

Politics, Protest and Revolution:

The Origins and Evolution of the Urban Networks of the NLF and the Communist Party in

Central Vietnam, 1930-1975

Aaron Lillie

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2021

Reading Committee:

Christoph Giebel, Chair

Laurie Sears

Raymond Jonas

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

History

©Copyright 2021

Aaron Lillie

University of Washington

Abstract

Politics, Protest and Revolution:
the Origins and Evolution of the Urban Networks of the NLF and the Communist Party in
Central Vietnam, 1930-1975

Aaron Lillie

Chair of the Supervisory Committee: Associate Prof. Christoph Giebel, International Studies and
History

This project combines political history, social history and memory to convey a perspective of the war through the eyes of the people of Central Vietnam who participated in the urban movement of the Vietnamese Revolution. It is intended to address conspicuous gaps within the historical record through an examination of how and why urban networks of the Communist Party, the Việt Minh and the NLF evolved and attracted new members in Huế and Central Vietnam in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s.

Beginning with the inception of the Communist Party in Huế in 1930, this project tracks the various affiliated underground network's development and evolution through World War II, the French War of decolonization, the Diệm government, the Struggle Movement and the Tết Offensive, concluding in the early 1970s. It offers a view of the Vietnamese revolution and the

Vietnam Wars (1945-1975) from the perspective of the people in Hué and Central Vietnam who joined the, the Communist Party, the NLF and the student and Struggle Movements.

Chapters 1 and 2 follow the development of the Communist Party and affiliated networks in central Vietnam through the 1940s and 1950s. Based primarily on recent interviews with participants and eyewitnesses, Chapters 3,4 and 5 are a narrative which incorporates a collection of perspectives of NLF underground agents, dissidents and political activists, who, riding a wave of anti-American nationalism and Buddhist and student anger at the undemocratic policies of the military government in early 1960s central Vietnam, made a choice to become committed revolutionaries. Chapter 5 also addresses the Tét Offensive in Hué and surrounding controversies in some detail.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to
all my friends and loved ones in Vietnam
who donated their time and energy
to this project

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my wife for assist me during interviews and for her patience, her tolerance and support me during what turned out to be a long writing process. I also am especially grateful for the contribution of my primary mentor at the University of Washington, Christoph Giebel whose ideas provided inspiration for my research. Additionally, would like to thank other mentors at UW that have helped guide me along the way including, Laurie Sears, Bill Rorabaugh and Glennys Young as well as Vince Raphael, Purnima Dhavan, Raymond Jonas and Christina Sunardi. I would also like to thank my colleague Huong Thi Diu Nguyen for her advice and assistance.

Among the many people in Vietnam to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, I would like to acknowledge and express my thanks for the immense contributions to my research by the following participants in the urban movement in the 1960s in Huế and Central Vietnam: Chu Son, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Dương Đình Na, Lê Công Cơ, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Võ Ky Nam, Trịnh Túc, Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Phạm Thi Nga, Võ Quê. Additionally, I would like to express my profound gratitude to all the participants and scholars of the urban movement whom I interviewed for taking the time to speak with me.

I have been extremely fortunate to have been able to rely on the guidance and assistance of number of very capable members of a younger generation of academics and scholars in Vietnam without whom my work would have been impossible. I would especially like to acknowledge the contributions of Dương Thi Hương Trà and Vinh Linh Nguyễn. I would also like to thank Cô Tươi, Cô Yên and all of the other patient and talented Vietnamese language instructors at the Trường Đại Học Khoa Học Xã Hội và Nhân Văn who provided me with important insights and the linguistic tools I needed to understand years of accumulated books, documents, interviews and other materials in Vietnamese gathered for my research.

The University of Washington libraries have proven an invaluable resource over the years. I would like to thank Judith Henchy and all the staff at the UW libraries for their advice and assistance during the 8 years of this project. I am also grateful to Lê Công Cơ and the staff at the Duy Tân University Library in Đà Nẵng for providing me with a number of relevant books and other materials as well as access to their archive. Thanks also to Robyn Davis and the FLAS program for facilitating several years of intensive Vietnamese language study.

Abbreviations

ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam

DRVN Democratic Republic of Vietnam

DMZ Demilitarized Zone

NLF National Liberation Front

PAVN People's Army of Vietnam

PLAF People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam

PRG Provisional Revolutionary Government

RVN Republic of Vietnam

VC Việt Cộng

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii-iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Abbreviations.....	viii
Table of Contents.....	ix-xiii
Introduction.....	1
The Importance of Reframing the Conflict to Understanding the Revolutionary Perspective.....	4
Conclusion.....	20
Terminology.....	21
Sources and Methods.....	24
 Chapter 1	
The City of Huế as a Center for Tradition and Culture and a Cradle of the Vietnamese Revolution.....	28
Religion and Religious Practices in Thừa Thiên Huế	32
The Origins of the Communist Party in Huế.....	33
Early Revolutionary Newspapers.....	48
The Network Revitalized.....	51
Conclusion.....	56
 Chapter 2	
The Network in Thừa Thiên Huế Before 1968.....	59
The Communist Party Leadership of the Urban Movement of the NLF in Central Vietnam.....	67
Võ Chí Công.....	67
Lê Tư Minh.....	69
Trương Chí Cương.....	72
Hồ Nghinh (aka Ba Phước).....	73
Nguyễn Trung Chính.....	74
Nguyễn Đình Bảy.....	75
Phan Nam.....	76
Hoàng Kim Loan.....	76

Phan Thanh Pha.....	77
Hoàng Lanh.....	78
Tôn Thất Dương Ky.....	79
Lê Quang Vịnh.....	80
Nguyễn Dóa.....	81
Nguyễn Đình Chi.....	81
Thích Đôn Hậu.....	82
Underground Families in Huế.....	83
The Thiên Tường Family.....	83
Bửu Đáp and Family.....	84
Hoàng Bá.....	85
Lê Khắc Quyến.....	86
Nguyễn Hữu Đính and Family.....	88
Nguyễn Hữu Trí and Family.....	89
Tô Nhuận Vỹ.....	90
Nguyễn Khoa Điềm.....	91
The NLF Led Student Movement in Huế.....	92
Lê Công Cơ.....	93
Nguyễn Thúc Tuân.....	97
Nguyễn Thúc Lư.....	102
Dương Đình Na.....	103
Trịnh Túc.....	105
Nguyễn Thúc Tần.....	107
Nguyễn Văn Ninh.....	108
Phạm Thị Nga.....	109
Lê Văn Hào.....	110
Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường.....	111
Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan.....	112

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.....	112
Photos.....	116-122

Chapter 3

The Growth of the Urban Movement in Huế, 1960-1965.....	123
Thanh Lương Village and a Meeting of Likeminded Youth.....	131
Printing and Distributing Agitprop in Huế.....	141
Political Training and Indoctrination.....	150
The Buddhist Movement.....	155
Ngày Phát Dan through the Eyes of Professor Erich Wulff.....	156
Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.....	160
The Buddhist Movement and Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association.....	165
Increasing Politicization of the Movement.....	173
From Buddhist Movement to Struggle Movement.....	176
Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan.....	183
The Network Grows in Size and Strength.....	186
The Quốc Học Network Exposed.....	191
Underground Agents of the Youth Association Flee to the Jungle.....	194
1965, A Year of Escalating Tension.....	198
Conclusion.....	199

Chapter 4

Tam Kỳ.....	201
The Founding of the Youth Association of High School and College Students for Liberation of the South, Tam Kỳ.....	204
Sơn Hải.....	208
Affiliated Underground Agent, Nguyễn Lương Ý.....	209
Underground Agents, Nguyễn Lương Ý.....	210
Underground Agent, Phạm Thị Cẩm Nhung.....	212

Affiliated Communist Party Official, Đo Thế Cháp.....	213
Committee Secretary, Đỗ Hùng Luân.....	214
Deputy Secretary, Nguyễn Nhung.....	217
Nguyễn Quang Vinh.....	218
Vũ Bá Học.....	219
Trương Cao Nhã.....	220
Nguyễn Đình Sơn.....	221
Recruitment and Vetting	221
Màn Non Newspaper.....	223
Propaganda.....	225
Distributing Leaflets and Other Tasks.....	227
Drawing Maps, Providing Intelligence and Planting Bombs.....	229
Political Training.....	231
Joining the Communist Party.....	233
Officials in Tam Kỳ React.....	235
Arrest.....	236
General Nguyễn Chanh Thi.....	242
Republic Justice.....	246
Conclusion.....	248

