

Vietnam's Forgotten Revolutionaries:  
Student Voices From Inside the Vietnamese Revolution, 1954-1975

Aaron Lillie

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Committee:

Christoph Giebel

Laurie Sears

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**Abstract**

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Aaron Lillie

Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor of History and International Studies, Christoph Giebel

Jackson School of International Studies and the Department of History

Using a combination of sources, including interviews with a number of former members of the organization, Vietnamese scholarly publications and recent publications by American academics, this thesis project centers primarily on a narrative of the lives of seven Vietnamese student activists in Hue who joined the NLF-led Youth Association of High School Students for National Liberation in the Center of Central Vietnam in December of 1961. Through their accounts and recollections, this narrative investigates and seeks to identify the political and historical conditions that gave life to and fueled this disciplined, highly-motivated and determined revolutionary movement of high school and college students.

## **Glossary of Terms:**

AFV = American Friends of Vietnam Committee  
 ARVN = Army of the Republic of Vietnam  
 ASVN = Associated States of Vietnam  
 DRV = Democratic Republic of Vietnam  
 GVN = Government of Vietnam  
 MGR = Mere Gook Rule  
 NLF = National Liberation Front  
 PAVN = People's Army of Vietnam aka NVA  
 PRG = Provisional Revolutionary Government  
 RVN = Republic of Vietnam  
 USIS = United States Information Service  
 VC = Viet Cong aka NLF

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**A list of those who attended the meeting at Thanh Luong Village in December of 1961:**

(The Youth Association of High School Students and College Students for National Liberation in the center of Central Vietnam)

**Le Cong Co:** Founder and President of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in the center of Central Vietnam. Sent by the City Party Committee in Saigon to Central Vietnam in 1960 at age 19 to create an organization of student youth. Currently, Co is the President and principal founder of the largest private university in Central Vietnam.

**Nguyen Thuc Lu:** Vice President of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in the center of Central Vietnam. Lu was the son of the prominent Viet Minh and NLF leader, Nguyen Thuc Tuan, and cousin of my father-in-law, Duong Dinh Na. Deceased since 1971.

**Duong Dinh Na:** Nephew of Nguyen Thuc Tuan and President of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Former prisoner on Con Dao Island. Na led a strike at Quoc Hoc High School and recruited students in Hue. Arrested in 1964 at age 22, tried in 1966 and sent to Con Dao Island, Na was forced to remain on Con Dao Island until 1975.

**Pham Van Duc:** Vice President of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Duc was given responsibility for managing military affairs for the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Deceased since 1966.

**Nguyen Thuc Tan:** Nephew of Nguyen Thuc Tuan, Committee Secretary of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Tan was imprisoned on Con Dao Island from 1966-73.

**Trinh Tuc:** Wrote for the Huong Newspaper in Hue for the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Tuc is a nephew of Pham Thi Nga by marriage. Tuc was imprisoned on Con Dao Island from 1966-73.

**Pham Truyen:** responsible for communications (i.e. coordinating relationships with other revolutionary organizations) Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Truyen was imprisoned on Con Dao Island from 1966-73.

**Nguyen Ich Ha:** Nephew of Nguyen Thuc Tuan, student organizer, journalist, activist, guerilla fighter. Died in 1968.

**Other individuals who contributed to this narrative:**

**Do Hung Luan:** General Secretary of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Tam Ky, Luan is a poet and a published author. Luan was imprisoned on Con Dao Island from 1966-73.

**Nguyen Thuc Tuan:** Tuan is the son of the mandarin Nguyen Thuc Duyet, a former Viet Minh and NLF leader, former Member of Parliament, father of Nguyen Thuc Lu and uncle of Duong Dinh Na. Tuan is currently a boy-scout leader in Hue and just recently turned 100 years old.

**Nguyen Van Ninh (aka Dao):** Student activist and member of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in Hue. Political organizer and *Dac Cong* (Vietnamese commando) guerilla fighter. Escaped arrest and fled with Nguyen Ich Ha to the jungle in 1964. Imprisoned in Thua Phu prison in Hue at age 20, 1966-68. Freed from prison during the Tet offensive and resumed fighting.

**Pham Thi Nga:** Underground agent for the Viet Minh and the NLF and cousin of Nguyen Thuc Tuan and Duong Dinh Na. Nga hid printed materials and provided a safe house for student activists, and he collected and stored weapons and supplies for the NLF during the Tet offensive in 1968.

### **Introduction:**

On July 28, 2013, I interviewed my father-in-law at his home in Hue in central Vietnam. At the time this interview began, I knew only that my father in-law, Duong Dinh Na, had been a student activist and that I was looking for a starting point for a project I had originally conceived as being based on a collection of first-hand accounts taken from National Liberation Front (NLF) veterans of the Vietnamese-American War. What I discovered caught me completely by surprise. During the interview, it quickly became apparent that I had stumbled on an intriguing and complex story of a group of young student activists whose backgrounds and collective struggles and sacrifices are, in many ways, a microcosm of the struggle for independence and national liberation that took place throughout Vietnam south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel between 1954 and 1975.

This organization of revolutionary activists was remarkable not only for the young age of its membership, many of whom joined while they were still in high school, but also because it was led by and composed of some of the most gifted young Vietnamese students of their generation. Called The Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in the Center of Central Vietnam, the group was a clandestine organization comprised of hundreds of students spread out over a five-province area in the center of central Vietnam (or Trung Trung Bo as it is known in Vietnamese). Its members, with the exception of the leadership, operated in compartmentalized cells and were generally unaware of the identities of their comrades.<sup>1</sup> Although originally founded by order of the central leadership of the NLF in Saigon, most students who joined cared little about communism and were principally motivated by a patriotic desire to resist what they viewed as an invasion by a foreign power.<sup>2</sup> For the

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<sup>1</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, recorded, July 28, 2013, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #1 with Le Cong Co, recorded, August 14, 2013, 6.

“crime” of organizing strikes and demonstrations, printing and distributing newspapers and pamphlets, hanging the NLF flag and speaking out against the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government, they risked imprisonment, torture and death in some of the most horrific conditions imaginable. By the end of the war in 1975, very few of them had managed to escape one or all of these possible outcomes.



(above) A reunion of the surviving members of the Youth Association at Duy Tan University, Da Nang, in 2013

This thesis project investigates and seeks to identify the political and historical conditions that gave life to and fueled this disciplined, highly-motivated and determined revolutionary movement of high school and college students. Through a combination of interviews with members of the organization and primary and secondary sources published by academics both inside and outside of Vietnam, this project reexamines the Vietnamese-American war from

outside the conventional context of the debates that have taken place inside American academia over the last 50 years. Whereas Vietnamese voices have been habitually excluded from the dialogue regarding the history and political fate of their nation, I have made a deliberate effort to begin the process of redressing this imbalance by focusing on the Vietnamese role and agency in shaping their own political future.

Vietnamese civilians caught up in the war often faced an agonizing choice between two brutal and uncompromising adversaries whose ideologies and goals did not represent the aspirations and desires of the majority of the population. In part, because of the Vietnamese cultural tradition of elevating the status of Vietnamese narratives of heroic resistance against foreign aggression to a national ideal, an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese cared deeply about opposing any form of foreign domination and strongly supported complete political and military independence for Vietnam. An overwhelming majority of Vietnamese people also strongly believed in a united Vietnam. The strength of this belief was deeply rooted not only in Vietnamese historical and cultural tradition, but was also constantly reinforced by the complex web of relationships (family, friends, commerce) and the quotidian interactions which were part and parcel of the everyday lives of millions of Vietnamese citizens.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, a majority of Vietnamese civilians were not communists and did not support the idea of imposing a communist economic system on Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> This fact could have been used to the Diem government's advantage. Instead, in 1955, the United States Information Service (USIS) coined the term Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communist) and the Diem government

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<sup>3</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Don Luce and John Sommer, *Vietnam, The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 276.

soon began applying it to virtually everyone who expressed public opposition to their policies.<sup>5</sup> By using this terminology to apply a blanket label to all of his political adversaries, Diem attempted to maintain the fiction that his campaign of repression was entirely directed at Communists and avoided more problematic questions about the true nature of the conflict.

In reality, however, the National Liberation Front was itself deeply divided on the issue of what sort of government should be instituted after the war. As former student activist leader Le Cong Co has pointed out, the student movement in southern Vietnam was “a patriotic movement, not a communist movement. There were some people in the movement who were communists, but most people were patriots....”<sup>6</sup> According to one anonymous minister in the Saigon government, cited in Don Luce and John Summer’s *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*, only about 5% of NLF members were actual Communists. While this 5% was most definitely in a leadership position, as many as 20% of NLF members were simply southern Vietnamese nationalists, many of whom had previously fought the French, with the remaining 75% being largely made up of people who were “products of circumstances....”<sup>7</sup> Those who did join generally found themselves surrounded and protected by a sympathetic population. “The NLF holds considerable attraction even for Vietnamese who do not go so far as to join their ranks. [Because] ‘There is so much about them to admire,’ friends would tell us, ‘They are well disciplined, very ingenious, and many are true nationalists.’”<sup>8</sup>

The United States’ disastrous foreign policy in Vietnam during the 1950s and 60s owed much to the failure of American diplomats and intelligence agencies to assess and address the

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves, The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #1 with Le Cong Co, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Luce and Sommer, *Vietnam, The Unheard Voices*, 276.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

desires of the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people. As a result of this, US policymakers consistently ignored the nuances and complexities of Vietnamese political life while imposing their own preconceived notions of “Asianness” and political backwardness on the Vietnamese people in order to justify US neo-colonial policies in Vietnam.

While they sought, through inconsistent and haphazard aid and development policies and public relations efforts, to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and build a new nation-state almost from scratch, very few Americans took the time to investigate why tens of thousands of Vietnamese people were leaving their homes and joining the NLF each year.<sup>9</sup> This was not because of any lack of Vietnamese opinions being voiced; the difficulty was more a matter of overcoming racial stereotypes and prejudices.

Despite being constantly preoccupied with maintaining political legitimacy in their own country, officials in the US government made little effort to (figuratively) take the pulse of this newly independent nation state and, as a result, utterly failed to appreciate the power of Ho Chi Minh’s and the DRV’s perceived moral authority within Vietnam. This failure was not for lack of evidence of the overwhelming popularity of Ho Chi Minh’s government. Rather, Eisenhower and his advisers took the paternalistic view that the United States could and should determine what political system and political leadership were best for the Vietnamese people and the “Free World.”

The tragic failure of US officials to understand and recognize the crucial importance of political legitimacy and the perception of moral authority in shaping the conflict in Vietnam led them to actively work towards effecting policies that undermined democracy and sabotaged the

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<sup>9</sup> James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam, The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

implementation of the Geneva Accords. Having opposed internationally monitored nationwide elections and sought a permanent partition of the country at the 17th parallel, American war planners soon found themselves supporting a dictator incapable of even the most basic forms of consensus-building and political give-and-take. As a result, the political will and agency of the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese people was ignored and their voices remained almost entirely unheard in the halls of Americas' great academic and governmental institutions.

### **Sources and Methods:**

One notable exception to this during the 1960s was a young student activist named Ngo Vinh Long. Like many of the other student activists who rose to prominence during the war, Long was an outstanding student, having scored the highest of any test-taker in southern Vietnam on the national exams for 1959.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, Long was given entrée at a young age to the highest levels of Saigon society. After having secured a job as a topographical map maker for General Maxwell Taylor, Long traveled extensively throughout south and central Vietnam making maps for the US military. What he learned during his travels about the state of the country and the policies of the RVN government radically changed his perspective and led him to resign his position in disgust and begin agitating as part of a growing student movement in Saigon.<sup>11</sup>

In 1964, realizing he had become a target for the ire of the RVN secret police, and faced with possible arrest and imprisonment for his dissidence, Long applied to Harvard and was accepted, but he was only able to leave the country with the assistance of General Maxwell Taylor's wife who made phone calls to secure his visa. As a former student activist who had

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Appy, *Patriots, The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, interview with Ngo Vinh Long, telephone interview, not recorded, August 25, 2013, 108.

traveled extensively throughout southern Vietnam making topographical maps, Long had unique insight into the hatred engendered by the policies of the Diem government and its successors. Arriving at Harvard early in 1964, Long was an isolated and lonely voice in opposition to what he called an American invasion of Vietnam until he joined a small group of prominent academics led by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn who had just recently begun touring universities in New England speaking in opposition to the war. During the 1970s, after graduating from Harvard, Long became a professor at the University of Maine.<sup>12</sup>

Since the end of the war, Ngo Vinh Long and the former president of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation in the Center of Central Vietnam, Le Cong Co, have become close friends and collaborators at Duy Tan University (a large private university in Da Nang founded by Co).<sup>13</sup> Today, Professor Long is, to my knowledge, the only academic from an American institution, aside from myself, to have ever studied or written about NLF-led student organizations formed during the Vietnamese-American War. Long's unusual background as both a Vietnamese student activist in the early 1960s and an American academic have given him exceptional insight into how the war was perceived both in Vietnam and in the United States. Since the late 1970s, Long has been a lonely voice speaking out in favor of taking a more nuanced approach to academic dialogues about the war, an approach that incorporates the voices, views, aspirations and motivations of southern Vietnamese which have, until recently, been omitted by the overwhelming majority of historians and researchers of the War. Because of his unique background, Professor Long has become an important source of information and inspiration for this thesis project not only as a primary and

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<sup>12</sup> Appy, *Patriots, The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #1 with Le Cong Co, 7-8.

secondary source but also as an informant.

Although, I have made extensive use of primary and secondary research by American and western scholars to provide the reader context, I have deliberately favored Vietnamese voices and Vietnamese sources wherever possible. By listening, giving recognition to and cataloguing stories of those Vietnamese who were most disenfranchised, disempowered and devalued by the RVN government and their American supporters, it is my hope to help amplify the voices of those who have been silenced and ignored for the past 40 years.

Many of those voices which have remained the least heard are those of the southern revolutionaries (soldiers, student activists, and political operatives) who supported the National Liberation Front. Despite having made many of the greatest personal sacrifices during the war, large numbers of NLF members and their supporters were sidelined and marginalized and, in many cases, even persecuted to varying degrees by the DRV government following the defeat of the RVN forces and the takeover of Saigon in 1975.<sup>14</sup>

The NLF's history of independent action and the diversity of political backgrounds of its membership have made the history of the NLF movement a political liability for the communist leadership in Hanoi. In the years immediately following the end of hostilities in 1975, both the governments in Hanoi and in Washington, DC, have preferred a narrative of the war that portrays the NLF as having been little more than a political tool of the Hanoi government. As a result, in the years following 1975, both sides found it expedient to marginalize and downplay the role played by the NLF organizations and other independent actors in the south in bringing about the US defeat. To this day, it has been in the interests of both the government in Hanoi and in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

Washington, DC, to portray the communist leadership in Hanoi as having been the source of all political agency in the struggle against the United States and its dependent the Saigon government.

