed partisans of the rebel Le Bao Hung. On his own authority, Francis Garnier decreed that henceforth sailing on the Red River was free and customs duties abolished. The Vietnamese authorities refused to comply with this dictate. On November 19, 1873, the French opened fire and seized Hanoi. The old General Nguyen Tri Phuong, defender of Hanoi, wounded and captured, rebuffed all advances by the French, and let himself die of starvation. The French troops rapidly seized Nam Dinh, Hai Duong and other localities in the delta, thanks to the complicity of some Catholic communities. But the Vietnamese forces counter-attacked and encircled Hanoi, and Garnier was killed on December 21, 1873, in an ambush in the vicinity of the town.

Still suffering from the effects of the 1870 French-German war, France stood in dread of committing herself too deeply. King Tu Duc, faithful to his policy of compromise, failed to exploit a favourable military situation; he signed with the French the 1874 treaty, by which France returned the conquered towns but obtained permission to garrison troops in Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as the opening of the Red River for trade.