Chapter 5

The Suppression of the Struggle Movement, Leader of the Urban Movement Flee to the Jungle, and the Tết Offensive and its Aftermath, 1966-1968.....	250
The Confrontation and Flight to the Jungle.....	261
Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association and the Struggle Movement.....	269
Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's Escape to the Jungle, 1966.....	273
The Networks of the Communist Party and the National Liberation Front in Huế prior to the Tết Offensive.....	277
Nguyễn Khoa Điềm and Tô Nhuận Vỹ.....	281

Preparation for the Assault Inside and Outside of Huế.....	288
January 30, 1968, and the First Phase of the Attack.....	289
The Tết Offensive in Thanh Lương Village.....	292
The Treatment of Prisoners of War by the NLF in Huế, the Policy vs the Reality.....	295
The Impact of the Tết Offensive on the Civilian Population.....	309
Conclusion.....	313

Epilogue

Confinement at Côn Đảo.....	315
The Death of Nguyễn Thúc Lư.....	319
The Rise of a New Student Movement in Huế.....	320
Conclusion.....	323
Bibliography.....	326

Introduction:

Historians often claim the role of ordained arbiters of historical truth, taking it upon ourselves to analyze and assess the vestiges of the past, usually in service of a particular narrative. Having accepted the important task of interpreting and attempting to make sense of our collective history, it is critical however, that we remember that the narratives we guide are of our own construction. These assemblages of fragmentary pieces are brought together to create a representation of the past, which are at their best careful and ethical re-imaginings of events based on incomplete evidence with each one of its constituent parts meticulously crafted, shaped and fitted to the task of disguising its inadequacies. Historians aspire to construct truth and meaning from the remnants of our past, but inevitably, if we wish to be honest with ourselves and our readers, we must confront the question of whose truth and whose meaning we seek to convey.

The process of creating historical narrative is in some ways not dissimilar from that of writing music in that both are art forms that rely on silences to give their work structure and form. Although historical silences are often not conscious constructions, they are inevitable and essential components of any historical narrative which help enable their audience to distinguish what the author believes is significant. As the anthropologist Michel Trouillot has observed, “Silences are inherent in history because a single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing...”¹ If a historical “account was indeed fully comprehensive of all the facts, it would be incomprehensible. Further, the selection of what matters, the dual creation of

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 49.

mentions and silences, is premised on the understanding of the rules of the game by broadcaster and audience alike.”²

Trouillot argues that “in vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both ‘what happened’ and ‘that which is said to have happened.’ The first meaning places the emphasis on the socio-historical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.... The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.”³⁴ Thus, the characteristics and idiosyncrasies that are imbued within archival sources at the moment of their creation should themselves be the subject of historical inquiry. This can provide historians with useful tools for identifying significant absences, gaps or inconsistencies in the historical record which may lead to important insights when engaged in the process of constructing a narrative account of what is said to have happened. Inevitably, as one begins to peer behind the curtain to see how historical documentation is transformed by the historian into narration and then is accepted as truth, the fragmentary nature of historical evidence becomes increasingly clear.

Historical narrative is created by coalescing and assembling disparate pieces in much the same way as a building is constructed using carefully selected building materials that are assembled, measured and then cut down to size with precision by skilled craftsmen who then fit them into a carefully planned architectural scheme. Surplus materials are discarded or saved for later use in another project. Once complete, everything should fit seamlessly together and the project itself is then viewed as a whole, obscuring questions of possible alternative outcomes.

² Trouillot, 51.

³ Trouillot, 2.

⁴ Trouillot, 4.

According to Trouillot, “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives) ; and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”⁵ As such “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”⁶ I would argue that identifying and exploring these “bundles of silences” is among the most effective methods a historian can employ when seeking to address the enduring legacies of repressive state power.

As Trouillot points out, “the silencing of dissent and the building of state institutions” are frequently part of the same process of establishing and legitimizing state power.⁷ In the Vietnamese-American War, we have the unusual case of the victor (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the defeated nation (the United States) each creating their own narratives of the war, with each narrative having becoming dominant within their respective spheres of political influence. Thus, historians, attempting to read their sources against the grain in this particular situation, should interpret them in a way that goes not only against the grain of the commonly accepted American historical narrative of the war, but also against the grain of the dominant narrative put forth by the government in Hà Nội. Here, the historical narratives of the defeated nation have actually had the advantage because of the inequality in the distribution of systems of knowledge production or what Trouillot refers to as the “uneven power of historical production.”⁸

⁵ Trouillot, 26.

⁶ Trouillot, 27.

⁷ Trouillot, 68.

⁸ Trouillot, 44.

The result of this creation of dual and often contradictory narratives of the war has been the formation of separate and distinct “bundles of silences” within each narrative that, when identified, often point to areas that confuse, disrupt and undermine the dominant narratives of unity and solidarity on the communist side and American narratives of defending freedom and democracy in an embattled south Vietnamese Republic holding the line against communism while being invaded by their aggressive neighbor to the north.

The Importance of Reframing the Conflict to Understanding the Revolutionary Perspective:

In order to fully understand the perspective of those who supported the NLF and the Vietnamese revolution, it is essential to first sidestep the most basic framing of the American narrative of the war which describes the conflict in Vietnam in terms of a “North” vs “South” binary. For many Vietnamese, whose lives and families extended across this arbitrarily imposed dividing line at the 17th parallel, the notion of a permanent political border separating two distinct Vietnam’s was always a nonstarter. This vitally important fact was fundamental aspect of the conflict which helped shaped the thinking of Vietnamese on both sides of the dividing line. As the Vietnam historian Christoph Giebel has pointed out, from the time of the creation of the of the ASVN (Associated State of Vietnam) by the French in 1949, a succession of southern based Vietnamese governments declared their intentions to reunite the country under a single national government. This plan, which came to be known as Bắc Tiến (advancing to the North) never reached a stage where it might have been implemented, in part, because of American opposition. Nevertheless, the plan is a clear illustration of the mindset of Republican leaders and

the Vietnamese public regarding a permanent division of the country into “North” and “South” Vietnam.⁹

In the minds of many Vietnamese living south of the 17th parallel, support for the northern government over that of the American backed Republic was the only realistic option for bringing about a united Vietnam. As a result, a large number of southern Vietnamese in Central Vietnam in the 1960s enlisted into military units of the PAVN. While many others returned to the south to fight after regrouping to the north (đi tap kết) in the 1950s. Regardless of where they were born and raised, people from this group have always been depicted on American maps as infiltrators invading their own communities.¹⁰

American maps representing the conflict to this day continue to portray the political situation in these terms. Southerners living in the south and fighting other southerners are conveniently completely ignored, and effectively prevented from being recognized and addressed. Because this framing of the war elevates the importance of role the communist government, implicitly implying that the communists in Hà Nội were the sole source of all agency during the revolution, it has not been sufficiently refuted by the Vietnamese government.

The complex political landscape of Vietnam in the 1960s is reflected in the diversity of views held by different groups of Vietnamese people on the war and the Vietnamese Revolution. Until very recently, both American and Vietnam based scholars researching the Vietnamese-American War have continued to overwhelmingly privilege the narratives and perspectives which reinforce the tropes and ideologies preferred by their respective governments. As a result, very few accounts have been written which focus on the point of view of the group of people

⁹ Christoph Giebel, “Terminology Matters: The Fiction of ‘South Việt Nam’ and Representations of the Republic of Việt Nam,” 2019, 3.

¹⁰ Giebel, 20.

most impacted by the violence of the war, southern Vietnamese supporters of the Communist Party and the National Liberation Front. While in recent years, a large number of books and articles by Vietnamese veterans have been published, despite the availability of these new materials, only a handful of scholars outside of Vietnam have taken the time to utilize them.

Over the past 50 years, among the hundreds of scholars publishing thousands of academic works examining the war in the United States, only a few outliers have bothered to address basic questions about the fundamental nature of the enemy the US was fighting. In my research I have sought answers to questions like “How much popular support did the NLF have among Vietnamese living south of the 17th parallel?”, “Who were the people who fought for the NLF,” “Where did they come from?”, “What were their motivations?” “How did they conceptualize the war?” and “What did they believe they were fighting for?” “What did they do, specifically, while they were active in the Revolution?” “What do their writings at the time tell us about who they were and what they believed? “, “How did people around them in their communities perceive them at the time? “ By seeking nuanced answers to very specific and detailed inquiries about peoples’ lives and experiences, it is possible to construct a fuller and more accurate portrait of the people who joined the Struggle Movement and the NLF as individuals, which is less distorted by war propaganda, factionalism, bitterness, or desire for revenge.