I have divided this project into six sections, the Introduction, Part One, Part Two, Part Three, Part Four and the Conclusion. Part One consists of a contextual diplomatic and political narrative assembled in large part using primary and secondary sources drawn from the latest publications in the field. This section focuses on the years from 1954-60, a period of time in which the Diem government's implementation of police state tactics suppressing political dissent set the tone for the conflict that would be begin in earnest in the early 1960s. Through a campaign of strict censorship, arrest, imprisonment, torture, public and secret executions, and the creation of *agrovilles* and strategic hamlets forcing people in the countryside to leave their ancestral homes, Diem managed to alienate millions of Vietnamese and solidified opposition to his government across a broad political spectrum. Diem's refusal to hold the national elections envisioned at Geneva in 1954, and the rigging of his own sham election against Bao Dai compounded the problem of his perceived lack of legitimacy.

By 1960, Diem's tyrannical dictatorship had already thoroughly undermined any chance of support Diem might otherwise have had from a broad cross section of Vietnamese nationalists.<sup>15</sup> The fear and bitterness engendered by Diem's brutality during the 1950s created a political climate in which thousands of Vietnamese living south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel begun working quietly, often in small groups to create an infrastructure that could oppose the Diem government.<sup>16</sup> As a result, in 1960, when NLF leaders in Saigon ordered Le Cong Co to begin

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<sup>15</sup> Do Hung Luan, interview with Do Hung Luan, recorded, August 14, 2013, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, interview with Ngo Vinh Long, 108.

the formation of a student movement in central Vietnam, student activist leaders like Vice President of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for National Liberation, Nguyen Thuc Lu, were quickly able to integrate an assortment of smaller groups already operating independently at universities and high schools around central Vietnam into their organization.<sup>17</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the years between 1954 and 1960 in determining the direction and outcome of the Vietnamese-American War. Recently, a number of prominent historians and researchers have begun to reexamine these early years of American direct involvement in Vietnam. As a result, the past 12 years has been a productive period for historians studying the 1940s and 1950s in Vietnam. Researchers such as Mark Phillip Bradley have documented the undeniable continuity between America's colonial policy in Asia pre-1950 and American policy in Vietnam during the war.<sup>18</sup> Seth Jacobs has taken this a step further by illuminating the connections between the racist and Orientalist mentality of America's foreign policy elite and the choice of Diem as America's Miracle Man in Vietnam, despite, and in part, even because of his autocratic behavior.<sup>19</sup> Vietnam historian Christoph Giebel has documented how the false dichotomies of "North" and "South" have hijacked and distorted honest discourse on the war, assisting in the creation of the US government narrative of a locally inspired conflict among two discrete and opposing nations.<sup>20</sup> More recently, diplomatic historian Frederick

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<sup>17</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam. 1919-50* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Christoph Giebel, "National Liberation and the Cold War in Viet Nam: Some Thoughts on Spatial Representations of War after 1954" (presented at the Third International Conference of Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, 2008).

Logevall has constructed a beautifully-written, comprehensive, political and diplomatic narrative of the Franco-Vietnamese war and the lead-up to American direct intervention.<sup>21</sup>

In Part Two, Part Three and Part Four, I have combined a collection of first-hand accounts derived from interviews completed this past summer with research taken from recently published Vietnamese books and articles about the student movement and an eclectic mix of other sources, including information collected by American anti-war activists (almost entirely from Vietnamese sources) in the 1970s and an internet blog by a Vietnamese scholar.<sup>22</sup>

Beginning in the late 1950s, the narrative follows the lives of a group of seven student activists, starting with a brief overview of their backgrounds and some of the events that helped shape their political views. The narrative begins by focusing on the fateful first meeting of the group of young activists in Thanh Luong village in December of 1961, then follows them through the tumultuous early years of the 1960s, the rapid expansion of their network at Quoc Hoc High School, the Buddhist crisis of 1963 and their eventual discovery and exposure by the RVN police, followed by the arrest and imprisonment of 4 key members for political crimes in 1964.

At this point, the narrative splits, first, following the lives of those members of the Youth Association who were arrested and held at Thua Phu prison in Hue for two years and were then taken to Con Dao prison in 1966. In Part Four the focus of the narrative returns to Hue to follow events in the lives of the student activists Nguyen Thuc Lu, Pham Van Duc and Nguyen Ich Ha, who, after managing to escape the RVN dragnet in 1964, fled to NLF military bases in the jungle where they were trained as NLF guerillas and political operatives.

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<sup>21</sup> Frederik Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, n.d.).

<sup>22</sup> With the heroic assistance of my wife Duong Thi Huong Tra

## Part One

### *The Geneva Accords and Diem's Reign of Terror, 1954-1960:*

***“South Viet Nam is today a quasi-police state characterized by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, strict censorship of the press and the absence of an effective political opposition... All techniques of political and psychological warfare, as well as pacification campaigns involving extensive military operations, have been brought to bear against the underground”*** William Henderson, published in *Foreign Affairs*, January 1957.<sup>23</sup>

During the 1950s, Vietnam became a bitterly contested battleground for three nations with very different conceptions of the world, each with their own brand of nationalism and ideology pushing them inexorably into conflict with one another. The American refusal to attend the Geneva Conference in 1954 as anything more than a disgruntled observer in the peace talks between the Viet Minh and France was the end result of deep fissures that had formed between American and French foreign policymakers regarding the nature and significance of the French Viet Minh conflict internationally. The origin of this divide had its roots in the differing approaches the two nations took to communist expansion in the 1950s, colonial empire, and differing conceptions of the roles their nations should play in the world.<sup>24</sup>

The primary concern American officials had regarding French colonial policy stemmed from, as Mark Philip Bradley phrases it, "the certainty of interwar observers that American approaches to colonial tutelage differed sharply from French ideas and practices."<sup>25</sup> Far from being opposed to the idea of colonialism, American policymakers shared an unwavering belief in their own brand of colonial overlordship, which, in keeping with Americans' long-held cultural and historical attachment to anti-imperialist rhetoric, emphasized more strongly a period of

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<sup>23</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, "From Polarization to Integration in Vietnam," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, No 2 (May 2009): 297.

<sup>24</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 398.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam. 1919-50*, 71.

tutelage and eventual independence once political maturity had been properly instilled. The French, by contrast, were seen as being more oriented toward an assimilationist policy of trying to imbue the Vietnamese with French culture and encouraging a sense of common identity with France, and were much less interested in the preferred American/British style of colonial rule which involved co-opting local elites and teaching them (in theory at least) how best to govern themselves.

The guiding principles and ideology that steered American foreign policy in Vietnam during the 1950s were rooted in America's colonial history in Asia and the growing fear shared by millions of Americans of the aggressive expansion of international communism. In the early 1950s, the Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh was widely perceived by American policymakers as a tool of the Chinese Communists. Such was the fear of a large scale Chinese intervention in Vietnam during the darkest days of the battle at Dien Bien Phu that the Eisenhower administration drew up plans for nuclear strikes against China. Following the French defeat, this fear continued to have an important influence on US policy in Vietnam, as Cold War historian Gordon Chang has pointed out, "although the Chinese invasions never occurred, and the Geneva Conference temporarily ended the fighting, the Eisenhower administration remained convinced that Beijing coveted Southeast Asia, and that the local Communists were their obedient instruments"<sup>26</sup>

France's crushing defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the subsequent peace negotiations in Geneva in 1954, forced US foreign policymakers to a crossroad; the US could either allow the Viet Minh to win the elections agreed upon at Geneva (an agreement in which the US took no

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<sup>26</sup> Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China and the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 165.

official part and of which it quite conspicuously disapproved), resulting in the unification of the entire country under Communist leadership, or ignore the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accord and begin to build up the political and economic power of an alternative government in the south under American tutelage.<sup>27</sup>

As historian Christoph Giebel has observed, “Vietnamese territorial unity was a quintessential point that Vietnamese nationalists over a broad ideological spectrum agreed with.” In the years immediately following the formation of Diem’s new government in 1955, Diem repeatedly stated (what the large majority of Vietnamese clearly believed), that Vietnam was “independent, unified, and territorially indivisible....”<sup>28</sup> While, administratively, at this time, “independent” and “unified” was obviously not an accurate description of the current reality on the ground, these statements were nevertheless a reflection of the political aspirations of an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese people.

For those who took the time to ask the opinion of Vietnamese people living south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel during this period, this fact would have readily become apparent. The American notion of turning the temporary dividing line agreed upon at Geneva in 1954 into a permanent border dividing two separate countries completely ignored fundamental nationalist and traditional conceptions of national identity which had achieved passionate and practically universal acceptance throughout Vietnam. As former General Counsel for the Department of Defense Paul Warnke has observed, “the people I talked to [in Vietnam] didn’t seem to have any

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<sup>27</sup>R.S. Chavan, *Vietnam: Trial and Triumph*, (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1987), 86

As Eisenhower would later admit in his 1963 book reflecting on his first term in office *Mandate for Change* 1953-56 “...possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai.” Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1963), 372.

<sup>28</sup> Giebel, “National Liberation and the Cold War in Viet Nam: Some Thoughts on Spatial Representations of War after 1954,” 6.

feeling about South Vietnam as a country. We fought the war for a separate South Vietnam, but there wasn't any South and there never was one,"<sup>29</sup>

American policymakers chose Diem to lead the newly formed *South Vietnam* because not only was he well known as a staunch Vietnamese nationalist but also because Diem's devout Catholicism and patrician background ensured his strict opposition to communism. Diem's ascension to power in Vietnam was virtually devoid of any indigenous support beyond that of his family and a few loyalists.<sup>30</sup>

When Diem first arrived in Vietnam after having spent much of the previous 2 years living in a Catholic seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey, he immediately found himself in a position of extreme dependence upon the Vietnamese Catholic community to staff most of the senior positions in his government. Because of his devout Catholic background and his refusal to reach out to Buddhist leaders by including them in his decision making processes, Diem's position with the Buddhist community in Vietnam was tenuous at best. Well aware of this fact, American foreign policy leaders understood that Diem would need a strong base of support if he were to have any chance of establishing a lasting government.

In 1955, the decision was made that the flamboyant CIA operative Colonel Edward G. Lansdale would be assigned to organize a propaganda campaign to facilitate the spread of panic among already apprehensive Catholic communities in northern Vietnam. Well known as an expert practitioner of psychological warfare and counterinsurgency, Lansdale had made a reputation for himself by playing a key role in the suppression of the Huk insurgency in the Philippines during the early 1950s. Upon arrival in Vietnam, Lansdale had quickly ingratiated

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<sup>29</sup> Carter, *Inventing Vietnam, The United States and State Building, 1954-1968*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam 1950-1963* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2006), 11.

himself with Diem to such an extent that Diem asked him to move into the presidential palace.<sup>31</sup> In the years to come, Lansdale would become one of Diem's closest advisers and staunchest defenders.

In 1955 and 1956, using a combination of leaflets dropped from airplanes and carefully nurtured, highly dubious rumors and media reports of Viet Minh atrocities, Lansdale, the CIA and the Diem government were extremely successful in encouraging a mass migration of Catholics from northern Vietnam to areas south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. During this time over 600,000 Catholics were transplanted from the north, primarily to areas in and around Saigon. Having been given special privileges such as land grants and access to the patronage of the Diem government in the years between 1956 and 1963, this group of Catholics would form the core of Diem's government, creating intense jealousy and resentment among Buddhists and becoming a focal point for opposition to Diem's government. According to Lansdale, "U.S. officials wanted to make sure that as many persons as possible, particularly the strongly anti-communist Catholics, relocated in the South."<sup>32</sup>

In the words of former CIA official Chester Cooper, "The Central Intelligence Agency was given the mission of helping Diem develop a government that would be sufficiently strong and viable to compete with and, if necessary, stand up to the Communist regime of Ho Chi Minh in the North."<sup>33</sup> Placed in charge of this effort was Colonel Lansdale. Lansdale's work with the Catholic community in 1955-56 helped provide the Diem government with a much needed base of support during a critical time.

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<sup>31</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 636.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 634-635.

In 1955, Diem's unpopularity and lack of indigenous support south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel was not a source of immediate conflict in the south. In fact, the germination of violent revolutionary resistance to the Diem government did not really begin in earnest until 1959. Starting in 1940, a brutal five-year occupation by the Japanese had been quickly followed by over eight years of bitter and costly fighting with the French. War weary, fearing American intervention, under increasing pressure for a settlement from their Soviet and Chinese allies, and eager to begin the project for which so many had sacrificed so much (i.e. building an independent Vietnam), Ho Chi Minh and the leadership of the DRV agreed to a temporary division at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, in the hopes that the other provisions of the Geneva Accord would be implemented and nation-wide elections would be held in 1956.

In 1956 as the date of the elections agreed upon at Geneva came and went and Diem's crackdown continued to become more brutal and widespread, it became increasingly obvious that Diem and his backers in the United States government planned to permanently divide the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. This led to a profound shift in the way many Vietnamese viewed the future of the conflict, how they discussed it, and how they prepared for it.<sup>34</sup>

During his tenure in office, Diem and his American backers remained adamantly opposed to any solution which wasn't either predicated by the complete capitulation of the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), or alternatively, which involved anything less than a permanent partition of the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Notoriously difficult to negotiate with, even for his American patrons, Diem preferred the use of military force to negotiated compromise. After arranging to win an electoral victory against the French puppet Bao Dai with

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<sup>34</sup> Giebel, "National Liberation and the Cold War in Viet Nam: Some Thoughts on Spatial Representations of War after 1954," 11.

98% of the vote, Diem wasted little time establishing a government before beginning a systematic campaign to eliminate any organized opposition he viewed as a threat to his newly formed regime. In the summer of 1955, just one year after the Geneva Accord was signed, Diem launched what came to be known as the “Denounce the Communists” campaign, aimed at identifying and eliminating former Viet Minh, communists and their sympathizers throughout southern Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> As Robert Brigham has observed in his book on the NLF’s foreign relations *Guerilla Diplomacy*, Diem’s “newly created national police force arrested thousands of suspected Communists, who were jailed... or executed. By early 1956, according to the journalist Stanley Karnow, Diem had reduced the former Communist cells south of the seventeenth parallel by 90 percent.”<sup>36</sup>

In the five years that followed the Geneva Accords (1954-59), former Viet Minh and their sympathizers in the south were under strict orders not to violate the ceasefire. Despite many of them having been trained and experienced fighters, well-prepared to fight the Diem government, very little resistance to Diem’s brutal purges was officially sanctioned by the Communist party in Hanoi (AKA Lao Dong) during this period. As one NLF NCO (non-commissioned officer) explained to the journalist Wilfred Burchett in 1964, “Absolute strict respect for the Geneva Agreements was spelt out into detailed instructions to observe discipline; not to go beyond the bounds of legal, political struggle. We are revolutionaries. That was an

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<sup>35</sup> William Duiker, *Sacred War, Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 109–110.

<sup>36</sup> Robert K. Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 6.

instruction which our sense of revolutionary discipline does not permit us to violate. It cost us the lives of many of the finest of our comrades in the period between 1954-1959....”<sup>37</sup>

According to an assessment and analysis of the war done by the Vietnamese Politburo in 1995, critical of the DRV’s failure to protect its supporters in southern Vietnam, during Diem’s initial crackdown “principally because the party did not come up with any clear-cut policy and appropriate strategy that would allow the population to actively resist the enemy in any effective manner the revolution in the South suffered unprecedented loss.”<sup>38</sup> From 1955-58, former Vietminh and their supporters watched helplessly as over 70,000 party cadres were murdered in Diem’s brutal campaign of repression. Additionally, during this same period over 90,000 others were arrested and tortured, and, of those, approximately 20,000 were either crippled or severely wounded during incarceration. Reflecting back on this General Tran Van Tra (one of the NLF’s most prominent military leaders) would later write “In my heart I still mourn the many comrades who fell in battle—with weapons in hand but not daring to fire—during that period, and mourn the many local movements that were drowned in blood.”<sup>39</sup>

Former Commander and Chief of the Viet Minh army Vo Nguyen Giap published an accurate account of the US reaction to Geneva (if you filter out some of the overblown communist rhetoric) in a propaganda pamphlet titled *The South Vietnam People Will Win:*

No sooner had the ink of the signatures on the Geneva Agreements dried than the U.S. imperialists set up the aggressive South-East Asia military bloc and brazenly put South Vietnam... under its protection. The US imperialists... trampled upon all the provisions of the Geneva Agreements...and resorted to oppression and coaxing to carry out separatist general elections, meanwhile they sealed off the provisional military demarcation line and turned down every proposal to re-establish normal relations and convene a consultative

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<sup>37</sup> Wilfred G. Burchett, *The Inside Story of the Guerilla War* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 113.

<sup>38</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, “From Polarization to Integration in Vietnam,” 298.

<sup>39</sup> George Kahin, *Intervention, How American Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986), 108.

conference with the North.<sup>40</sup>

Giap charitably refers to Diem's farcical defeat of Bao Dai with 98.2 percent of the vote and 133% of the total voting population in Saigon as a "separatist election." Yet, as historian Fred Logevall has pointed out, "to ensure the right outcome, the government prohibited campaigning for the emperor [deposed emperor and French puppet Bao Dai], stuffed ballot boxes [and] intimidated voters..." Pentagon advisers suggested Diem might consider staging a more plausible election, giving himself a more credible 60-70% of the vote, but Diem remained adamant.<sup>41</sup> Acknowledging the existence of any legitimate opposition to the newly created RVN and the Diem government was apparently more of a challenge to Diem's authority than he could bear.

Diem's undemocratic impulses were (until the Buddhist Crisis of 1963) not perceived to be a major problem in the eyes of most American foreign policymakers. Diem's American advisers were much more concerned about the appearance of democratic consent than the reality. The implementation of democratic reforms and the creation of democratic institutions within southern Vietnam was, in fact, very far down the list of priorities for American policymakers. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told the US Ambassador to the Associated State of Vietnam, Frederick Reinhardt, in October of 1955, the development of "strong stable executive leadership in Vietnam should have priority. Such representative and constitutional processes should be developed to [the] extent that they do not weaken central authority."<sup>42</sup> Since, by definition, genuine representative and constitutional processes weaken the power of central

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<sup>40</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *The South Will Win* (Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1965), 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 654.

<sup>42</sup> Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 18.

authority, it seems logical to conclude that Dulles was advocating the development of institutions and processes to provide a veneer of democratic choice but sought to ensure that the reality behind the veneer kept power entirely concentrated in the hands of Diem and the small group of loyalists that surrounded him.

The Ngo Dinh family formed the tightly knit nucleus of the Diem government that dominated Vietnamese political life south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel for the eight plus years between 1954-1963. Diem had great difficulty delegating authority and prioritized personal loyalty above all else and thus was forced to rely heavily on his family members to occupy many of the key positions in his government. Diem's brothers, Ngo Dinh Thuc (Catholic Archbishop of Hue), Ngo Dinh Can (Diem's personal representative in Central Vietnam) and the clever, ruthless and notoriously corrupt Ngo Dinh Nhu (Chief of Secret Police and Diem's closest advisor) together, with other family members who held many lesser but still important positions, maintained a virtual stranglehold over all political power within the RVN government.<sup>43</sup>

Diem's complete dependence on American aid effectively undermined any claims of an independent "South Vietnam." In his book on the origins of American involvement in Vietnam *Embers of War*, Fred Logevall writes, "In the fiscal year 1957, American aid supported the entire cost of the Vietnamese armed forces, almost 80% of all other government expenditures, and nearly 90% of all imports . . . ."<sup>44</sup> For many Vietnamese peasants . . . the war of Resistance against French Bao Dai rule never ended; France was merely replaced by the US and Bao Dai's mantle was transferred to Ngo Dinh Diem."<sup>45</sup>

In the United States, long-held racial and cultural stereotypes were used as a rationale for

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<sup>43</sup> Kahin, *Intervention, How American Became Involved in Vietnam*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War, The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 682.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 687.

supporting Diem and discouraging democratic reforms. As popular American novelist and author of *Tales of the South Pacific*, James Michener, phrases it in an article written for life magazine "Asia is a backward continent... Their knowledge of the world is abysmal... [in Asia] power continues to be held by a tiny minority. This minority is neither stupid nor selfish; it may even rule reluctantly, but rule it must."<sup>46</sup> Americans, Michener tells us, must learn to accept the fact that the "world is not made in the American image" and Asia is "a continent run by oligarchs, and whether or not the idea is congenial to our predispositions, we must deal with them, with all their prejudices and limitations."<sup>47</sup>

General and chairman of the AFV (American Friends of Vietnam Committee), "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, would make a similar argument about Diem and in defense of the southern regime, while speaking to the editors of the *Chicago Sun Times* about Diem's atrocious record on civil liberties, "In an Asian society such as Vietnam's, real democracy requires generations in which it can evolve... Diem wants to get things done and he feels justified in cracking the whip. If he opened the door to democracy as we know it, the communists would go all out and step in."<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and in to the 1960s, Diem's autocratic policies, his brutality, his paranoia, his vanity and his inability to compromise were viewed in US diplomatic and military circles as typical and even necessary traits for an Asian head of state in a country threatened by the specter of communist rule. Despite all of his faults, the "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia," as Lyndon Johnson would later call him, would continue to receive the full backing of the

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<sup>46</sup> Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

United States until the Buddhist crisis in 1963, when it seemed like the entire endeavor might unravel because of Diem's complete indifference to the religious sentiments and sensibilities of 85% of the population of southern Vietnam. After his overthrow and murder by a military junta led by Duong Van Minh on November 2, 1963, Diem's unpopularity was so pervasive, even among members of his government that the newly installed American backed military dictatorship declared the date of his removal from power a national holiday.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 289.

## Part Two

### *Thanh Luong Village and a Meeting of Like-minded Youth:*

***“I was very eager to participate in the revolution because Ngo Dinh Diem arrested my friends and relatives and arrested people in the area, beat them and put them in prison. There were people dying, and the life of the people was torn apart, and my brother was put in prison. I was also eager to participate in the revolution because I hoped that the country would be unified and my father and my uncle could return from the north.”***<sup>50</sup> (Do Hung Luan, Student Activist Leader in Tam Ky, Central Vietnam)

The organization of Youth High School and College Students for Liberation that took shape in the center of Central Vietnam (or Trung-Trung Bo as it is known in Vietnamese) early in 1962 was a rallying point for a group of determined revolutionaries who, by the time of its official formation, had already been in search of leadership and an infrastructure around which they could organize resistance to the Diem government for some time.<sup>51</sup> As I mentioned in Part One, after the Geneva Accord in 1954, tens of thousands of former Viet Minh and their supporters had been left unprotected by the division of the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Diem’s police state tactics and his refusal to hold nationwide elections had created a political climate in which organized resistance against the RVN regime was the inevitable consequence.

In the countryside around Hue, thousands of peasant farmers had taken up arms against the French during the late 1940s and early 50s. After finally achieving a victory in a long and bitter struggle, in 1954 these anti-colonial revolutionaries, who had liberated themselves from the French at great cost, found themselves once again under the authority of a government which had only a year before been known as the French colonial puppet state of Cochinchina. Although this state had been rebranded as independent, it was in reality financed and organized with massive

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<sup>50</sup> Do Hung Luan, interview with Do Hung Luan, 62.

<sup>51</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, recorded, August 4, 2013, 34.

assistance from the United States. The virulently anti-communist and largely Catholic leadership of the newly formed RVN government was extremely suspicious of those who had joined the Viet Minh in their war of national liberation against the French colonial government. The fact that many RVN officials were known to have been collaborators with the French colonial regime must have served to compound their unease about the danger posed by former Viet Minh to their tenuous position. As American military historian Richard A. Hunt pointed out in his book on the “pacification” program in Vietnam during the early 1960s:

Diem filled many high military and political posts with Vietnamese who had cooperated with the French and migrated to the South as the colonial authorities withdrew... Such individuals formed the foundation of the Saigon government and...made it difficult for the South Vietnamese president to divorce his administration from the legacy of French colonialism.<sup>52</sup>

These former French collaborators and despised enemies of the Viet Minh, now flush with American dollars and military equipment, had been re-empowered by Diem as official representatives of the new RVN government and given a mandate for state consolidation. The result was that, within little more than a year after defeating the French on the battlefield and negotiating a peace at Geneva in 1954, tens of thousands of victorious revolutionaries south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel found themselves faced with the choice of either leaving their ancestral homes and heading north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel or being ruthlessly hunted down by an American-backed dictator. Highly respected former Viet Minh fighters and political operatives became prime targets for arrest, torture, secret killings and trial by kangaroo courts often swiftly followed by the guillotine.<sup>53</sup>

In an interview with Christian Appy, historian and former student activist Ngo Vinh Long

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<sup>52</sup> Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification, the American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Appy, *Patriots, The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*, 57.

shared his recollection of the savage punishments meted out to suspected communists, former Viet Minh and their sympathizers by Diem's police state in the late 1950s:

The Diem government had many public executions. A lot of people in the West denied that it happened but Diem made no bones about it. They advertised the executions and there were pictures in the paper of people getting their heads chopped off by a guillotine. Officials read a list of crimes the person was supposed to have committed, the blade came down, the head rolled into a box full of sawdust, and that was that. The whole thing was meant to intimidate the population not to join the revolution against Diem. In 1959, when I went around with the map teams there were many military outposts where they summarily chopped off the heads of people they thought were Communists. They put the heads on stakes right in front of their outposts, sometimes with two cigarettes up the nostrils. They even invited people to take pictures of it. They were very proud of themselves. It was a really savage time...<sup>54</sup>

Rural communities like Thanh Luong village were particularly hard hit by the Diem government's terror and intimidation tactics. Located 12 km north of Hue City, today Thanh Luong is a quiet and picturesque rice farming community that traces its history back to the 1500s and the earliest years of Vietnamese settlement in central Vietnam. Like many villages in this area, Thanh Luong was a battleground and a hotbed of anti-French activity during the years between 1945 and 1954. In the words of one former NLF nurse who grew up there, Thanh Luong was a "heroic village" whose residents were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the cause of a united and independent Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> During the French War, Thanh Luong and many neighboring villages, believed by the French to be allied with the Viet Minh, faced punitive raids followed by arrests, with particularly troublesome families being singled out for house burnings and imprisonment.<sup>56</sup>

Like many other farming communities around Hue, the residents of Thanh Luong often lived their professional and educational lives inside the city while simultaneously maintaining

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Duong Heo, interview with Duong Heo, not recorded, July 24, 2013, 124.

<sup>56</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 17.

their traditional family lives and connections with their ancestors through their family members who lived year round in their home village. This responsibility was usually performed by older family members who remained in the village and preserved the tombs and altars of their ancestors, prepared offerings and observed the family's death anniversaries. Thus, communities like Thanh Luong village, although somewhat isolated geographically, would often be the ancestral home of well-educated Vietnamese whose lived experiences intersected regularly with both urban educated elites and rural peasant farming communities.

Based on my observations, I would argue that this intersection of the cosmopolitan and the rural helped produce an especially rich potential for revolutionary ferment in central Vietnam's rural communities during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As a result, large numbers of the students who were born into families who lived in communities like Thanh Luong, but were selected based on their perceived potential to be educated among the urban elites, became radicalized. This radicalization was given life and a particular urgency by the oppressive policies of the Diem government that were being directed towards family members who had supported the Viet Minh and by their exposure to the larger world of political possibility and political agency which existed among educated elites.

Beginning in 1945 with the August revolution, one prominent local family in Thanh Luong village descended from military mandarins and scholar officials, who had long served the Nguyen dynasty, became a focal point for revolutionary activism. Being strong supporters of the Viet Minh movement for independence, members of this family were singled out for special attention by the French colonial government. As a young child living in Thanh Luong, future student activist leader Duong Dinh Na remembers witnessing his uncle being viciously beaten by

French colonial soldiers for his suspected political activities. Others, such as Na's grandmother had their homes burned down in retribution for their support for the Viet Minh.<sup>57</sup>

In the early 1960s, it was primarily members of the second generation of political activists emerging from this family who would form the core of Le Cong Co's Youth Association and fill most of leadership positions in Hue. As community leaders and Viet Minh supporters during the French War, many of the elder members of this family had already demonstrated a firm commitment to revolutionary activism and the ideal of a united and independent Vietnam.

One of the more prominent leaders of this clan and the person who facilitated the introduction and first meeting of the two founding members and leaders of the Youth Association in Hue was a veteran of the Viet Minh resistance movement named Nguyen Thuc Tuan.<sup>58</sup> Born in 1914 in Thanh Luong village, the son of a middle-ranking mandarin, Tuan's mother died in childbirth and as a result Tuan was raised primarily by his mother's elder sister. Thus, although Tuan's parents were well off, Tuan was not raised particularly wealthy.<sup>59</sup>

During the 1930s, Tuan's father, the mandarin Nguyen Thuc Duyet, served as secretary to the famous constitutionalist intellectual and minister in the Bao Dai government Pham Quynh. Duyet elected to join the Viet Minh during the August revolution in 1945 and was appointed President of Thanh Luong village. In 1948, Duyet's son Nguyen Thuc Tuan was drafted by the French, but instead decided to join the Viet Minh.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Nguyen Thuc Tuan introduced Le Cong Co to his second son Nguyen Thuc Lu after Le Cong Co asked for Tuan's assistance in establishing a student youth network in the center of central Vietnam.