Ironically, one area in which the most hawkish members of the government from both nations have found common cause has been in the suppression of the voices of the men and women from the south of Vietnam who rose to prominence as leaders in the National Liberation Front. Since the takeover of Sài Gòn by the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in 1975, tens of thousands of books and articles have been published in the US about the American War in

Vietnam from the perspective of American reporters, American officials and American veterans. By contrast, little more than handful have been written about the National Liberation Front.

While in the past, the difficulty of finding former NLF members and supporters willing to speak about their experiences was a genuine obstacle, I would argue that in recent years with the publication of numerous memoirs and articles in Vietnam containing firsthand accounts of participants on the revolutionary side, the most significant resistance to this type of scholarship has stemmed largely from the difficulties of delving deeply into complex and poorly understood issues and events. Wading into such bitter controversy is not generally considered to be an appealing task by most historians. Even among Vietnamese researchers, serious scholarship on the urban movement of the NLF has only really begun in earnest in the last two decades.

Despite having made many of the greatest personal sacrifices during the war, large numbers of NLF veterans and their supporters were sidelined and marginalized and, in a number of cases, even persecuted to varying degrees by the DRV government following the defeat of the RVN forces and the takeover of Sài Gòn in 1975. The NLF's record 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 Hà Nội. In the years immediately following the end of hostilities in 1975, both the governments in Hà Nội 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 Hà Nội government. As a result, both sides have 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 withdrawal. To this day, both the government in Hà Nội and in Washington, DC, prefer a narrative of the war that portrays the communist leadership

in Hà Nội as having been the source of all political agency in the struggle against the United States and its dependent, the Sài Gòn government.¹¹

As the French philosopher Michel Foucault has astutely observed, by nature, power is not possessed by individuals or concentrated at the top of a pyramid, rather, it must be continually acceded to by a network below.¹² As a consequence, those who are endowed with it are perpetually seeking new ways to renew, strengthen and maintain the legitimacy of the hierarchal relationships it creates. In order to maintain that legitimacy, explanatory narratives are formed and defended. Historically, American nationalists and the United States government have promoted a narrative of American exceptionalism implicit within which is the idea that the United States is the world's most exceptional nation. Based on this assumption it is argued that the United States has a duty to promote the spread of freedom and democracy around the world. This trope has been widely used by politicians and media when attempting to justify American involvement in Vietnam.

Vietnam's dominant national narrative focuses primarily on a long tradition of heroic resistance against foreign aggression and the inevitable march of progress led by the benevolent communist vanguard in Hà Nội. In order to protect its claim to a monopoly on political power in

¹¹ Ngô Vĩnh Long argues in his article *Post Paris Agreement struggles and the Fall of Saigon* that US historians and former American policy makers overemphasize the role of the PAVN, particularly in the latter part of the war with regard to the South, and as a consequence, "largely ignored if not dismissed as being insignificant... the roles of southern fighters of the National Liberation Front and the southern urban opposition." Long goes on to say that "In a sense, the revisionist American view and the dominant official Vietnamese view on the role of the NLF and southern struggles during the post-Paris Agreement period have converged" " P204-205 and "after interviewing hundreds of southern revolutionary fighters intermittently for the past 10 years, I have learned that many of them feel frustrated and slighted by the fact that the struggles of the people in the South have not been appropriately recognized... Moreover, many of those who operated in urban areas—especially in Saigon have told me that after the war they have been regarded with suspicion and marginalized, in part because of the incorrect official assessment of the role of the urban opposition during the war years. In my opinion, this has created a certain resentment which in turn has made political accommodation and integration in post-war Vietnam that much more difficult." 205 Long also argues that this "incorrect assessment of the role of the urban opposition" has led to an incorrect assessment of the "political support for the revolution in the southern towns and cities" 205

¹² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 1997), 29.

Vietnam, the post-1975 communist government in Hà Nội found it expedient to disperse and dismantle the networks of the NLF while attempting (with some success) to publicly discredit and disgrace their leadership.¹³ After 1975, a number of former NLF cadres and their political supporters were brought to trial in kangaroo courts on trumped up charges and then sent to reeducation camps. Many others whose war records could not be credibly cast in question were assigned to lead youth brigades engaged in land clearing in the jungle for periods of time ranging anywhere from 2 to 11 years. This was part of a project called the *kinh tế mới* or “new economic zone.”¹⁴

Over the past 45 years, the political suppression and public degradation of many of these former revolutionary cadres has resulted in many areas of oppressive silence being imbued and then defended within the Vietnamese governments official historical record of the war. Foucault tells us that, “History gave us the idea that we are at war; and we wage war through history.”¹⁵ Hence, the necessity of creating and defending silences in the historical record through the application of political repression becomes inevitable. As in the case of the Haitian Colonel, Sans Souci, described in Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past, Power and the Production of History*, the silences that have formed around the NLF are part of what Trouillot has called a “war within a war.”¹⁶ With the creation of the National Liberation Front in southern Vietnam in 1960, an entire generation of alternative leadership rose to prominence whose political goals and ideals would undoubtedly have been silenced by their more dogmatic allies in the Hà Nội regime had they been living north of the 17th parallel. However, during the war, out of necessity, the coalition of

¹³ Ngô Vĩnh Long, Phone interview with Ngô Vĩnh Long, Telephone interview/Not recorded, August 25, 2013.

¹⁴ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013.

¹⁵ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 172.

¹⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 40.

revolutionary forces brought together by the Front was broadened far beyond what would normally have been acceptable to the ideologues in Hà Nội.

The French philosopher Michelle Foucault has written eloquently about how history is perpetually being revised to meet the needs of the dominant narrative because “the delicate mechanisms of power cannot function unless knowledge, or rather knowledge apparatuses, are formed, organized, and put into circulation.”¹⁷ In Vietnam, these apparatuses enable certain types of historical knowledge to be situated within the context of the dominant narrative while excluding or suppressing the production of historical knowledge that undermines narratives of national unity of purpose and absolute faith in Hà Nội’s benevolent one party monopoly on political power.

This dissertation is intended to provide the reader with a view of the Vietnamese Revolution and the war from the perspective of the people in Huế and Central Vietnam who joined the student movement, the NLF, the Communist Party and the Struggle Movement. In these pages you will find the voices of dissidents, political activists, and revolutionary cadres who, riding a wave of anti-American nationalism and Buddhist and student anger at the undemocratic policies of the military government in early 1960s Central Vietnam, made a choice to become committed revolutionaries. Within this group a diverse assemblage of intellectuals and spiritual leaders debated a myriad of competing political and ideological visions for the future of Vietnam. Despite their commitment to overthrowing the RVN regime, during the 1960s and 70s, a number of NLF cadres and other supporters of the revolution were fearful and anxious about the idea of being forced to submit to the authority of the Communists in Hà Nội, but few have been brave enough to voice those fears publicly after 1975.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 33.

Along the periphery of the revolution that swept through Central Vietnam in the mid-1960s were many who joined the Buddhist Movement and the Struggle Movement but were unwilling to fully commit to joining the NLF. This group, which included a number of Buddhist monks and intellectuals opposed to the American-backed RVN military dictatorship, but not bring themselves to support the Communists and therefore sought accommodation between the two sides.¹⁸ It is these individuals more than any other that have been most impacted by the silences imbued within the US and Hà Nội's preferred narratives of the war. The suppression of the Struggle Movement in 1966 by the ARVN led to a shutdown of the freedom and diversity in the intellectual community in Huế from which the city has never recovered, hardening positions on both sides and eliminating much of the intellectual and ideological diversity that existed there in the early 1960s.

Even today in Huế, while the war with the Republic has ended, many of the same dividing lines remain hidden beneath the surface between intellectuals and the inheritors of the communist hardline position. Much of the nuance and complexity of the views and aspirations held by those who supported the Struggle Movement and the Revolution during the war are still deliberately being obscured due to their suppression by the Vietnamese government. To the extent that it is possible for me to do so, I have tried to convey this diversity of views and interpretations of events as these individuals saw, felt and understood them without my own intervention.