<sup>59</sup> Pham Thi Nga, interview #2 with Pham Thi Nga, recorded, April 1, 2014, 128.

<sup>60</sup> Nguyen Thuc Tuan, "Unpublished Letter Written by Nguyen Thuc Tuan to Aaron Lillie," March 31, 2014.

After the Geneva Accords in 1954, Tuan fell under the suspicion of the Diem government for his past associations with the communist-led revolutionary movement. In 1957, he was accused of being a communist and arrested, imprisoned and coerced into signing a document stating that he would not engage in any political activities detrimental to the interests of the Diem government, an agreement he apparently abided by until after Diem's death in 1963. Tuan was a highly-respected community leader, and his arrest and the treatment he received while in prison were viewed by his family and friends as being a terrible injustice.<sup>61</sup>

Tuan's second son Nguyen Thuc Lu was born in 1935. Nguyen Thuc Lu was the oldest member and leader of the group of student activists, most of whom were born and raised in Thanh Luong village.<sup>62</sup> By the time the Youth Association was formed in December of 1961, Nguyen Thuc Lu along with like-minded friends and family had already been organizing and agitating against the Diem government on their own for several years.

In December, 1961, Nguyen Thuc Lu brought this group into a budding network of student activists under the regional leadership of Le Cong Co. After Lu and Co were introduced by Lu's father Tuan they had quickly become close friends while attending Hue University. Together the two of them set about building the foundations of an organization that would eventually grow to several hundred students spread out over a five-province area of central Vietnam.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Chu Son, "Gia Dinh Co so (tiep Theo). Article by the Vietnamese Scholar Chu Son about the Life of Nguyen Thuc Tuan.," Blog, *Gia Đình Cơ Sở Ở Huế*, (n.d.), <http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-3>. This article focuses mostly on his prosecution, trial and imprisonment on trumped up charges of being a CIA agent by ambitious hardline communists in 1978 pursuing a political agenda.

<sup>62</sup> *Ky Yeu Anh: Hoi Lien Hiep Thanh nien – Hoc Sinh – Sinh Vien Giai phong Trung – Trung Bo (1960-1975)* (Da Nang: Dai Hoc Duy Tan, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Le Cong Co, *Nam Thang Dang Nguoi, Hoi Ky*, vol. 1 (Da Nang: Nha Xuat Ban Tre Dai Hoc Duy Tan, 2012), 70.

When selecting the core members of his organization in Hue, Lu relied heavily on his family's loyalty, patriotic tradition and hatred for the Diem government. Lu's family village was an ideal place to begin recruitment, starting with four of his cousins, plus one cousin by marriage named Trinh Tuc and several other trusted friends from around Thanh Luong. Of the six recruits who were brought into the organization at the meeting, four of them; Duong Dinh Na, Pham Truyen, Nguyen Thuc Tan and Nguyen Ich Ha, had grown up in Thanh Luong village and shared the same grandfather, the mandarin Nguyen Thuc Duyet father of Nguyen Thuc Tuan.<sup>64</sup>

Despite coming from relatively privileged economic and educational backgrounds, Tuan and Lu's extended family had strongly supported the communist led Viet Minh during the French War and had been actively engaged in the war effort. As middle school students during the 1950s they had been forced to stand helplessly by and watch as some of their closest relatives (Nguyen Thuc Tuan and Na's older sister Duong Dinh Lan and many others), friends and neighbors were arrested and imprisoned for their past associations with the Viet Minh, and their political advocacy and support for left wing nationalist policies.<sup>65</sup>

In December of 1961, Lu brought Co to Thanh Luong village to meet, recruit and train this group of cousins and trusted friends and neighbors who would then go on to become the core leadership of the Youth Association in Hue. During this fateful meeting, Le Cong Co and Nguyen Thuc Lu established the command structure for the organization. Leadership responsibilities for the organization were assigned as follows: Duong Dinh Na was made President of the Youth Association in Hue; Pham Van Duc was assigned the position of Vice President in charge of military affairs; Nguyen Thuc Tan was assigned the position of committee

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<sup>64</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #2 with Duong Dinh Na, not recorded, September 3, 2013, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 18.

secretary; Pham Truyen was assigned responsibility for communications (i.e. coordinating relationships with other revolutionary organizations); and Trinh Tuc was given responsibility for journalism.<sup>66</sup>

After hammering out plans for a rapid expansion of the network in Hue, Le Cong Co trained his eager new recruits as revolutionary agitators using the lessons he had been taught at an NLF military base in the jungle.<sup>67</sup> The small group, now energized and inspired by a sense of direction and collective purpose, quickly went to work organizing their fellow students in Hue. Starting in 1962, the focal point for their efforts was an elite institution famous in Vietnam for producing national leaders called Quoc Hoc High School.

### **Quoc Hoc High School:**

Even today, opportunities for academic achievement in Vietnam are determined by a complex examination system which assigns a student's place in the educational hierarchy. Students who score high are admitted to the best schools and placed from a young age on an educational track that leads toward positions of responsibility and careers generally requiring higher levels of education. By the early 1960s, Quoc Hoc High School was more than 60 years old and already well known for being a training ground for local and national leaders. Thus, the battle for the hearts and minds of the students at Quoc Hoc was an important bellwether for determining how the children of Vietnam's educated elite perceived the actions of the RVN government and its dependent relationship with the United States.

When Quoc Hoc High School was founded in Hue in 1896, it was originally envisioned as a school that would teach French language and culture to students who could then become

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<sup>66</sup> Le Cong Co, *Nam Thang Dang Nguoi, Hoi Ky*, 1:70.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

administrators and functionaries in service to the French colonial government. Today, Quoc Hoc looks much the same as it has since it was rebuilt in classic French colonial style in 1915. Its beautiful walled campus faces north towards the Huong River and the imperial Citadel and is laid out in a style similar to an American or European university. French colonial style buildings with vaulted ceilings and arched windows are connected by walkways crisscrossing beautiful flower gardens and meticulously landscaped hedgerows. Large trees for shade and stone benches have been spaced out intermittently in the interior of the campus, creating a park-like setting for the students to relax in while they study outside.<sup>68</sup>

As a Vietnamese institution famous for producing graduates who have become prominent leaders in modern Vietnamese history, Quoc Hoc is unrivaled. Among its most well-known attendees were, Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong and Tran Phu. Of the initial group of students Lu recruited to join the movement at Thanh Luong village in December of 1961, Duong Dinh Na, Nguyen Thuc Tan, Pham Van Duc, Pham Truyen and Trinh Tuc were all students at Quoc Hoc High School.<sup>69</sup>

In 1962, Duong Dinh Na, Trinh Tuc, Nguyen Thuc Tan, Nguyen Ich Ha, Pham Truyen and Pham Van Duc, along with a carefully selected group of like-minded student friends, began an orchestrated and highly successful campaign to organize the student body at Quoc Hoc to protest the American presence in Hue and some of the most blatantly oppressive measures and police state tactics of the RVN government. Since most of them had already been agitating against the Diem government independently, they were able to use already established networks

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<sup>68</sup> “Qoc Hoc Hue, Century Old High School,” n.d., <http://www.vietnamonline.com/attraction/quoc-hoc-hue---century-old-high-school.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Tran Phuong Tra, “Ve bo sach ‘Quoc hoc Hue xua va nay,’” *VOV.vn*, August 31, 2013, <http://vov.vn/Xa-hoi/Ve-bo-sach-Quoc-hoc-Hue-xua-va-nay/278485.vov>.

to organize demonstrations without arousing any suspicions about the change of leadership or the existence and rapid expansion of their underground network.<sup>70</sup>

Reflecting back on this period during an interview, Trinh Tuc described how their small group formed the nucleus of a larger movement while maintaining their cover as independent activists:

The core of the movement at Quoc Hoc at that time was our group under the leadership of Le Cong Co...<sup>71</sup> We gathered a large number of high school and college students who loved Vietnam, who were not communists but only wanted to defend the country against invasion. We were opposed to the people who followed the French and the Americans. Quoc Hoc at that time was a place where the movement began. The students there and the students at Dong Khanh [an elite high school for girls across the street] worked together in the movement. From this collaboration, our revolutionary consciousness and organization developed and became strong. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>72</sup>

According to Nguyen Van Ninh (aka Dao), another activist member of the group at Quoc Hoc during this time, “The network of Duong Dinh Na and Nguyen Thuc Lu started a strike at Quoc Hoc High School. They prepared some red banners for the strike, and the strike spread from Quoc Hoc to Dong Khanh [high school for girls], and then the headquarters of the (*Tong Hoi Sinh Vien*) college students.”<sup>73</sup> For the Diem government these ominous developments taking place at one of Vietnam’s most prestigious educational institutions did not bode well for the future and, apparently, were viewed as too serious to ignore by RVN officials.

In 1963, high level officials in the Diem government began to take an interest in averting a crisis in the educational system by quelling the groundswell of student resistance that was taking hold at Quoc Hoc. According to Trinh Tuc, “Nguyen Van Khuong was a Member of

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<sup>70</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>73</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, not recorded, September 2, 2013, 97.

Parliament; he saw that the movement among the students at Quoc Hoc was very vigorous so he came to Quoc Hoc to give a speech to persuade the students to limit their political resistance.”<sup>74</sup>

Khuong’s speech apparently had little effect because, in reaction to the increasingly alarming level of defiance and political unrest on the part of the students, local officials, “planted government spies all over [the school]... There were times when they set up checkpoints to search all of the students. There were government spies in every class. They dressed up and pretended to be teachers. They wanted to find and arrest... all of the student activists.”<sup>75</sup>

Efforts to suppress the rapidly expanding circle of demonstrators and dissenters at Quoc Hoc met with little success, and the student protests continued to escalate in intensity and size into 1963 and 1964:

At Quoc Hoc, during that time, there were two events that became widely known in the country. One was some brothers in our organization who wrote on the wall of the school this slogan “we request that the Americans and the American puppet regime release all of the high school and college students that have been arrested.” This sentence was written on a wall. They tried every way they could to wash it off, but the students kept rewriting it... Finally, they tore the wall down... One Monday morning, when they were having the salute-the-flag ceremony my Brothers prepared a word for each person. There were around 20 of them who each held up a single word they had written on a piece of paper. The slogan read “Down with the Americans and their American puppet regime who oppress the college and high school students.” These two events forced the governor of Hue province to visit the school to give a speech for the students. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>76</sup>

Taking advantage of the political turmoil they had helped stir up, Na and his group followed up on their initial success by creating a newspaper and printing pamphlets which would then be distributed secretly to sympathetic students. These reading materials were then circulated

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<sup>74</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 52–53.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 53.

throughout the school and into the hands of the general population of students, raising awareness of a large and rapidly expanding revolutionary movement.

Simultaneously, in an effort to compete with publications sympathetic to the RVN government, members of the Youth Association wrote, printed and secretly distributed materials for the general public in Hue:

At the Vietnamese-American Society office, they had some newspapers with news from the United States. So, I put our newspaper among those newspapers, and we went to Dong Ba market and distributed our newspaper to the vendors so they could read it. We mixed our newspapers in with the RVN newspapers. We distributed the pamphlet to people who were anti-American to promote liberation and demanded the release of our friends who were high school and college students who had been arrested. We went to all of the schools in the city. In one school, they had announcement board where people placed news and notices of various kinds, we put our pamphlets there. We took down their news and put up ours.” (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>77</sup>

Elaborate safety precautions were taken to avoid discovery and arrest by RVN police. Safe houses were maintained by families of underground agents who were not publicly known to be affiliated with any aspect of the student movement. Printing equipment and stacks of pamphlets were hidden in these locations:<sup>78</sup>

We had the sources from the jungle combined with what we printed. We didn’t use anything handwritten because we were afraid they could recognize our handwriting. At that time, we didn’t have any modern equipment; we had to use a typewriter and a manual printer. While we printed inside a house, outside there were three people who watched for police and secret police that might come to arrest us. Therefore, every time we printed, we were only able to print 50 to 70 pamphlets at the most. We printed and then combined our work with documents from the jungle...(*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>79</sup>

Because of the enormous risks they were taking, Youth Association members generally operated in compartmentalized cells and were constantly aware that any small mistake could lead to arrest, torture and possibly execution.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>78</sup> Pham Thi Nga, interview #1 with Pham Thi Nga, recorded, September 2, 2013, 105.

<sup>79</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 38.

We were miserable when we participated in revolutionary activities like these because, if we revealed ourselves, we would be arrested immediately. Therefore, in our group there were about 20-30 people, but only 2-3 people knew each other. We were all in the same organization, but we didn't know each other. One group would whisper to another, and that group would whisper to another, and that's how we communicated. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>80</sup>

The recruitment of new members into the organization was, therefore, carefully planned. Each new member had to be vetted based on their family history and reputation in the community before they were chosen for a process of cultivation and indoctrination that could eventually lead to full membership. According to a student activist leader in the organization from the nearby city of Tam Ky, the recruiting process was as follows:

If you wanted to recruit a person, first you would subtly question them. We went to school together and would go out together and during this time we would get to know their thinking. Usually, the people who had a revolutionary consciousness would have fathers, brothers or close relatives who went to the north. When we could be certain they had revolutionary views, we would start to propagandize them and bring them into the organization. Speaking about the propaganda, there were two methods of propaganda. One was legal propaganda, and the other was illegal propaganda...<sup>81</sup> If we used legal propaganda, and I saw that that person was interested in what I said and enthusiastic, I would gradually bring them into the organization. After that procedure, the enemy could never plant a spy in our organization. When they had already joined the organization we would use illegal propaganda to indoctrinate them. For example, we would give them the newspaper from the liberation zone to read..." (*Do Hung Luan*)<sup>82</sup>

Despite their best efforts to maintain their professionalism, this was a group of passionately idealistic young men, and their shared experiences created a strong bond among the leaders of the association in Hue. Naturally, they began to look to each other for companionship and a sense of shared purpose:

Lu met with our group several times a week. When we were involved in revolutionary activities, we were very secretive and rarely went out, but at that time we were very

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>81</sup> Do Hung Luan, interview with Do Hung Luan, 68.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

young and we loved to hang out together. We went to eat Che [sweet corn soup] at Con Hen island on the Huong river. We went to the train station and went to Thien Mu pagoda and Vong Canh hill. Among those who participated in our revolutionary organization, we were very close and treated each other like biological brothers. When Tan passed away, it hurt me even more than when my own brother died. We never argued. At that time we were not party members. We were only members of the youth union, but we were very disciplined and we followed the orders from the organization with voluntary zeal. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>83</sup>

The strikes and demonstrations that took place at Quoc Hoc High School in 1963-1964 were a small but important part of a series of political uprisings taking place all over Hue during this time period. Hue city has long been one of the preeminent centers of Buddhism in a country where adherence to Buddhist traditions and practices has overwhelming social and cultural acceptance, even among those who do not strictly practice the religion. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the ferocity and strength of the combined uprising of Buddhists, students and merchants brought national attention to struggles of the nation's Buddhist majority and had fatal implications for the continued viability of the Diem government. Diem's discriminatory ban on flying Buddhist flags in 1963 proved to be a political misstep with disastrous consequences, provoking an already infuriated Buddhist population to a level of civil unrest on a heretofore unprecedented scale.

...all of the student movements in Hue, and the workers and the officers of the government had a strike, and all of the merchants in the markets went on strike and the college and high school students also went on strike. They refused to take the examinations; they refused to go to school; and they didn't study...(*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>84</sup>

The Buddhist crisis of 1963 caused a crisis of confidence regarding long term viability of the Diem government not only in Vietnam, but perhaps, even more importantly, at least in the short term for the Diem government, in the United States as well. Unfortunately, the Kennedy

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<sup>83</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #2 with Trinh Tuc, not recorded, September 3, 2013, 54.

<sup>84</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 36.

Administration and its successor the Johnson administration continued to ignore the fundamental problems underlying the legitimacy of a separate Vietnamese state south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. In the minds of America's chief foreign policy makers yesterday's "miracle man" had become today's political liability. US officials mistakenly assumed disposing of Diem and replacing him with a more pliable, less anti-Buddhist alternative, would allow them to more successfully manipulate public opinion in Vietnam.

However, in retrospect, there is a broad consensus among historians that the overthrow of Diem marked the end of any viable claim on the RVN and American side of defending a legitimate government. The series of coups and counter coups that followed Diem's death on November 2, 1963, led to the propping up of a succession of front men who could never achieve the same level of support, legitimacy or administrative capability as the Diem regime. According to the former President of the Youth Association in the center of central Vietnam, Le Cong Co, one of the biggest mistakes "the Americans made was assassinating Ngo Dinh Diem. After the fall of the Diem regime there was no government that could rival it, and because of that, the Americans had to pour troops into southern Vietnam to save the government."<sup>85</sup>

Diem's assassination had little effect on the size and strength of the student movement in Hue or the oppressive policies that inspired it. In 1964, the American trained RVN secret police achieved a major breakthrough, penetrating the Youth Association network in Hue. Precisely how the RVN police obtained the information that started their investigation remains a matter of speculation among my sources. Once the arrests began, however, the systematic utilization of a variety of brutal and coercive interrogation methods including, beatings, electric shocks and

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<sup>85</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #1 with Le Cong Co, 5.

threatening the families of those who refused to cooperate were among the most commonly utilized techniques for obtaining information employed by the RVN police.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #2 with Duong Dinh Na, 26.

## Part Three

### ***Exposure, Arrest and the Tiger Cages of Vietnam:***

***The American government is not only waging war in Vietnam, it is also building prisons and detention camps, manning and supporting the barbarous interrogation centers, and providing funds and advisors to centers of detention and torture. In 1970, the American government provided funds for security equivalent to three times the funds provided for education, that is U.S. dollars 20.9 million as compared to 6.1 million. We do not invent these figures they are taken from the report of your ambassador to Vietnam. At this very moment, a U.S. firm [Raymond, Morrison, Knutson-Brown Root] is constructing isolation cells in Con Son Island at the cost of more than U.S. dollars 300,000 to U.S. tax payers.*** (From a letter to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Professor Nguyen Van Trung, Chairman of the Committee for the Improvement of the Prison Regime in South Vietnam)<sup>87</sup>

In November of 1964, virtually the entire student network in Hue was compromised.

Within a period of one month, the leaders of the student network were arrested one after another.

Nguyen Thuc Lu, Trinh Tuc, Nguyen Thuc Tan, Nguyen Thuc Truyen and, one month later,

Duong Dinh Na, were arrested and brought to police stations around Hue for interrogation.<sup>88</sup>

According to Dao, a student activist who managed to avoid arrest and escape to the jungle during this time:

Lu was arrested and brought to the temporary prison. That temporary prison is near the province public security office, and they use it today to interrogate people. At noon, when the guard was sleeping, Lu took a bicycle that belonged to one of the guards and rode to my house. My younger brother brought the bike to the train station and left it there to make it look as if Lu had gotten on a train. I brought Lu to the jungle. (Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao)<sup>89</sup>

Other members of the group were less fortunate. Duong Dinh Na, President of the Youth Association in Hue had been studying pedagogy at a college near Saigon when many of the

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<sup>87</sup> Holmes Brown and Don Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoners* (Washington, DC: Mobile Indochina Education Project, 1973), 109.

<sup>88</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 96.

arrests in Hue were made, but was tracked down, arrested and flown back to Hue for imprisonment and trial:

They arrested me because at that time a cell was broken and someone was arrested and tortured. That person couldn't withstand the torture, and they informed on me. When they arrested me I wasn't in Hue, I was in Long An. At that time, the student movement was crushed from Quang Nam to Hue. When they brought me to Thua Phu prison, Tuc and Tan heard that there was someone arrested near Saigon, and they knew it was me. That evening we went to bathroom in prison and talked there. We told each other what we believed the government already knew about us. I wasn't tortured a lot...<sup>90</sup> I was lucky because other people in the network were tortured before me and had already told them everything, so other people were beaten harder than I was. In Thua Phu prison, I met Phu who was chief of foreign relations in the police department for Hue province, and he said "you are the nephew of Nguyen Thuc Tuan, no wonder you are like that." (*Duong Dinh Na*)<sup>91</sup>

The degree to which a particular student activist was tortured depended on a number of factors. During the period when they were under investigation no amount of professed contrition or cooperation was sufficient to prevent or put stop to it:

You were tortured more or less depending on who interrogated you and how you answered the questions they asked. The more you informed or confessed, the more they would torture you because if you informed about one thing, they would torture you more to get more information. So the trick was to try to suffer through the first round of torture. If you could survive that without breaking, you wouldn't be beaten as hard later. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>92</sup>

Two of the student activists arrested at this time, Duong Dinh Na and Nguyen Thuc Tan, had been given funding from the government for their studies and, therefore, were viewed as particularly troublesome and given public trials and harsher sentences.

The government gave me a trial. In Hue there was me, Tan, Dao, Tuc and Truyen. Tuc and Truyen were only arrested without trial. We were against the authorities at the courthouse. They asked me "you were going to become a teacher, an officer of the government, why did you listen to communists?" I said, "I will be a teacher, but the bombs from the war fall on the people, a lot of people have died, how can I save all of

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<sup>90</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 24.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>92</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #2 with Trinh Tuc, 57.

them? ...I have to be against the American invasion.” [They asked] “Why don’t you say that the Soviet Union and Chinese Communists invaded the country? Why do you say American invasion?” I replied, “You can search the whole country; do you see any Soviet or Chinese soldiers in this country? The Americans have 500 or 600 soldiers in Da Nang, did you know that? (*Duong Dinh Na*)<sup>93</sup>

Other activists such as Trinh Tuc and Nguyen Thuc Truyen were held without trial or having been given a specific sentence. They were told they must pledge allegiance to the RVN government and agree to demonstrate their loyalty by becoming spies and informing on their comrades in order to be set free. During an interview, Tuc explained:

There were two kinds of cases. My case was *cau luu* which meant they arrested you and put you in prison, and, if you changed your mind about your ideology and obeyed them, they would release you. The second case was Na and Tan. Na was a student at Long An University of Pedagogy, and Tan went to University (as medical assistant in medical school). So, these two cases were special because they had government funded positions. So, they had to have a trial. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>94</sup>

For the two years between 1964 and 1966, Na, Tuc, Tan and Truyen languished together at Thua Phu prison in Hue. After Na and Tan were tried and convicted of treason, all four young men were sent together by ship to an infamous, formerly French operated, prison on Con Dao Island. By then, they had been joined at Thua Phu by several other student activists from the same organization who had been arrested in the nearby cities of Da Nang and Tam Ky.<sup>95</sup>

### **Con Dao Prison and the Tiger Cages of Vietnam:**

Arriving at Con Dao in late 1966, they began an ordeal which, for most of them, would last between seven to nine years. Originally built in 1861 by the French colonial government, Con Dao (aka Poulo Condore, aka Con Son) prison had a long history of housing troublesome Vietnamese political dissidents. During the Vietnamese-American War, inmates on the main

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<sup>93</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 25.

<sup>94</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 45–46.

<sup>95</sup> Do Hung Luan, interview with Do Hung Luan, 73.

island were divided into seven different camps that housed a total of approximately 4000 political prisoners.<sup>96</sup>

Hardened criminals were placed in charge of managing the prison and maintaining discipline among the inmates. Given the title “Trustee” by the wardens, these criminals were encouraged and coerced, when necessary, into being utterly merciless towards political prisoners. According to a report written in 1970 protesting the inhumane conditions at Con Dao, signed by 82 former female inmates:

The policy of using prisoners to rule other prisoners is a most evil method of the prison chief. Particularly at Con Son, military culprits and common criminals are used to rule over other prisoners. To prevent the emotional weakness of the trustees, the prison chief ordered that those that sympathize with political prisoners would receive 200 lashes, or go to the stone cave to chop wood, or be shackled. Unable to suffer these physical punishments, a number of prisoners followed orders and beat other prisoners.”<sup>97</sup>

One former inmate, who was released in 1970, described his arrival at Con Dao and his first experience with the prison trustees during an interview with three American Congressmen in Saigon:

When we got to the island we were met by 300 order guards. These are prisoners who are there for criminal acts like robbery, murder and rape. By agreeing to guard the other prisoners, they are given special privileges. We were lined up and marched off. Each of us had to keep our heads bent to the ground. There was one old man from Bien Hoa who could not keep up. He was too weak. The orderlies beat and kicked and cursed him. They hit him on the head with a cane. ‘Slowness means being whipped. Do you hear that boy?’<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 28.

The total number of prisoners held at Con Dao varied greatly depending on the year. During the times it was most overcrowded there may have been as many as 10,000 prisoners of all types on the island. Precise numbers of inmates housed at Con Dao at any given time are difficult to come by. By the 1970s, large numbers of farmers and refugees, including pregnant women and young children swept up in American and Vietnamese military operations, had swelled the ranks of inmates, many of them having no idea why they were transported to Con Dao. (Source, a letter from an anonymous camp warden to a Catholic priest contained in Brown and Luce’s, *Hostages of War*, P66)

<sup>97</sup> Brown and Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon’s Political Prisoners*, 78.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Living conditions in the prison camps were extremely harsh, and the danger of being beaten or placed in a *tiger cage*, sometimes for months at a time, was a constant threat intended to keep the prisoners in line. During the times when an inmate was not being singled out for punishment, everyday life was generally agonizingly monotonous and unpleasant:

Usually, you would live in a room with more than 60 people. So, you would lie on the cement. You would eat on that spot, you would sleep on that spot, and urinate and defecate in that spot. Although we lived in prison, we had to do everything according to their commands. We woke up at a certain time, according to their command... There were two things that were particularly awful. The first was that they constantly had us under surveillance. The second was that the food was very dull and plain. We had only three kinds of food, one was *ca kho* a salted dried fish that has dried under the sun and been stored for up to four or five months and had become rotten; the second was *tuong* (a type of soybean jam); and the third was shrimp paste. This was a kind of shrimp paste that all of the nutrition had already been extracted from it to make fish sauce and was the waste product of that process. There were only these three kinds of food with rice. In one day, we would have only two meals, one with rice with dried fish and one with rice with shrimp paste. Therefore, we were always in need of vegetables. Most of the prisoners had intestinal diseases, hemorrhoids and bowel diseases. Like me, now I have bowel disease because I had to sit a lot and I didn't eat enough vegetables and nutritious foods... We didn't have enough vegetables and we were always stressed and worried because we didn't know where we would be the next night. That was the life *outside* the tiger cage. (Trinh Tuc)<sup>99</sup>

In an attempt to break the revolutionary spirit of the prisoners at Con Dao, guards would routinely give the inmates the opportunity to salute the RVN flag and pledge allegiance to the RVN government. According to the testimony of a former Viet Minh named Nguyen Van Thanh taken by the International Commission of Enquiry into U.S. War Crimes in Indochina in 1972, this was an “effort to compel us to... renounce our faith in the revolution and... the National Liberation Front.<sup>100</sup> Also to [force us] to obey every order... to go build military projects, airfields and roads, or to public[ly] voice support for them. Of course being patriotic, we could

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<sup>99</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 47–48.

<sup>100</sup> Nguyen Van Thanh was a former Con Dao inmate who had been imprisoned since 1957 for his associations with the Viet Minh during the French War and was finally released in 1969.

not do such things as to speak ill of our resistance movement or obey the orders they wanted us to obey.”<sup>101</sup> Prisoners like Thanh who refused to cooperate were beaten regularly and sent to live in the tiger cages. Any inmate who resisted the authority of the prison guards could be held in these cages, often for months at a time.

In 1968, student activist Trinh Tuc was placed in a tiger cage for possession of a contraband radio which he been using to synthesize and disseminate news to his fellow prisoners. In a recent interview he described the experience:

In Con Dao prison, there was a Party committee. This committee assigned me a small radio so that I could synthesize the news about current events in Mien Nam and in Con Dao. I synthesized the news and sent it to the newsletter in the prison.... Every night around one or 2 AM, I listened to the radio. After I finished listening, I would memorize the news and then synthesize it. After a while, the guards discovered what I was doing. They put me in a tiger cage.... When they put us in a tiger cage, we only wore underwear, and our legs were manacled. They closed the door every day and only reopened it twice a day to give us rice, and every day they gave us a bucket to urinate and defecate in. We couldn't see outside. There was only one small sliding window the guards could slide open to see if we were there. I was isolated in a tiger cage like that for months.<sup>102</sup> (*Trinh Tuc*)

According to Nguyen Van Thanh, an inmate who spent a total of seven years living in tiger cages, “the tiger cages were installed in rows. The walls were thick with a door in front of the cage. The ceiling was made of bars. There was a small gangway between the rows of the tiger cages so that the guards could go back and forth along the path and supervise the prisoners below.” Punishment for minor offenses was a daily fact of life, and prisoners were often kept tightly chained and manacled. “[Our] legs were chained to the walls. As for the hands, sometimes they were chained behind the prisoner. Other times, still they were chained together

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<sup>101</sup> Brown and Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoners*, 62.

<sup>102</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 48.

with the feet so that the prisoner had to bend down... Day after day the prisoners were taken out for beatings.”<sup>103</sup>

A wooden bucket was usually placed next to the bars above the inmates. These buckets were filled with a mixture of water and lime which could be poured down through bars onto the inmates below, providing a quick, effective and easy way to inflict extreme pain over long periods on anyone who refused to cooperate.