Since 1975, the politics of public memory and public remembrance in Vietnam have been monopolized by the Communist Party for the purposes of creating and reinforcing its national narrative of revolutionary unity and historical inevitability. In the same way that the US

¹⁸ This group included people like Thích Trí Quang, local politician and university lecturer Hoang Văn Giàu, police colonel Lê Khắc Duyệt, and Quốc Học Professor Ngô Kha

government has for centuries derived legitimacy from the revolutionary war and the writings of the “Founding Fathers”, the story of the Vietnamese revolution as recounted by the Vietnamese Communist Party, has become central to maintaining the legitimacy of the current Vietnamese government. This is immediately evident when traveling to virtually any city in Vietnam today, it is impossible to travel any significant distance without seeing the names of famous revolutionaries literally all around you in every direction. In addition to most schools, public buildings and public parks, many public streets now bear the name of a famous revolutionary figure.

Thus, daily life and travel in every major city and town in Vietnam necessitates the usage and memorization of the names of countless historical figures whose political lives have been given an official stamp of approval by the Communist Party. While most young Vietnamese today know little about or have forgotten who these people actually were and what they did, the legitimacy invoking these names afford as symbols of revolution and the Vietnamese Communist Party still remain the fundamental justification for the Party’s existence and is key to the continued survival of its current incarnation. Or at least the Party believes this to be so.

The ongoing process of politicizing, lionizing and memorializing revolutionary leaders by transforming them from private individuals into public symbols of heroism and martyrdom has led to much of their actual history and humanity being lost as their individuality is stripped away, and they are reshaped into objects of veneration and then positioned within a carefully structured narrative. In many cases, backgrounds, beliefs, motivations and desires for the future are concealed, lost to public memory or obscured beneath a never-ending stream of state sponsored propaganda that deprives them of their autonomy as human beings, portraying them instead as generic one-dimensional cutouts. As heroes of the revolution, they serve an important

purpose as idealized symbols for the state but through this process much of their individuality is erased.

At the same time, within the United States public remembrances and narratives of the war by US veterans and those of Vietnamese exiles (whose stories are often quite different) have also frequently been politicized in order to reinforce established narratives, ideas and political justifications. Since the end of the war in 1975, the politicization of the history, memory and public remembrance of the Vietnamese Revolution and the American War in Vietnam has led to something approaching consensus among many chroniclers of the war on both sides. This unspoken agreement between the government in Hà Nội and supporters of the Republic has sought to portray the troublesome community of Buddhists and intellectuals in Huế who breathed life into the Buddhist Movement and the Struggle Movement in the early to mid-1960s, to the extent to which it is possible to do so, as the manipulated pawns of the Communist Party and the NLF. Members of communities or groups whose history and political goals undermine established US, Vietnamese exile and communist revolutionary narratives, like the Buddhists, students and intellectuals in Huế who supported the Struggle Movement and opposed American intervention, have frequently experienced a kind of willful misremembering by supporters of both the US and Hà Nội governments.¹⁹

Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Quốc Học High School Professor and political activist Ngô Kha. Kha's refusal to join the NLF or the Communist Party is an uncomfortable fact, inexplicable according to the narratives of both the Hà Nội and Sài Gòn

¹⁹ Viet Thanh Nguyen refers to this phenomena as a kind of willful dis-remembering, “the experience of being remembered and forgotten at the same time.” At once lionized for their contribution to the revolution, and simultaneously suppressed and politically marginalized for their cosmopolitan outlook, support for pluralistic democratic processes and freedom of speech, many of the former revolutionary political leaders of Huế were swept aside by the Communist Party after 1975, their long histories of sacrifice for the revolution conveniently dis-remembered by the local party which they themselves had played a critical role in building in central Vietnam. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, (New York, Grove Press, 2015)

governments. Yet, he is unquestionably one of Huế most famous revolutionary martyrs of the period, greatly revered by many intellectuals in Huế who were his contemporaries. His brutal murder by RVN police in 1973 by order of the police chief Liên Thành left an indelible impression on many on the revolutionary side.²⁰ Far from being a supporter of the Communists, Kha was, in fact, bitterly opposed to a communist takeover by the Hà Nội government, particularly after 1968 when his brother who was serving in the RVN military was killed during the Tết Offensive. According to one of his closest friends, a writer and RVN army officer named Trần Huệ (aka Chu Sơn), who joined the NLF late in the war, “Kha chose to be killed by Liên Thành because it was better than living in shame under a Communist regime or being killed by the Communists. [Kha believed] if Liên Thành killed him it would be more fitting. . . . He wanted to die, but he wanted to die a worthy death.”²¹²²

Falsely labelled a Communist by RVN police chief Liên Thành for his political dissidence, the murder of Ngô Kha while in police custody eventually led to his public transformation from an anti-American intervention nationalist and anticommunist into a revolutionary martyr by the Communist Party. Thus, the sacrifice made by Ngô Kha has been exploited by both sides for political convenience erasing its original intended meaning and significance.

This same group of intellectuals found itself similarly mis-remembered in the Vietnamese exile community and among American journalists and scholars of the war. Until recently, American scholars of the war when writing about the NLF and the Struggle Movement have

²⁰ Liên Thành was a student of both Ngô Kha and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường at Quốc Học.

²¹ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Sơn (Trần Huệ) Interview 3, December 2017.

²² This interpretation of the reasoning behind Kha’s actions would most likely dispute by some his students that joined the Communist Party, such as the poet Vơ Quê. Many in Huế who knew him prefer to think of him as an unqualified supporter of the Communist Party and the NLF, but it is widely accepted that he declined to join the either organization. Nor was he willing to leave Huế for the safety of the jungle despite knowing the danger of continuing to stay in the city.

typically ignored the wide-spread popularity, diversity and complexity of the political leaders and the movements they shaped that opposed American intervention in Vietnam.

Frequently, because it was politically convenient to do so, the mass mobilizations of Vietnamese Buddhists, students and intellectuals advocating for democratic freedoms and American withdrawal have been viewed and analyzed by the American press and American media in the most simplistic terms. Usually by accusing them of being communist stooges or dupes. This assumption has provided an unspoken justification for the beliefs and genuine motivations of the leaders of these movements being omitted from the historical record. As a result, the role and agency of many of the Vietnamese southern revolution's most influential political figures have frequently been shamefully misrepresented when they have not been completely ignored.

Influential community leaders who either led or have been publicly identified with the Struggle Movement such as Thích Trí Quảng, Hoàng Văn Giàu, Ngô Kha, Lê Khắc Duyệt and Trịnh Công Sơn have typically been labeled as communist agents by supporters of the Republic and the US war effort in Vietnam and branded as ideologically unreliable and potential troublemakers by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Despite the fact that no one from this group ever joined the NLF or was ever admitted to the Communist Party, and some like Trí Quảng spent much of their life in Vietnam after the war under house arrest, respected historians in the US have continued to portray them as having been loyal underground agents of the Hà Nội government during the war. Their actual beliefs and motivations have only rarely been investigated and discussed and never clearly understood by historians outside Vietnam.²³

²³ James McAllister, “‘Only Religions Count in Vietnam’: Thich Tri Quang and the Vietnam War,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2008): 753.

My own research into the backgrounds, motivations, and beliefs of former NLF and Struggle Movement activists and the specific events that led to their opposition to the Sài Gòn government has uncovered compelling evidence that a number of the most commonly propagated storylines related to the Tết Offensive in Huế are not supported by testimony of eyewitnesses to the attack and its aftermath. Tales of the most horrific and capricious brutality, such as that of the kangaroo courts overseen by famous intellectuals from Huế, ending in the live burial of hundreds (in some versions thousands) of residents at the Gia Hội bridge have been consistently repeated over the past 50 years. This version of events remains seductive for many who supported the Republic in Huế because it confirms a worldview and anti-communist philosophy that portrays the intellectuals in Huế who supported the revolution as a group of vengeful and diabolical mass murdering communist ideologues. This helps simplify a situation that might otherwise lead to some very difficult question about the true nature and underlying causes of the conflict.