On the walking paths above the rows of tiger cages, the guard always kept either sacks of lime dust in powder form or lime mixed with dirty water, stinking water. Whenever the prisoners demanded anything either a few minutes out to have some fresh air or when the prisoners would shout to demand more food or drinking water, the guards would drop lime water or throw lime dust down upon the prisoners....<sup>104</sup>

Prisoners who objected to the conduct of their tormentors or tried to intervene to help others could expect swift and severe punishments from the prison trustees who themselves were probably afraid of being singled out for some excruciatingly painful form of physical abuse if they lost control of the prisoners or attracted the attention of the prison authorities. During one incident at Con Dao, a group of women being held in tiger cages began shouting when they heard the “cries of protest” from the men being held in an adjacent building. The response they received from the guards was swift and utterly ruthless:

[April 28, 1970]... Nhan and Sum [two of the guards overseeing the inmates]... shouted: “I give orders to throw lime on them until they die.” The trustees rushed towards us, throwing bags and buckets of lime upon us which had been set on the iron bars above. Buckets of water followed. We were choked and burned by the lime mixed with the water. Many fainted, others vomited blood. One woman was seriously injured when a block of hard lime fell upon her head. At the same time they went into the dispensary and threw lime onto the patients four times until all of them collapsed... After the repression, our bodies as well as our belongings were all covered with lime. Yet they did not allow

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<sup>103</sup> Brown and Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoners*, 61.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

us to wash ourselves and clean the cells. So for two months, we kept lying in the lime...  
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Do Hung Luan a student activist leader from the Tam Ky branch of the Youth Association, who was known for his unbending resistance to the authority of the prison guards, has recently written a book called *Thang Ngay Cua Muoi Nam Ay*, about the time he spent in Con Dao prison. During an interview, he shared some of his recollections of prison life on the island:<sup>106</sup>

I was with Duong Dinh Na for two years in the kitchen before I was moved to another location. I was moved to three or four more places. I was a rabble rouser. Each time I opposed them, they beat me and put me in a narrow cell with stone walls. In the pit, they forced me to remove all of my clothes; all I had was underwear. The cell contained a small stone rectangular platform; the platform was just large enough for one person to lie on it. There was a steel bar with U-shaped manacles where my legs were shackled. I stayed there, eating in one place, urinating in one place, defecating in one place and there were thousands of mosquitos. At that time, I wrote a poem in the cell. Every year when the spring came, I wrote a poem. In Con Dao there was no paper or pens so I just memorized the poems in my mind. There were many times I was put in a cell like that. Every time I opposed them, they beat me and put me in a cell... (*Do Hung Luan*)<sup>107</sup>

Inmates imprisoned at Con Dao had very little to do for entertainment other than conversing with their fellow prisoners. Isolated on an island far from their hometowns, they began to form a shared sense of community by finding ways to give purpose and meaning to their lives while rejecting the coercive authority of their tormentors who operated the prison:

At that time Na, Tan and I were very young college students and our level of enthusiasm was very high. In prison, we had two duties, first was, if we knew anything, we taught it to other people. For me, when I was in prison in Con Dao, I taught math. The second duty was the things we didn't know we learned from those who understood them better. In Con Dao, there were people from the military base and others, who had many years of experience of participating in revolutionary activities. We could learn from them. In prison Na, Tan and I could learn a lot. We learned foreign languages such as Chinese.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>106</sup> Do Hung Luan, *Thang Ngay Cua Muoi Nam Ay* (Da Nang: Nha Xuat Ban, 2010).

<sup>107</sup> Do Hung Luan, interview with Do Hung Luan, 72–73.

The most important thing was political theory. There was a saying, “prisons are the biggest universities.” There were many sources, many ways of thinking and many experiences we learned about from other people. There was another saying, “if you live in prison you live in a communication vessel.” The people who knew more shared with the people who knew less. If we lived in a camp for one year, we gained a lot of knowledge because our brothers in prison came from diverse backgrounds and many parts of the country. For example, we are from Hue and we brought the knowledge from Hue to exchange with them. People from Quang Nam, if they knew something, would exchange ideas with us etc. (*Trinh Tuc*)<sup>108</sup>

Little or nothing would have ever been known in the United States about Con Dao and the treatment of Vietnamese prisoners there during the war if not for the perseverance and determination of a very unusual American named Don Luce. For 10 years, from 1958 to 1968, Mr. Luce had lived and worked in Vietnam as the head of International Volunteer Service Vietnam (IVS Vietnam) a group of humanitarian Christians working in Vietnam to help alleviate the suffering of the Vietnamese people caused by the war. During that time, Luce had learned to speak Vietnamese and formed many close friendships with Vietnamese people in the communities in which he worked. In 1968, Luce, along with 47 other IVS volunteers, resigned his post in protest against American military policy in Vietnam. Luce then co-wrote a book called “*Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*” and returned to the United States to lobby for a peaceful solution to the war.

In 1970, Luce, accompanied by a group of two US Congressman and a small entourage, decided to take a tour of Con Dao prison to see if there was any truth to the accounts of the horrific conditions they had been hearing about from a recently released prisoner who had spent years being tortured and starved while confined on the island for political crimes. Having planned in advance to avoid being taken on a carefully choreographed tour of the island, Luce chose to diverge from the assigned route at a prearranged location where his informant had told

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<sup>108</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 48–49.

him prisoners were being kept in tiger cages. What he found there and the people he met would make a lasting impression on him. In an article he wrote over thirty years later, Luce described his visit to Con Dao:

On the way out Frank Walton, the U.S. prison advisor, described Con Son [the largest island in the Con Dao archipelago] as being like "a Boy Scout Recreational Camp." It was, he said, "the largest prison in the Free World." We saw a very different scene when we got to the prison. Using maps drawn by a former Tiger Cage prisoner, we diverted from the planned tour and hurried down an alleyway between two prison buildings. We found the tiny door that led to the cages between the prison walls. A guard inside heard the commotion outside and opened the door. We walked in. The faces of the prisoners in the cages below are still etched indelibly in my mind: the man with three fingers cut off; the man (soon to die) from Quang Tri province whose skull was split open; and the Buddhist monk from Hue who spoke intensely about the repression of the Buddhists. I remember clearly the terrible stench from diarrhea and the open sores where shackles cut into the prisoners' ankles. "*Donnez-moi de l'eau*" (Give me water), they begged. They sent us scurrying between cells to check on other prisoners' health and continued to ask for water. The photos that Harkin, today a U.S. Senator from Iowa, took were printed in *Life Magazine* (July 17, 1970). The international protest which resulted brought about the transfer of the 180 men and 300 women from the Cages....<sup>109</sup>

According to Trinh Tuc, "Nguyen Thuc Tan met Don Luce in person at Con Dao prison. At that time, Con Dao was restricted to foreigners, but Don Luce decided to go off on his own and meet with some of the prisoners." Luce's visit did have "an impact on American public opinion. It touched the conscience of America," but "the reality in Con Dao was that the life of the prisoners was changed [improved] mainly because of their struggles. We fought in many ways. One is that we shouted. The other was hunger strikes. Another way was opening our guts. This was just normal."<sup>110</sup>

As unbearable as their existence was on Con Dao Island, those student activist members of the Youth Association who were sent to Con Dao at least managed to survive the bloodiest

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<sup>109</sup> Don Luce, "The Tiger Cages of Vietnam," *Torture American Style*, n.d., <http://www.historiansagainstawar.org/resources/torture/luce.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Trinh Tuc, interview #1 with Trinh Tuc, 54.

years of the war. Many of their comrades who escaped arrest and fled into the jungle in 1964 were not so fortunate. As Duong Dinh Na, President of the Youth Association in Hue, summarized it during an interview, “if I had stayed... [in Hue], I would already be dead.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #1 with Duong Dinh Na, 28.

## Part Four

### *A Sea of Fire:*

*“This spring, how can we be happy when the Americans are still sowing so many sorrows and miseries, and when thousands of tons of bombs are falling on our Fatherland, destroying and setting houses on fire, stripping the trees bare of leaves, forcing the people to flee and wander from place to place, and reducing them to a life of privation and hardship? How can I be happy when I think of all this? Wherever we go, we see only destruction—heaps of ashes and debris where war and happy homes used to be. What are we going to do? When the country is plunged into a sea of fire, the only thing we can do is to transform our hatred into action and make use of all our strength to bring a spring of victory to the people. When victory is achieved, we will rebuild the bridge that links North and South, no matter what, so that North and South will be united again—they are all anxiously looking forward to that.”* Captured letter written in 1965 by an NLF soldier named Be Danh assigned to an elite demolitions platoon of 514<sup>th</sup> Battalion stationed in the Mekong Delta.<sup>112</sup>

As I mentioned in Part Three, in November of 1964, the Youth Association networks, which had been so painstakingly constructed over the past two years under the leadership of Le Cong Co and Nguyen Thuc Lu, came under simultaneous attack by police in Hue, Da Nang and Tam Ky. As a result, those who managed to escape the RVN dragnet of arrest and torture were forced to flee urban areas seeking sanctuary at NLF military bases and other prepared hideouts in the jungle. For Youth Association members Nguyen Thuc Lu, Nguyen Ich Ha and Pham Van Duc, their comfortable lives as underground agitators and organizers who worked, studied and attended school during the day had come to an abrupt end, never to return. As well-known fugitives, simply traveling from place to place in RVN controlled areas had become extremely dangerous. Although they remained determined to continue the struggle, rapidly escalating political tensions and swarms of RVN soldiers and police scouring Hue city and the surrounding countryside forced them to acknowledge that conditions dictated a new strategy.

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<sup>112</sup> David W.P. Elliot and Elliot, Mai, “Documents of an Elite Viet Cong Delta Unit: The Demolition Platoon of the 514th Battalion—Part Five: Personal Letters” (Rand Corporation Study RM-5852-ISA/ARPA, May 1969), 13–14.

Described by his friends and fellow revolutionaries as a capable leader, an elegant man, well-educated, energetic, highly intelligent and “very sincere with the people he recruited,” Lu was also known for being cautious and reserved. Using his position as a middle school teacher as a cover, Lu was able to network with teachers and students secretly active in the resistance movement from institutions all over Hue.<sup>113</sup> Many of his recruits, however, had little or no experience working with an underground revolutionary movement and were lacking in formal training in clandestine activities. As a result, “these brothers made some mistakes during their activities, and the enemy investigated them and found out about them. When the group hung the NLF flag on the Thuong Tu [gate of the Citadel], the police had already been observing them, and they arrested Lu.”<sup>114</sup>

Immediately after being taken into custody, Lu was taken to a temporary prison in Hue for questioning. Precisely what happened to him after his arrest, whether or not he was tortured and what he may have said to his interrogators will likely never be known. At some point during his interrogation, Lu managed to escape his captors, stealing one of the guard’s bicycles during lunch time (a popular time for a siesta in Vietnam) and riding to the home of a trusted friend and fellow student activist, Nguyen Van Ninh (aka Dao). After he explained the situation to Dao, the two young men rapidly came to the realization that living in Hue was no longer a viable option.<sup>115</sup>

Although not a leader in the student movement, Dao had contacts in the Communist Party and was well connected with local NLF guerillas. Through his associations with a group of NLF fighters active in the jungle near Hue, Dao was able to ensure Lu was safely guided to a nearby

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<sup>113</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 96.

<sup>114</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #2 with Le Cong Co, recorded, April 3, 2014, 114.

<sup>115</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 96.

military base. Electing to remain behind for a time, Dao arranged a meeting with Nguyen Ich Ha, after which the two of them made preparations to leave Hue together for the jungle. First borrowing a small amount of money from Dao's sister, Dao and Ich Ha then sought shelter in a nearby pagoda, where they remained hidden for a time under the roof directly above a large Buddhist statue. "Before I went to the Pagoda my sister Nguyen Thi My Nhan had given me 20 dong and with that money we bought 20 rice cakes.... a woman there hid both of us, Ich Ha and me."<sup>116</sup>

In the early hours of the morning, they hastily made their way to a prearranged location on the outskirts of the jungle where they were met by several local guides who had agreed to take them to an area nearby an NLF military base, at which point, they would be expected to find their own way. Crossing over into NLF controlled territory was always a risky endeavor, and, for inexperienced urban revolutionaries like Dao and Ich Ha, the dense jungles canopies were full of unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells which seemed to conceal other terrors, some perhaps, even more frightening than an RVN prison cell.

We were led through the jungle by some people who made a living by burning trees in the jungle and harvesting charcoal. They carried their tools and equipment on a ganh [two baskets held together by a bamboo rod]. On the ganh they attached a choi [a small broom] as a signal that we should follow them. We followed them across a river and went deep into the jungle. We knew we were lost but we kept going. After some time, Ich Ha saw a pile of ferret excrement and thought it was tiger shit and became very afraid. Ich Ha said "I would rather die than have a tiger eat me! I am going back to Hue now." I had to reassure him. I told him "don't say things that will bring us bad luck." We decided to take a break and sat down on the trail and started to eat some of the rice cakes I had brought. While we were eating, we saw banana leaves on Kim Phung mountain swinging. We thought oh! That is our comrades. They have seen us and they are signaling us. At that point, Ich Ha overcame his fear of being attacked by tigers, and we continued on our journey. That afternoon, Ich Ha and I saw a small airplane scouting the jungle for communists. So we laid hiding in the bushes until the airplane flew off. Later

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<sup>116</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #3 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, recorded, March 20, 2014, 121.

that evening an old man suddenly came rushing out of the bushes pointing his gun at us. We said, “please don’t shoot us.” [We explained that] we had participated in revolutionary activities in the city and our network was discovered. Now we have to find a way to flee to the jungle. It turned out that the old man was a guide for the revolutionary forces in the jungle. His name was Duong. He said “ok, so you are from the city, who did you know in Huong Tra District?” We mentioned two names he recognized, Ong Tu and Ong Tho [leaders in the local communist party]... and he was satisfied with that.<sup>117</sup> (*Nguyen Van Ninh, aka Dao*)

Dao and Ha were fortunate to have stumbled onto the path of an old Viet Minh revolutionary whose job it was to act as a guide for NLF guerillas in the jungle. “Mr. Duong didn’t go to the north. He stayed as a local who specialized in knowing the roads and trails in the jungle. He built some of the trails.” Local guides like Mr. Duong, who were experts in jungle warfare and survival and had detailed area knowledge acquired over many years, were an essential resource for the NLF and often gave them a significant advantage over American and RVN soldiers who often knew little about the areas they fought in.<sup>118</sup>

After arriving at the military base under the watchful eye of Mr. Duong, they were turned over to the care of a Mr. Dong and Mr. Hai:

Dong and Hai gave Ich Ha and me each one hammock. We stayed in the jungle and slept in hammocks and borrowed fishing poles from Dong and Hai. We fished a lot and we caught many fish. In the jungle it is very difficult to get a machete, but I didn’t know that. I borrowed a machete and tried to chop some very tough wood. I broke the edge of the machete. My comrades told me “we greatly valued that machete, but you have broken it. You need to choose another type of wood that is not so hard to cut and when you cook you need to choose a wood that does not produce a lot of smoke.” There is saying that was popular in the jungle. “Walk without a footprint, cook without smoke and speak without a voice....”<sup>119</sup> (*Nguyen Van Ninh, aka Dao*)

Having grown up in villages near Hue city and spent much of their time as students active in the urban movement, Dao and Ich Ha were completely unfamiliar with life in the jungle and

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

knew next to nothing about how to survive in such an unforgiving environment with little in the way of supplies. In the months that followed, learning basic wilderness survival skills would become an essential component of their military training. The skills they acquired would serve them well in the coming years. For the remainder of the war, they would spend much of their time en route between military bases in the jungle and the urban hideouts and safe houses from which they organized their supply missions, printed newspapers and pamphlets and managed the recruitment of new agents.

Lu, Dao and Ha were not separated for long. Despite the collapse of their organization in Hue, Lu retained his position as a leader among the student activists, even in the jungle. Having been attached to particular group of NLF guerillas, not long after the arrival of Dao and Ich Ha at the base, Lu assigned Dao to cook for the entire unit. Chuckling to himself about his foolishness almost 50 years later, Dao described his first experience cooking for hungry guerillas in the jungle, “when we were in the jungle, Lu assigned me to cook for the whole unit, and I put all the MSG into one meal instead of dividing it into small portions to save for another time. Everyone said how delicious the meal was...” By necessity, life at the NLF military base was extremely austere, and a small amount of MSG could be a precious commodity for hungry guerillas surviving on minimal rations.<sup>120</sup>

During their time together at the base in 1964, Lu, Dao and Ich Ha were integrated into the ranks of the NLF guerilla forces in the highly respected role of quasi-military political operatives who would continue to organize student activists, this time, however, only from the shadows, as fugitives operating from safe houses, underground hideouts and NLF military bases

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<sup>120</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 96.

in the jungle. At the same time, they were also trained and utilized for military operations, primarily consisting of the collection and distribution of supplies and other tasks with a relatively low risk of combat and a high degree of interaction with the public. This extremely important task was assigned to many of the student activists who fled from Hue to the jungle in the 1960s, and the success of the men and women who carried it out was a crucial factor enabling the continued survival and operational capability of the NLF guerillas stationed in nearby military bases in the jungle.<sup>121</sup>

For Lu, Dao and this time marked the beginning of a long period of living in the shadows. As Dao would summarize it during an interview 50 years later, “I was born in the year of the Rooster, so I was a jungle rooster. Most of my life, I had to live in the jungle.”<sup>122</sup> From this point on, only when hidden away in the deepest recesses of the jungle canopy, could they ever feel reasonably safe from the threat of imminent arrest or execution by the RVN police or military.

### **Pham Van Duc:**

The events surrounding the last two years in the life of the Vice President of the Youth Association in Hue, Pham Van Duc are difficult to track because they are not well-documented or remembered by my sources. Although he was a leading member of the Youth Association in Hue when the group formed in December of 1961 and a relative of Nguyen Thuc Lu by

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<sup>121</sup> Contrary to the widely accepted mythology that the Ho Chi Minh trail was the primary and most strategically significant source of supply for NLF soldiers and guerilla’s operating south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, the day to day needs of guerilla’s stationed around Hue (and according to Ngo Vinh Long throughout most of southern Vietnam) were in reality generally met by individuals on regular supply routes returning to their hometowns and villages, often acting in collaboration with friends and family to collect desperately needed food, bandages and other items which were routinely purchased in local markets and shops inside RVN controlled territory.

<sup>122</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 98.

marriage, Duc traveled in somewhat different circles than most of the other members of the group. In December of 1961, during the first meeting of Youth Association members in Thanh Luong village, Duc was selected to take the leadership role in handling military affairs for the organization. This meant that, should the group have selected any RVN or American targets for assassination, it would have been Duc's duty to see that the assassination was carried out. Since no targets were ever selected, Duc was never called upon to fulfill his role in the group.<sup>123</sup>

According to President of the Youth Association in the center of central Vietnam, Le Cong Co, Duc had little patience or talent for journalistic endeavors, but "he was good at organizing self-defense activities for youth. That's how he became a military leader"<sup>124</sup>

During the time he was a student activist, Duc made connections with the guerilla forces in his home village of Quang Phu in the Quang Dien district of Hue province. After the discovery and exposure of the student network in Hue in 1964, Duc went to the jungle for training as a *Biet Dong* urban guerilla. "People from the city were often assigned to be *Biet Dong* because they had knowledge about the areas which they came from, so they could lead soldiers to fight in those areas of the city." After his training was complete, he was assigned "to organize the movement in the city and make connections with local people...."<sup>125</sup> According to Duong Dinh Na, around this time Duc was promoted to the rank of *Huyen doi truong, Quang Dien* (Military District Chief of Quang Dien) and became involved in organizing recruits from his home district into rudimentary military units.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #3 with Duong Dinh Na, skype interview, not recorded, February 18, 2014, 127.

<sup>124</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #2 with Le Cong Co, 118.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>126</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #3 with Duong Dinh Na, 127.

Today his former comrades seem to know little about Duc's fate, or perhaps, are simply reluctant to speak about it. Only his cousin and friend, the underground agent, Pham Thi Nga, was willing to share any details about what she believes happened to him. An important part of Duc's job as a guerilla leader was to act as liaison between NLF forces in the jungle and his own unit of urban guerillas from his home village of Quang Phu. According to Nga, on April 13, 1966, "Duc had some tasks which required him to go back and forth between the jungle and his village, and on one of these missions he forgot the proper code word and was shot [and killed] by soldiers from his own side for using the wrong word."<sup>127</sup>

**"We had to destroy the city to save it"<sup>128</sup>**

From 1964-68, the tensions among people living inside the city of Hue steadily increased culminating in the Tet offensive in February of 1968. Faced with conscription by the RVN and also under intense pressure from members of their community to join the NLF, young men in Hue who didn't want to choose sides found themselves in an increasingly difficult position. In 1969, Don Luce published a letter written in Hue in his book the *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*. In this letter a young man poignantly articulates the dilemma faced by countless Vietnamese nationalists who were motivated neither by communism nor by anti-communism but simply wished for a peaceful way to go about their daily lives, free from violence and foreign domination:

Maybe this is the last letter I send you—because I must make the choice, the choice of my life. I am pushing to the wall. To choose this side or the other side—and not the

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<sup>127</sup> Pham Thi Nga, interview #2 with Pham Thi Nga, 128.

<sup>128</sup> American artillery officer speaking to combat photographer David Douglas Duncan during the Battle for Hue, Tet 1968, Stephen Ambrose, *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian*, (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2002), 136.

middle way! I can no more use my mouth, my voice, my heart, my hands for useful things. All the people here have to choose manipulate guns—and they have to point straightly in face of each other. One side the Vietnamese city people and Americans, another side Vietnamese rural people and Communists and Leftist minded people. What have I to choose? But all things are relative now—I can't side even with Americans or Communists. But you have no choice. Or this side or the other side--. With Americans, you are accused of valets of Imperialism, of pure Colonialism—You are in the side of foreigners, of the people who kill your people, who bomb your country, with the eternal foreigners who always wanted to subjugate you for thousands of years...No, it's a desperate situation. I want so desperately to be still in jail--. It don't pose before you a terrible problem: to choose... I can't keep quietly, I can't have a peaceful mind in these days. I can't become a mercenary in this kind of puppet army. Americans in uniform are not my friends at all. They're just foreign troops in my country. Furthermore, I can't carry the gun and kill my people, Communist or not. They're all my compatriots that I learn to love...No, I can't physically and mentally. I met many of our friends. They're so desperate. A-, he dropped by to see me, he said he could not fire in the battle-field without bleeding in his heart, he can't help crying for his own dilemma. B- said desperately, "maybe he side with the VC, against these militarists!?" Many of my friends in Hue must have to choose—or prison in this side or some kind of "desperate collaboration" with the other side—I want quietly to do my things well—to build a new environment for my country. But you can't do it without choice of a political system. Not with foreign domination—Chinese, French, Japanese, or American.<sup>129</sup>

As the desperation of the civilian population increased and disaffection with the American presence in Vietnam grew with it, many residents of Hue found that continuing to sit on the sidelines, while the unrelenting violence of war raged all around them, was simply no longer an option. As a result, new underground agents and guerilla fighters were constantly being recruited.

For Lu, Dao and Ich Ha, the battle for Hue was now being waged on multiple fronts. As known fugitives, traveling through the city was difficult, but not impossible. The three young men spent much of the time in the years between 1964-66 training, building and rebuilding their networks. When they weren't indoctrinating new recruits or collecting supplies from sympathetic friends and family members, they were generally either lying low waiting for the right moment

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<sup>129</sup> Luce and Sommer, *Vietnam, The Unheard Voices*, 279–280.

to move, or surreptitiously moving to a new location where they were to carry out their next assignment. According to Dao, this was essential not only for replenishing their ranks with new agents, but also “because in the jungle we didn’t have food and supplies. We had to go to urban areas. We had to cross the river and return to our home villages. We had to organize underground agents and these agents kept us fed.”<sup>130</sup>

With Trinh Tuc having been arrested and imprisoned at Thua Phu (a famous prison in Hue that is located just east of Dong Khanh High School), the leading role in the publication of the Huong Song newspaper after 1964 fell to Ich Ha and another important leader in the Youth Association named Ai Phuong.<sup>131</sup>

As the leader of the Youth Association in the five province area in the center of Central Vietnam known as Trung Trung Bo, Le Cong Co was often busy with other activities, but he would still lend a hand with the newspaper when he could. During an interview, Co shared his recollection of Ich Ha and his work on Huong Song during the years between 1964 and 1968.

I worked with Ha to publish Huong Song newspaper. Ai Phuong and Ha were in charge of that newspaper.... Ha and Ai Phuong wrote the newspaper and spent many hours working on it. They were very industrious and hardworking all the way up until it was published. The printing equipment was obsolete and hand operated. At that time we had to sit there at night using an oil lamp because if we turned on electricity they could find us so we had to sit under an oil lamp. If a letter was missing, we had to rewrite it. When it was released, we distributed it everywhere including the houses of RVN soldiers and RVN officers. Ha was very talented as a journalist and publisher, and he worked with great enthusiasm and without fear.<sup>132</sup>(*Le Cong Co*)

Today, Ich Ha is remembered by his friends and former comrades as having been a handsome, charming, dedicated and a passionately idealistic. In 1968, Ich Ha (22 years old at the time) had a girlfriend who was also in the movement. On December 6 of 1968, during a

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<sup>130</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #3 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 123.

<sup>131</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #2 with Le Cong Co, 118.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

particularly bloody confrontation between RVN and NLF soldiers, Ich Ha and his girlfriend were discovered together by an RVN military unit in an underground hideout near his home village of Phu Xuan. After taking up positions around the entrance, the soldiers demanded that the couple come out of their hideout and surrender. Ich Ha must have known what sort of treatment they were likely to receive should they be captured and imprisoned, because he elected to answer the RVN soldiers' demand by throwing some well-timed grenades out from the entrance of the hole, killing and wounding an unknown number of RVN soldiers. At this point, the RVN soldiers apparently lost interest in taking prisoners and responded by throwing their own grenades into the hideout killing both Ich Ha and his girlfriend.<sup>133</sup>

Earlier that year, the Tet offensive had already claimed the lives of thousands of NLF guerrillas and PAVN soldiers who had come south to assist them. During this time, bitter house-to-house fighting inside the city had made travel even more dangerous, but Lu, like his cousin Ich Ha, still found time to try and maintain a relationship with a woman from Hue. "Her name was Lien, but that girlfriend was married to someone else because Lu's life was very unstable. He was always traveling around to organize revolutionary activities, and the girlfriend never knew where he went or if he was still alive. In 1968, Lu went back to Hue and tried to meet with that girl...."<sup>134</sup>

During an interview, Le Cong Co shared his recollection of Lu's ill-fated romance and how the violence and unpredictability of the war and the deep divisions it created in their community literally and figuratively conspired to keep Lu and Lien apart:

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<sup>133</sup> Duong Dinh Na, interview #3 with Duong Dinh Na, 127.

<sup>134</sup> Nguyen Van Ninh, interview #2 with Nguyen Van Ninh aka Dao, 96.

In 1968, during the uprising in Hue, Lu had a girlfriend whose name was Lien. Before Lu went to the jungle they had made many promises to each other. Lu told her he would go to the jungle and they would wait for each other... Lu asked me to go with him to see Lien... At one o'clock at night, Lu and I went out on the street [to go see her] and tried to cross but we couldn't because of the bombardment from artillery nearby. Even the dogs running out in the street were being killed... We didn't know that Lien had already married an RVN policeman. When Lu [and I] went to her house, her mother lied and said she went out, but, actually, we found out she was with that policeman. Lu was devastated. (*Le Cong Co*)<sup>135</sup>

While the initial combined PAVN and NLF assault was successful at taking most of the city, once the decision was made by the RVN and American side to call in airstrikes and artillery fire, the number of PAVN and NLF casualties grew rapidly. By the beginning of March, 1968, the battle for Hue (or the Hue uprising as members of the NLF prefer to call it) had left much of the city in ruins. According to veteran American combat photographer, David Douglas Duncan, "The Americans pounded the Citadel almost to dust with air strikes, napalm runs, artillery and naval gunfire and direct cannon fire from tanks - a total effort to root out and kill every enemy soldier. The mind reels at the carnage, cost and ruthlessness of it all."<sup>136</sup>

With thousands dead and dying on both sides and the American and RVN military officials increasingly desperate to reclaim the Citadel from the NLF and PAVN forces that occupied it, little attention was paid to civilian casualties or to the preservation of Hue's numerous cultural and historical monuments. One month of bitter fighting reduced much of the outer wall of the Citadel and the imperial palace to piles of broken bricks, shattered concrete and dust. According to Don Tate of Scripps-Howard Newspapers, there were "bomb craters 40 feet wide and 20 feet deep in the streets near the walls of the citadel" and "bodies stacked into graves

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<sup>135</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #2 with Le Cong Co, 118.

<sup>136</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 136.

by fives -- one on top of another....” Many of the city’s most venerable neighborhoods lay in ruins with a total of “nine thousand seven hundred and seventy-six of Hue's 17,134 houses... [having been] completely destroyed”<sup>137</sup>

Lu, Co and Ich Ha were fortunate to have been ordered out of the city before the final American assault which overran the NLF and PAVN held positions around the Citadel and, thus, were able to avoid being killed or captured in Hue. Some of the most intense fighting of the war, however, was still to come. Though the three young men escaped the bloodbath in Hue, they were soon to find out that they had stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Ha’s death in December of 1968, while fighting in his home village, was the result of intense fighting that continued unabated throughout 1968 despite the enormous losses the NLF had suffered inside Hue.