Since the end of the war, Struggle Movement supporters like Lê Văn Hảo, Thích Đôn Hậu, Hoàng Văn Giàu, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân have faced a continuous barrage of unsubstantiated accusations by US scholars and the Vietnamese exile community of having masterminded the brutal mass killings. These charges were formulated by the military and police in Huế in the aftermath of the Tết Offensive in 1968 and through the intervening years have been repeatedly raised in print media outside Vietnam by former Huế police chief Liên Thành and his supporters.²⁴

Because of the wounds they had inflicted to political legitimacy of the Republican cause in Huế, members of this group, which was composed of a local politician, Hoàng Văn Giàu,

²⁴ Liên Thành, “Biến Động Miền Trung - Phần 1,” accessed April 28, 2021, <http://batkhuat.net/tl-biendong-mientrung-01.htm>. available at <http://batkhuat.net/tl-biendong-mientrung-01.htm>

famous intellectuals, Lê Văn Hảo, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, and a famous and highly respected religious leader, Thích Đôn Hậu, were seen uniformly as traitors and bitter enemies of the Republic in the eyes of RVN police and military officials. It is easy to see how from the point of view of these officials, the overwhelming need for victory in the desperate life and death struggle for political supremacy that took place in Huế in the 1960s, could justify the most extreme unsubstantiated accusations being leveled against those whose public defiance was a major blow to the political legitimacy of the RVN government.

What actually happened in Huế during the month of February 1968, according to eyewitness and based on the evidence I have gathered on the executions that took place during the 26-day long occupation of Huế by NLF and PAVN forces will be addressed in detail in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. The complexity of the subject, its sensitivity, and controversial nature require a deeper understanding of the larger context and the community in Huế from which this group arose than can be conveyed in this introduction.

Winning the political war for the sympathy and support of the people of Huế was an essential component of their strategy critical to bringing about a victory for either side. Fighting and winning the political battle for Huế was at least as important as the military struggle. As General Võ Nguyên Giáp has observed, "political activities were more important than military activities, and fighting less important than propaganda; armed activity was used to safeguard, consolidate, and develop political bases."²⁵ Like the Communists and their allies in the NLF, supporters of the Republic have also done their best to win the propaganda war. One of the most commonly used tactics employed by supporters of the Republic to undermine political support

²⁵ Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Peoples War Peoples Army* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc, 1962), 79.

for the Struggle Movement and the NLF was to attempt to discredit their most respected community leaders through demonization.

Undoubtedly, many war crimes were committed in the region during the Tết Offensive by combatants on both sides. The impulse to label those who fought for the opposing side as criminals by those seeking political advantage seems a universal phenomenon. Accusations of war crimes, such as those that were leveled against local intellectuals who supported the Struggle Movement and the NLF in Huế after the Tết Offensive in 1968 served an important political purpose for the RVN government. Thus, winning an enduring political victory over the NLF and the Communist Party in Huế by discrediting the embarrassingly large and well-respected group of community leaders in Huế who had come out openly on the side of the NLF in the period between 1966 and 1968 became a critically important step in winning the war by undermining public support for the revolution.

In the 1960s, deep fissures that existed within southern Vietnamese society were exposed by the political radicalization of Huế's Buddhist and student populations, inflicting a wound upon the Republic that festered and never fully healed. Faced with political extinction, to Republican officials like Liên Thành the normal ethical boundaries and standards regarding accusations of criminal behavior would likely have seemed relatively unimportant when weighed against the benefits to the war effort.

Aware that winning the battle over public opinion was at least as important as winning the war militarily, leaders in both the RVN and in the DRV/NLF were engaged in a desperate propaganda war to discredit the other side. News stories about the war written for consumption by citizens of the Republic, just as those which were produced for the Hà Nội government, frequently prioritized the political needs of their respective states over accuracy in reporting. As

a consequence, information about the NLF and its activities put out by the RVN government was often drawn from a combination of state gathered intelligence and state propaganda. Fact and fiction intertwined to create the desired narrative. An unquestioning acceptance and regurgitation of RVN propaganda narratives by American historians such as renowned expert on the NLF Douglas Pike with regard to the Tết Offensive has enshrined a perspective of what happened that was never updated to include the accounts and perspectives of those who led or participated in the attack from the NLF side.²⁶²⁷

The clandestine nature of the networks of the urban movement created a culture of secrecy shrouding much of the activities of its members and for many years preventing them from speaking openly to answer these charges or about their personal views and experiences during the war. Even today, the Vietnamese government in Huế continues to apply pressure to silence these voices. My intention is not to absolve the NLF or the Communist Party of guilt for committing war crimes during the Tết Offensive. In fact, I argue that it is clear based on the available evidence including eyewitness accounts that there were a substantial number of senseless killings of civilians in and around Huế perpetrated by NLF guerillas during the attack.

Based on the information I have gathered and presented in this dissertation, I will argue in chapter 5 that if any largescale massacres were committed by the NLF during the occupation of Huế, they were very likely ordered and executed by communist officials tasked with leading Vietnamese security forces into the city. Liên Thành's claim that a group of prominent scholars, intellectuals and Struggle Movement activists orchestrated the mass live burial of hundreds of innocent civilians is not supported by the eyewitness testimony of those who were there during this time period. Nor does it seem plausible given the backgrounds and personalities of the

²⁶ “Biến Động Miền Trung - Phần 1.”

²⁷ “https://En.Wikipedia.Org/Wiki/Massacre_at_Hu%E1%BA%BF,” n.d.

accused, a number of whom have written detailed accounts of their whereabouts and actions during the battle.

To this day, with the exception of Mark Bowden's recent book on the topic (which does make a laudable effort include some Vietnamese perspectives), American retelling of the events in Huế during Tết 1968, have never been updated to account for all of the information which has become available in the past two decades.²⁸ In recent years, former Republican police chief in Huế, Liên Thành, has continued to publish books and articles which are based on faulty intelligence and fictitious news reports. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5, when comparing these accounts with those written by participants in the urban movement it quickly becomes evidence that Liên Thành, in many cases, has made false assumptions based on incorrect information.

Conclusion:

While it is widely accepted among historians that the religious and intellectual community in Huế have played an important role in determining the fate of the Vietnam's southern Republic and southern Revolution, until recently, very little attention has been paid to the backgrounds and motivations of the individuals who were actively involved in the resistance to an American backed military regime in the city.

It would not be overstatement to say that the direction and eventual outcome of the Vietnamese Revolution and the Vietnamese American War were decisively influenced by events in Huế on at least two occasions during the conflict. The first time being in 1963, when prominent Buddhist monks from Huế spearheaded a massive wave of protests and civil disobedience directed at the discriminatory practices of the Catholic dominated Diệm

²⁸ Mark Bowden, *Huế 1968, A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017).

government, eventually leading to its overthrow by a military junta led by Dương Văn Minh. The second major turning point in the war was during the Tết Offensive in 1968, when a combined force of over 10,000 PAVN and NLF soldiers entered the city, freeing more than 2000 captives from Thừa Phủ prison and were able to hold their ground for more than 26 days before finally withdrawing. Despite both of these events having been researched and analyzed by scholars in detail, somehow the voices of the participants in the battle on the NLF side have remained, in large part, conspicuously absent from these works.

This project combines political history, social history, and memory to convey a perspective of the war through the eyes of the people of Central Vietnam who joined or supported the Vietnamese Revolution. What I seek to explain here is the actual process of how and why the revolution came about in Central Vietnam in the 1950s and 60s. At some point, virtually every soldier (excluding the small number who were forcibly conscripted) who fought in battle for the NLF, every underground agent that worked to undermine the Republic from within and every student who led a protest against the government or published a newspaper supporting the revolution had to first arrive at the political decision to do so.

As the war progressed, an increasing number of Vietnamese felt compelled to action, leading to the creation of thousands of locally inspired revolutionary networks which sprung up throughout Central Vietnam in the early 1960s. The creation of student, NLF and communist controlled networks was essential as a catalyst for the Vietnamese Revolution, supplying the leadership and political infrastructure that made mass organizing possible. Without them, the NLF would literally not have been able to exist.