Surviving the combined American and RVN onslaught on the jungle and the countryside around Hue over next 4 years was as much a matter of luck as anything else. As Le Cong Co explained during an interview in April of 2014:

On the battlefield and in the jungle people didn’t understand why I am still alive because the fighting was so fierce. There were some days they sprayed Agent Orange, and even the biggest trees lost their leaves and died. Frightful, I can’t imagine. There was no water to drink because B-52s bombed the streams and springs in the jungle to cut off our water supply. Because they knew that we relied on the streams for our water, B-52s bombed night and day.... That’s how Duong Dinh Na could go to Con Dao and survive. Other people went on missions. They all died. The entire group that was with me all died, only I

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<sup>137</sup> Gareth Porter, “The 1968 ‘Hue Massacre,’” 1974,

<http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furg/Vietnam/porterhueic74.pdf>.

After the US Army and the ARVN finished retaking Hue at the end of February 1968, there were reports of a large massacre of captured RVN soldiers, officials and others who may have been believed to have collaborated with the RVN government. These reports have never been thoroughly investigated and no conclusive evidence of a massacre has yet been uncovered. While a preponderance of the evidence I have examined does indicate that something on the scale of a massacre did take place in Hue during the time it was held by NLF and PAVN forces, the actual numbers of those killed and the names of the victims and the perpetrators, as well as the circumstances of their deaths and the locations of the their bodies remain unknown. Further readings available at <http://www.chomsky.info/books/counter-revolutionary-violence.htm#sec14>

survived... There were some days when I was in Phu Van that tanks demolished all of the houses and underground hideouts. Some days 50-70 guerillas died in one day. Frightful, I can't imagine.<sup>138</sup> (*Le Cong Co*)

In 1971, Lu and Co were assigned to go on one last training mission together. After completing their training in the jungle they were ordered to return to their regularly assigned areas:

...we went on a mission to return to the jungle for training. [After that] Lu, Co and Thi, these three brothers,[were ordered to go] back to their local areas. I remember at that time we were starving, and American soldiers were everywhere. If we just stepped outside, we saw Americans. [Because] the leader of the [City Party] Committee ordered that the three of us must return to our local areas, we had to find a way to get there. At that moment we said goodbye to each other, but we didn't know if we would ever see each other again, because the fighting around us was so fierce....<sup>139</sup> (*Le Cong Co*)

Since there are as many versions of the story as there are tellers, and no one I spoke with was able to name any eyewitnesses, it seems that the exact circumstances surrounding the death of Nguyen Thuc Lu will never be known. However, certain specific details of the moments leading up to his death are agreed upon by everyone I spoke with. Lu died on April 30, 1971 at Van Xa in the Huong Tra district of Hue province. Having been shot and badly wounded while transporting supplies through his home district, Lu told his comrades to continue on without him because he could no longer keep up. According to Le Cong Co, "they shot him and his leg was broken. Lu pulled the pin from a grenade and waited for the enemy, when the enemy rushed at him he threw his grenade and killed some of them."<sup>140</sup>

The former underground NLF and Viet Minh agent Pham Thi Nga (now in her mid-80s) remembers vividly the moment she learned of her cousin Lu's death:

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<sup>138</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #2 with Le Cong Co, 116.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 115-116.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 116.

Lu died on April 30[1971]. At that time I had a watch shop on Tran Hung Dao Street. Lu's group came back to the city and stayed with Lan [Duong Dinh Na's sister]. They bought supplies and transported them back to the jungle. One day on his supply route Lu, was ambushed by RVN soldiers. Lu and some others in his group were wounded. Lu told the others to leave him because he wouldn't survive his wounds. He tried to destroy all the materials with him. He volunteered to stay and fight to the death to hold off the RVN soldiers, and he died there. On that day I was selling watches, and, during the late evening, I stood in front of the door. An RVN soldier came up to me and showed me a watch and said, "Hey, how much is this watch worth? I just took it from a VC..." I recognized the watch because I had given that watch to Lu as a present. I knew I was not mistaken because his watch had a light so he could see it at night. The letters around the clock were red because they reflected light. I was grief-stricken because I knew that Lu was dead. Maybe that was his soul bringing the watch back to me to inform me that he was gone. (*Pham Thi Nga*)<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Pham Thi Nga, interview #1 with Pham Thi Nga, 106.

## Conclusion:

***“Millions of Vietnamese suffered: injuries and deaths, loss, privation, hunger, dislocation, house burnings, detention, imprisonment, and torture. Some experienced one or another of these every day for years on end. That’s suffering beyond the capacity of even our ablest writers to capture in a single book. Unfortunately, however, that’s not the problem. The problem is that almost no one has tried. That deserves a whole lot more focus... Vietnamese are bit characters in American histories of the war...”*** Nick Turse<sup>142</sup>

The act of counting war deaths ascribes value and a meaning that is tallied, recorded and repeated when estimating the overall cost of a particular conflict. During the Vietnamese-American War, the number of Americans who died was meticulously counted down to the last man. Later on, to help ensure that none of the Americans who died serving in Vietnam would be forgotten, each individual name was etched in stone on a memorial wall in the nation’s capital so that every loss could be recognized and remembered as a price paid and a sacrifice made for the American war effort in Vietnam.

The number of American soldiers lost is thought to have been exactly 58,282 KIA (killed in action).<sup>143</sup> The number of Vietnamese deaths will forever remain a mystery because no one ever bothered to attempt a systematic accounting of Vietnamese lives lost as a result of the war. Estimates of Vietnamese men, women and children killed by violence during the war vary widely. Perhaps, it was 2 million. More likely it was significantly more, possibly as many as 3.8 million according to a study done jointly by Harvard Medical School and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Nick Turse, “Who Did You Rape in the War, Daddy? A Question for Veterans That Needs Answering,” *Tom’s Dispatch.com*, March 19, 2013,

[http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175662/tomgram%3A\\_nick\\_turse%2C\\_a\\_rape\\_in\\_wartime/Who Did You Rape in the War, Daddy? A Question for Veterans that Needs Answering.](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175662/tomgram%3A_nick_turse%2C_a_rape_in_wartime/Who_Did_You_Rape_in_the_War,_Daddy?A_Question_for_Veterans_that_Needs_Answering)

<sup>143</sup> “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall,” n.d., <http://www.vvmf.org/NameAdditions2012Press>.

<sup>144</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves, The Real American War in Vietnam*, 13.

"The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient and as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important...." opined former US Commanding General in Vietnam, William Westmoreland, during an interview for the documentary *Hearts and Minds*.<sup>145</sup> Unfortunately, this assumption was in no way unique to General Westmoreland. In fact, during the war, so little value was placed on the lives of Vietnamese civilians that their deaths would only be counted by the US military if they were improperly labeled dead "VC" as part of a body count. The bodies of the elderly, pregnant women, young children and babies killed by American soldiers or American bombs, which could not be labeled "VC" with any degree of plausibility, were, as a matter of policy, ignored and forgotten.<sup>146</sup>

Though unofficial, this policy had a name and was often referred to by its military acronym MGR (Mere Gook Rule). This rule posited that all Vietnamese people, whether from the north or south, old or young, friend or enemy, were little more than animals who could be raped or killed with impunity. In many cases, the killing of civilians was actually encouraged because the extra corpses (assuming the dead weren't too young or too old) could be used to inflate body counts.<sup>147</sup>

While the costs of the war for the US has been meticulously catalogued and measured, first in soldiers and then in dollars, the cost in terms of Vietnamese lives and suffering have only

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<sup>145</sup> Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds*, Documentary (Rialto Pictures, 1974), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxheGsDzt3c>.

<sup>146</sup> Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves, The Real American War in Vietnam*, 12.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Body counts were used by the US military as a means of gauging the effectiveness of individual military units during particular engagements. In most cases, the higher the body count the more successful the mission was gauged to have been. A higher body count often resulted in better performance evaluations and promotions. Lower body counts could result in less perks (R&R passes, medals, beer, etc) and lowered performance evaluations. Turse, 45-46.

been estimated as an afterthought. The numbers of Vietnamese civilians who died was never considered worthy of investigation beyond that needed to make rough estimates for intelligence purposes. The act of counting itself would recognize, give voice to and assign a cost to the suffering of the Vietnamese people. Conversely, not counting Vietnamese war deaths disempowered and devalued the lives of the Vietnamese people by dehumanizing them to a level in which their deaths are categorized as unworthy of recognition. A war death that is unrecognized and uncounted implies no moral judgments and no need for second guessing.

The pejorative “gook” was used to reduce the Vietnamese people encountered by American soldiers to a something less than human. For many American G.I’s, the dehumanization of the Vietnamese people was a necessary precondition to the brutality they were forced to engage in. The beliefs that the Vietnamese people were uncivilized, dirty and ungrateful were fundamental underlying assumptions which pervaded throughout the US military and affected numerous aspects of military strategy during the war. These beliefs were perpetuated in the American media, which, by focusing almost exclusively on American deaths, reinforced cultural assumptions about the relative insignificance of Vietnamese suffering and loss of life.<sup>148</sup>

The creation by the United States of numerous free-fire-zones in southern Vietnam in which over 300,000 civilians were killed or wounded before 1968,(according to a study done for the US Senate), was the ultimate concession of defeat in the battle for Vietnamese “hearts and minds.”<sup>149</sup> By labelling the populations of large portions of the countryside as irredeemably lost and instructing soldiers who entered these areas to “kill anything that moves” the US and the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 60.

RVN were effectively acknowledging that only violence on a massive scale and the killing of hundreds of thousands of non-combatants would have any chance of achieving their objectives. These policies were put in place because, at the highest levels of the government and the military, American war planners dismissed or discounted the idea that Vietnamese public opinion would determine the outcome of the war in Vietnam and instead elected to rely on the US military's ability to kill on an industrial scale to bring about a victory.<sup>150</sup>

Despite all the rhetoric on the American side about winning hearts and minds, it was a rare occasion indeed when the occasional westerner took it upon him or herself to seek out and create a record of Vietnamese perspectives on what was happening within their own country. Since the War began, over 30,000 books have been written about myriad of related subjects. Yet, to this day, within this vast collection of writings, Vietnamese voices remain scarce and are generally ignored in public debates about the war.

Even in Vietnam the contributions made by southern revolutionaries to national liberation during the Diem era and the American War are just beginning to be fully recognized. While the history of the Youth Association student movement in Trung Trung Bo is certainly no longer suppressed or "forgotten" in Vietnam, the aspirations, motives and stories of these veterans remain almost completely absent from the corpus of American scholarship on the War. Today, only the tiniest fraction of the tens of thousands of former guerilla fighters, support personal and student activists who joined the struggle for Vietnam's national liberation have been interviewed or had their stories told. This narrowly focused thesis project, centering

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

primarily on the lives of a group of students who met in Thanh Luong village in December of 1961, is a small step in the right direction

The shifting winds of political power and an increasing willingness of people to speak about subjects that had once been regarded as politically sensitive in Vietnam, have allowed Duy Tan University and its Rector, Le Cong Co, to become the focal point for a larger effort now gathering steam within southern and central Vietnam to recognize and preserve knowledge regarding the contributions made by southern revolutionaries to national liberation. Over the past eight years, Le Cong Co and a community of Vietnamese scholars centered around Duy Tan University, working in collaboration with historian Ngo Vinh Long, have been steadily building up a body of Vietnamese language scholarship on the history of NLF-led student organizations. This has resulted in the publication of a number of Vietnamese language historical texts and other materials related to the student movement, including books, academic articles and film and television documentaries. As yet, none of this material has been translated into English, and very little has been scrutinized by scholars outside of Vietnam.

### **Vietnam and the United States, a Surprising Affinity:**

Once labelled the mortal enemies of America and the “Free World,” today, former members of the Youth Association are remarkably free from bitterness or ill will towards their former adversaries. During my interviews and in casual conversation many of my subjects expressed a fascination with and an admiration for American culture and strong support for a closer relationship between Vietnam the United States. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that many of them are eager to forge long-term connections with individual Americans on a personal level.

This attitude is by no means a recent development. There has long been an admiration for and an interest in American culture among well-educated Vietnamese. In 1955, family patriarch and father of Youth Association leader Nguyen Thuc Lu, Nguyen Thuc Tuan began learning English, eventually gaining an impressive mastery of the language, despite having only begun learning it while in his mid-40s. Tuan went on to receive a B.A. in American Literature from Hue University in 1964. In addition to reading traditional Vietnamese literature, children growing up in Tuan’s extended family after 1975 were also introduced to numerous classic American works of fiction such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Gone With The Wind*.

Historian and former student activist Ngo Vinh Long remembers that when he was a child, his father used to talk to him “about the United States.” Growing up in Vietnam, Long learned two names for the United States, “*my quoc*,” which means “beautiful country,” and “*hiep chung quoc hoa ky*,” meaning “racially harmonious country.” Long recalls being raised to believe that America was an “ideal place” which his father described to him as “a beautiful,

wonderful country where there is racial harmony.”<sup>151</sup> This sort of idealized perspective of the United States remains prevalent in Vietnam today, in many cases having been passed down to the children of revolutionaries by parents who spent more than a decade locked in a life and death struggle with the American military.

During an interview in the summer of 2013, Le Cong Co shared his perspective on how the Vietnamese-American War came about against the wishes of the Vietnamese and American people. “American participation in the War was a mistake. Indeed America was a not a country that wanted to conquer Vietnam. To Americans, the main issue in Asia was the Chinese. That is the balance of powers, not just in Southeast Asia and Asia, but globally. The Vietnamese-American War occurred against the desires of the Vietnamese and American people.”<sup>152</sup>

An oft repeated phrase in Vietnam illustrates a commonly held Vietnamese attitude of forbearance regarding the American intervention. “We fought the Chinese for 1,000 years, we fought the French for 100. You [the Americans] were here just for 10.”<sup>153</sup> In Vietnam today, the desire for reconciliation and friendship with United States is strong even among the families of the most diehard opponents of the US intervention. With the continual warming of relations between the US and Vietnam and a strategic and economic alliance between the two countries that seems destined to grow stronger in the coming years, new opportunities for original research will continue to become available. How the Vietnamese-American War is remembered in the United States and in Vietnam in the future is something that should be and will be negotiated as a collaborative effort among two friendly nations.

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<sup>151</sup> Appy, *Patriots, The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*, 55.

<sup>152</sup> Le Cong Co, interview #1 with Le Cong Co, 4.

<sup>153</sup> Julie Salaman, “TELEVISION REVIEW; The War Is Long Over, But Vietnam Continues,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2002, sec. Archives, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/23/arts/television-review-the-war-is-long-over-but-vietnam-continues.html>.

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