Terminology:

While I have largely avoided addressing the complexities of official designations of states and competing sovereignty claims in this dissertation, there are certain terms that need to be

defined for the reader for the purposes of clarity. One of the most basic organizational features undergirding and breathing life into the Vietnamese revolution was its ability to attract adherents through the formation of local committees and local organizations under the supervision of the Việt Minh and later the National Liberation Front. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter 1, this was accomplished through implementation wide-ranging recruitment strategy with a strong revolutionary nationalist appeal intended to attract supporters across a broad ideological spectrum, ranging from hardline communists to left wing nationalists. Like the Việt Minh, the NLF was an umbrella organization incorporating numerous local organizations which it coordinated on a national scale.²⁹

Imbedded at a deeper level within the NLF organizational hierarchy was a southern based Communist Party called the “Đảng Nhân Dân Cách Mạng Việt Nam” or the Peoples Revolution Party (formed in 1962), which until 1976, remained a separate entity from the Hà Nội based Đảng Lao động (Labor Party). During the American War, the two Vietnamese Communist Party worked in close collaboration with the northern based Party holding the more senior position among the leadership.

Generally speaking, in the early 1960s, the masses of Buddhist protesters and students who joined with revolutionary forces to oppose a Sài Gòn based military dictatorship in Huế were inspired by nationalism, religious piety and the desire for democratic political reforms. For many in Huế during this period, the term revolution became a kind of shorthand for a broad spectrum of political ideals which may or may not have incorporated ideas drawn from communist political philosophy. Supporters of at least some kind of revolutionary political

²⁹ Organizations like the “Liên minh các Lực lượng Dân tộc, Dân chủ và Hòa bình Việt Nam” which translates as the “Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam” or the “Chính-phủ Cách-mạng Lâm-thời Cộng-hòa Miền Nam Việt-nam” otherwise known as the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of the NLF which declared the formation of the Republic of Southern Vietnam (CRSVN) lasting from 1969-1976.

transformation of the country included a diverse cross section of activists and community leaders. While the advocates of a Vietnamese revolution generally shared a strong opposition to colonial domination and a vision of a nationalist state, many other fundamental aspects of their ideas for the future of Vietnam could not be universally agreed upon. In fact, as I will discuss in detail in chapter 5, some prominent community leaders calling for revolution, such as Cao Huy Thuần, editor the journal *Lập Truong*, were strongly opposed to a communist takeover in the south. Thuần vision of a Vietnamese revolution called instead for overthrowing the military dictatorship and in its place instituting a pluralist government based on democratic reforms and republican ideals and processes.

Many of those opposed to a Sài Gòn based military dictatorship were independent of any political organizations or worked in small unaffiliated groups. These “Third Force” political factions such as the Buddhists and Struggle forces in Huế each had their own hierarchy of concerns they were attempting to address, but would often coalesce around their shared support for pluralist ideals.³⁰ The rise of the Buddhist Movement in 1963 was primarily a reaction to a host of discriminatory policies that deeply offended a community, which, by virtue of their numbers and their traditional place within Vietnamese society, felt very strongly they should have religious equality with the Catholic Church. In Huế this same faction, in 1964, merged with a coalition of militant student activists to form a more deeply politicized movement which became known as the Struggle Movement. Briefly, in 1966, a Struggle force coalition consisting of Buddhists, students and RVN soldiers and officials based in Huế, resisted the Sài Gòn governments attempts to reimpose its authority in the region. The suppression of the Struggle Movement by the RVN military temporarily brought order to the streets of Huế, but also

³⁰See Sophie Quinnn-Judge’s 2017 book on “*The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954-75*”

hardened positions on both sides, and in the spring and summer of 1966, forced a number of leaders of the movement to flee to the jungle and to make lasting commitments to support the NLF.

Sources and Methods:

At its foundation this project seeks to redress an imbalance that exists within American and Western academia by moving away from traditional America centric methodologies for writing histories of the Vietnamese-American War and instead privileging Vietnamese sources and Vietnamese voices. While I have relied heavily upon Vietnamese language scholarly books, articles, newspapers, historical documents and other written sources, I have also tried to move away from total dependence on these types of written sources and instead construct a narrative based primarily on eyewitness accounts gathered from interviews and the memoirs of participants.

A significant number of my subjects in Hué are historians and scholars who participated in one way or another in the urban movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Their expertise has added greatly to my understanding of events. For several years, I lived in close proximity to former student activists in Hué whom I was fortunate to become acquainted with, often conducting unofficial unrecorded impromptu interviews to fill the gaps in my knowledge. Through years of interaction with and observation of my subjects, eventually a much clearer picture emerged from this extended dialogue than I would have been able to find by examining documents. This methodology has the advantage of bringing me in to closer proximity to events in a way that is more personal and less detached than if I had simply looked for documents in an archive. Approaching witness/participants in these events and becoming familiar with many of them on a individual level has enabled me to understand and empathize with their point of view in a way

that would not be possible otherwise. This was particularly important in this case because the subject I am researching remains extremely sensitive with the government in Huế, and as a result, finding people who are willing to drop their guard and speak candidly both on and off the record on these topics has been a formidable obstacle for scholars in the past.

During the 7-year period between 2011 and 2018, I have spent more than 6 years living in Huế, Đà Nẵng and Sài Gòn. In that time, I conducted over 75 interviews, attended several years of intensive Vietnamese language training at a university in Hồ Chí Minh City where I read through my interviews with Vietnamese scholars, and spent 1 year teaching and conducting research in the archive at Duy Tân University in Đà Nẵng, a private school founded by the former student activist organizer Lê Công Cơ.

It has been more than 45 years since the war ended and many related areas of research remain off limits in Vietnam. Because the topic of clandestine revolutionary networks is still viewed as sensitive by the government in Huế, local historians in Huế have told me privately that they have been refused permission to do any work on this subject. So, while many memoirs, articles and blogs have been written in the past 15 years, a comprehensive overview of the entire network has never been done before by either Vietnamese or American historians.

In December 2017, while conducting a series of interviews with retired government officials, I was visited at my hotel in Huế by a contingent of 4 policemen employed by 3 different agencies, Foreign Affairs, Customs and Public Security. At that time, I was told by Public Security that I could be thrown out of the country indefinitely for doing unauthorized research and that my wife could be jailed if she was in possession of any illegal books or documents.³¹ I was extremely fortunate to already be in possession of a wealth of materials

³¹ Ironically, one of my best sources for information on the Tết Offensive, Tô Nhuận Vỹ, is the retired Director of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Huế.

collected over the prior five plus years of research, and thus, I was able to finish without much difficulty. There is still a great deal of work to be done on this topic in the future. However, with so many of the leaders of these movements now moving from their seventies into their eighties, the window of opportunity for historians to speak directly with the people who witnessed and participated in the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Huế is rapidly closing.

List of Interviews Conducted in Vietnam:

Dương Hảo, underground agent active in Huế and Thừa Thiên Huế/NLF nurse
Dương Đình Na, student activist leader active in Huế, prisoner Côn Đảo island
Nguyễn Thúc Tuấn, Việt Minh/NLF underground agent active in Huế
Nguyễn Văn Ninh, student activist/soldier active in Huế released from Thừa Phủ during Tết 1968
Trịnh Túc, student activist active in Huế /Côn Đảo prisoner
Lê Công Cơ, organizer and former Communist Party official in Huế and Đà Nẵng. Currently Rector and owner of Duy Tân University in Đà Nẵng
Nguyễn Văn Hoanh, student activist in Đà Nẵng/prisoner Côn Đảo/government official after 1975
Phạm Thị Nga, underground agent in Huế
Vũ Bình Nam, underground agent/prisoner Thừa Phủ
Ngô Vĩnh Long, student activist active for a brief time in Sài Gòn/US based historian and expert on the NLF
Đỗ Hùng Luân, student activist Tam Kỳ/prisoner Côn Đảo/high level government official after 1975 who worked on building the electricity grid
Trần Huệ (aka Chư Sơn), RVN Lieutenant/NLF cadre in Huế/very close friend of Ngô Kha/historian
Dương Ngọc Anh, student activist in Đà Nẵng
Trương Cao Nhã, student activist Tam Kỳ
Nguyễn Quang Vinh, student activist Tam Kỳ
Nguyễn Nhung, student activist Tam Kỳ
Vũ Bá Học, student activist Tam Kỳ
Lê Văn Thuyên, student activist Huế, scholar
Ngô Võ Hồng Trân, student activist Huế
Nguyễn Thị Tâm An, student activist Huế
Trần Thị Sen, student activist Huế
Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Struggle Movement leader/student activist leader/NLF propaganda cadre/author of numerous scholarly works on an array of historical topics
Tô Nhuận Vỹ, educated in Hà Nội returned to Huế area in 1964 to assist the local war effort by writing and publishing of propaganda. Author of three works of fiction on the Tết Offensive.

Hoàng Thị Thọ/Nguyễn Duy Hiền (interviewed together), student activists in Huế, Hiền refused to join the Communist Party but was nevertheless given a position in the Huế city government as an organizer of cultural events

Nguyễn Thị Cẩm, student activist in Huế/physician

Lê Cung, professor at Huế University, government sanctioned expert on the student movement

Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, NLF cadre/later a Party official from Huế who worked with Lê Công Cơ during the 1970s, Hoa is a scholar who has recently published an excellent history of newspaper publishing in Huế since the 1920s.

Phan Hữu Lượng, student activist/artist Huế

Võ Quê, student activist in Huế/famous poet/government official after 1975

Lê Thị Nhân, student activist in Huế, government official after 1975

Phan Hoàng Quý, student and lecturer in Huế during the war. Son of Việt Minh underground agent Hoang Ba

Bửu Ý, well known lecturer who has translated a number of work from French to Vietnamese, younger uncle of Emperor Bảo Đại, very close friend of Trịnh Công Sơn

Phạm Phú Phong, underground agent

Chapter 1: Huế as a Center for Tradition and Culture, and a Cradle of the Vietnamese Revolution:

The life of the people... was simple and peaceful because the Huế lifestyle doesn't chase material things. Most everything here was unchanged from the era of Nguyễn Dynasty. Life was well-ordered. Although, before 1954, during the French War, peasants from the countryside moved to the city to escape the devastation in the countryside. The Huế lifestyle had mixed with that of the peasants and was not as pure as in the age of the royal dynasty. But overall Huế lifestyle, especially the consciousness of preserving the cultural life of the city remained the same.³²

As one American observer insightfully noted in 1964, “Huế is perhaps the most characteristically Vietnamese city in all of Vietnam,”³³ For more than two hundred years the former imperial capital city has retained a special status within the political, intellectual, religious and cultural life of Vietnam. Located in the center of the country about 100 kilometers north of Đà Nẵng and a few miles inland from the East Sea, since being made the political center of the Vietnamese kingdom under the newly established Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802, the modest sized city has featured prominently in Vietnamese poetry, song, literature and many other local artistic traditions.

Over the past few centuries, the city's most famous geographical feature, the Hương River (aka The Perfume River), which flows gently through its center, has been the subject of countless poems and songs inspired by its beauty and connections with celebrated Vietnamese historical figures and events. Huế's imposing imperial citadel is a massive fortress with 26-foot-high walls made of brick and stone extending for about 6 miles around the old city. A surrounding moat encloses two square miles of the northern half of the city. Built in the early 19th century, based primarily on French military designs, the citadel and the imperial palace at its

³² Túc Trịnh, Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded, not recorded, September 3, 2013.

³³ Nguyễn Thi Dị Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City (1957-67)” (University of Washington, 2017), 15.

center remain the city's dominant architectural features. Huế's imperial tombs with meticulously landscaped gardens, as well as countless pagodas and temples, dot the landscape scattered throughout much of the city, some dating back more than three hundred years. While frequently in disrepair, these monuments to the past provide inspiration and a deep sense of connection to Huế's history for the city's many tradition-oriented residents. Today, the city's inhabitants, ranging in status from the poorest and least educated to the most famous and accomplished, continue to take great pride in their city's distinct local character, customs, cuisine and strong connections with Vietnam's imperial history.

Despite its close proximity to the ocean, about 13 kilometers to the east, Huế does not have a port and was never known for being a particularly important commercial or industrial center. The city's harsh weather conditions, including sweltering hot summers and cold damp winters with seasonal monsoons bringing torrential rains and frequent heavy flooding, regularly test the fortitude of all who live there. The poor quality of the soil and the region's mercurial weather create challenging farming conditions in the surrounding villages, often resulting in poor harvests.

Huế's development as a commercial hub in Central Vietnam has never been especially rapid. By the 1950s, the city was already beginning to be overshadowed economically by the rising influence of the port city of Đà Nẵng 100km to the south. Beyond education, much of the city's economy has historically been dominated by local craftsmen, many of them living in small villages in surrounding communities, producing an array of products such as conical hats, incense, rice crackers, furniture and other items that have traditionally been used in Vietnamese daily life.

The enormous influence of the city's culture extends deep into neighboring communities, connecting the local residents to a larger central Vietnamese community and to a shared set of local traditions and values. Huế's beauty, its special position in Vietnamese society, difficult weather conditions and less than ideal farming conditions have all contributed to the unique character of the city and its people. According to the political scientist James Trullinger, who lived in Huế between 1973 to 1975 while researching the Vietnamese Revolution from the perspective of how it impacted a village just outside of Huế, "there is something about the Hue region that most of My Thuy Phuong people seem to love. Hue gives them a very special identity, and it breeds toughness and resiliency."³⁴

Huế's architectural centerpiece, the elegant Trường Tiền Bridge was constructed in 1896 by the firm of renowned French architect Gustave Eiffel. The steel bridge connects the older northern portion of the city dominated by the imperial citadel with the more recently built-up southern bank, which hosts many of the city's modern institutions such as Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh High Schools, Huế University, a bank, a post office and Huế Central Hospital. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the overwhelming majority of the city's approximately 100,000 residents lived in three districts, Thành Nội, which consisted of the citadel and surrounding area, Tả Ngạn, a very old neighborhood just east of the citadel, and Hữu Ngạn, a more recently built section of the city on the south side of the river.³⁵

Situated on the north bank of the Hương River, the city's massive imperial citadel encloses most of the district of Thành Nội. Within its walls another great fortress, the imperial palace also surrounded by a sizable moat, dominates the interior. To the west connected to Thành Nội by the Gia Hội Bridge is the district of Tả Ngạn. This neighborhood once housed

³⁴ James Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980), 6.

³⁵ Nguyễn Thị Dịu Hương, "Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City (1957-67)," 27.

many of the city's wealthy Chinese merchants and advisors to the king. While most of the Chinese residents are long gone or have intermarried and been assimilated into Vietnamese culture, many spacious homes, temples and pagodas with a distinctly Chinese style of architecture were built here to house Chinese advisors to the emperor and Chinese merchants. A number of these houses and pagodas remain and are being well maintained by area residents, giving the neighborhood a unique almost ghostly character, reminding visitors of what was once a very large and influential Chinese community.

As the most important training center for scholars and mandarins in service of the Nguyễn Dynasty, since 1802, institutions of higher learning in Huế have attracted many of Vietnam's brightest minds and most erudite scholars. During much of that time, Huế's Temple of Literature drew thousands of candidates from all over Vietnam to live in and around the city while studying to pass grueling examinations in Classical Chinese, graduating a steady stream of mandarins (scholar bureaucrats) to serve the emperor. Regardless of whether they passed or failed the exam, many stayed on in Huế becoming permanent residents of the city, steadily increasing the overall level of culture and education in the region. Throughout the 1950s-60s and 70s, Huế remained one of Vietnam's most important centers of education with the newly built university opening in 1957 and two of the country's most prestigious high schools, Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh, continuing to educate many of the nation's elites.³⁶

Among the very long list of famous communist revolutionaries who spent at least some portion of their youth studying at Quốc Học were Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Lê Duẩn, Trần Phú, Phạm Văn Đồng, Tố Hữu, Nguyễn Chí Diểu, Hải Triều (father of Nguyễn Khoa Điềm), Lê Việt Lượng, Đặng Thai Mai, Phan Đăng Lưu and Hà Huy Tập.³⁷

³⁶At the time Quốc Học was an all-boys school and Đồng Khánh all-girls.

³⁷ <https://phanxipang.wordpress.com/2012/09/18/quoc-hoc-100-nam-ii/>.

Religion:

A diverse collection of religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions contribute to the unique character of the city's population. Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Taoism, Cao Đài, ancestor worship and animism have all played important roles in the development of the region's distinctive character and traditions. Over time, many of these local customs and traditions have become layered, fused and amalgamated to form new ones. For example, almost every family in Huế, whether primarily Buddhist, Confucian or even Catholic maintains a carefully tended family ancestral altar where incense is burned and traditional sacrifices offered on holidays and death anniversaries. Maintaining this altar is an important filial duty that is passed on through the generations by each family's oldest surviving male.³⁸

The city's numerous pagodas, churches, temples and monasteries represent the wide array of religious and philosophical traditions embraced by local residents. Among these traditions respect and support for Buddhism is the most readily apparent. As one lifelong resident of the area explained during an interview, "Huế is the cradle of [Vietnamese] Buddhism."³⁹ Reverence for Buddhist traditions, even among residents who do not strictly practice the religion, is common. Huế's intensely pious inhabitants have been inspired by their religious devotion to build and maintain an astonishing number of pagodas, housing a vibrant community of Buddhist nuns and monks who have historically been led by many of Vietnam's most prominent Buddhist thinkers.⁴⁰

³⁸ My wife is a Catholic from a small overwhelmingly Catholic village just outside Huế. Her family, like all the other Catholic families in her community, maintains a family ancestral altar which is tended to by the family's oldest surviving male.

³⁹ Túc Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc, recorded, August 4, 2013.

⁴⁰ Thích Nhất Hạnh, Thích Thiện Minh, Thích Trí Quảng, Thích Quảng Đức, Thích Đôn Hậu, Thích Tịnh Khiết, Thích Trí Thủ. The most well-known pagodas in Huế include Báo Quốc, Từ Đàm, Thiên Mụ, Từ Hiếu, Tường Vân and Diệu Đế.

For centuries, living side by side with the Buddhists, the Catholic community of Huế has been a large and influential minority with the first Catholic diocese having been established there in 1850.⁴¹ While at times the relationship between Buddhists and Catholics has been strained by religious tensions, the overall trend over the years has been one of religious tolerance and cooperation. Intermarriage between religious groups, though generally frowned upon, was not particularly uncommon. In this regard and many others, the two communities were constantly intermingled in the everyday life of the city.

Buddhist and Catholic residents of Huế are united in their sense of connection with the city's culture and imperial history. This is equally true for the inhabitants of the nearby villages that surround the city. According to Trullinger, "Most residents of My Thuy Phuong have a special attachment to Hue, Vietnam's former imperial capital. A deep pride in the Hue region's traditionally important place in the nation is widely shared in the village, from the youngest school children to the most senior of local elders. It is so strong that it seems to cut across political, economic, and social differences."⁴²

The Origins of the Communist Party in Huế:

Early Vietnamese independence movements, such as the Cần Vương and the Duy Tân movement, were built around the idea of a restoration of the monarchy and emphasized a return to traditional values and ways of coping with upheaval. By contrast, the new political movements of the 1920s and 1930s, buttressed by the growing popularity of Quốc Ngữ script and the increased literacy levels that resulted from its widespread use, fully embraced the need for a rapid transformation of Vietnamese society. A growing consensus among Vietnamese built

⁴¹ Tran Gia Phụng, "Mậu Thân: Cộng Sản Tấn Công Huế," *Tiếng Dân*, n.d., <https://baotienngdan.com/2018/02/12/mau-than-cong-san-tan-cong-hue/>.

⁴² Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 6.

around anti-French nationalism proved an effective antidote to wide-spread parochialism, which had often divided Vietnam in the past, gradually causing it to be put aside and eventually largely forgotten. This newly instilled sense of political unity based on the idea of a single unified Vietnamese nation state, inspired self-made Vietnamese citizens (an independent Vietnamese nation at this point was still little more than an idea) to coalesce around ideas of revolutionary modernism, creating a new mythology and explanatory narrative of their shared past in which the Vietnamese nation had always existed, almost as if in a state of nature.

According to the historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “The root causes of [Vietnamese] radicalism are easy to identify: it was a delayed reaction to colonial conquest.”⁴³ Thus, the origins of the Vietnamese Revolution in central Vietnam can be traced back to the increasing radicalization of intellectuals which spread rapidly across the country during the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s in Huế, a sizable portion of the intellectual elite became politically active. During this period, growing nationalist fervor led to the formation of a wide array of new secret societies and political associations which ceaselessly debated politics as they struggled to find a new way forward for the country. These largely underground political activities frequently undertaken on an ad-hoc basis helped build a foundation for organized political thought and action opposing the French colonial regime.

The first major strikes and demonstrations against the French colonial government in Huế occurred at Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh High Schools simultaneously on the 6th-7th and 8th of April, 1927. Over the next several years, protests grew into fledgling movements, perhaps the best known being the Tân Việt Party. These early revolutionary political groups briefly swelled in size due to the Great Depression and the resulting collapse in the price of rice in 1929, and

⁴³ Tai Hue-Tam Ho, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 2.

then were very quickly and brutally suppressed by the French colonial police. Many of the organizers who participated in the protests in Huế were arrested and expelled from school. Some like the young revolutionary activist Võ Nguyên Giáp, who had begun attending Quốc Học High School in 1925, were given trials and lengthy prison sentences.⁴⁴⁴⁵

In February of 1930, the VYRL (Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League) was formally dissolved. In its place, with its Central Committee now located in Hải Phòng (as opposed to outside the country), the Communist Party was established from a fusion of several different political groups. After the merger, the newly formed Communist Party threw its energies into organizing workers' and peasants' protests.⁴⁶

The first meetings of the Indochinese Communist Party Committee for Thừa-Thiên Huế took place between the 7th and the 10th of April, 1930. Lê Viết Lượng, who was at that time a lecturer at Quốc Học High School, was elected by members of the committee to serve as the first Party Secretary for Huế province. During these early days of the clandestine network's existence, heavy emphasis was placed on the recruitment of new underground agents among all classes and positions in society, and the establishment of a chain of command with each district in the area choosing a local Party Secretary and forming its own local Party committee. In order to build support for the Party in Huế, underground agents in the network did their best to operate quietly behind the scenes to bolster the political awareness and level of organization of local political movements that challenged the French colonial regime during the 1930s.

The growth of local movements for higher salaries and better working conditions was seen as an opportunity by Communist Party officials who wished to strengthen their bonds with

⁴⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975* (Hà Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015), 15.

⁴⁵ Cecil B. Currey, *Victory at Any Cost, The Genius of Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap* (Virginia: Potomac Books Inc., 2005), 18.

⁴⁶ Hue-Tam Ho, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 231 and 240.

local people seeking meaningful change in their social and economic conditions. Organizing strikes and protests was an effective means of laying the groundwork for more long-term collaborations with other politically minded Vietnamese. In this way, Party members were able to gain experience organizing while establishing long-term relationships, increasing the size and strength of their networks and gaining the respect of other members of their community.⁴⁷

The Communist Party cell (Chi bộ) and the committee (ủy ban, which included ward, district, city, province and area) were the principal organizational structures upon which the Communist Party, the Việt Minh and later the NLF revolutionary movement were built. While the existence of communist cells was generally a closely guarded secret and the cells were very exclusive in terms of recruiting new membership, at a local level, numerous small affiliated organizations were created under Communist Party leadership to address the concerns of a wide array of political and social groups, including women, students, workers and members off the military.⁴⁸ Committee assignments were discussed and then voted upon by members. Generally created and led by Communist Party operatives, political action committees like these, utilizing essentially the same organizational model as the Communist Party, quickly spread throughout much of Central Vietnam.⁴⁹

According to the historian Alfred McCoy:

The Viet Minh's goal was to develop a political program that would draw the entire population-regardless of... religion, sex, or class background-into the struggle for national liberation. Theirs was a romantic vision of the mass uprising: resistance becoming so widespread and so intense that the French would be harassed everywhere. Once the front-line troops and the masses in the rear were determined to win, the tactical questions of how to apply this force were rather elementary.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000* (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2010), 77–78.

⁴⁸ John T. McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution* (Princeton University: The Center for International Studies, 1969), 140.

⁴⁹For example, Lê Công Cơ's student organizations.

⁵⁰ Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroine in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 66.

Political action associations recruited by the Việt Minh were often led by Communist Party members, but as a general rule had memberships which consisted overwhelmingly of people who were motivated primarily by nationalism and knew little to nothing about communist ideology. This is a point that was made to me repeatedly during interviews with participants in the urban movement in Huế, including their most successful recruiter, Lê Công Cơ, who himself was a local Communist Party official whose job it was to indoctrinate students and intellectuals in Huế during the American phase of the war.⁵¹

During the early 1930s, the Communist Party in Central Vietnam remained relatively weak. Possessing very little in terms of political infrastructure (governing committees and Communist Party cells), very meager financial resources, almost no weapons and little military training, the first Party officials in Huế were forced to rely on propaganda as their primary means for raising the revolutionary consciousness of the Vietnamese people and increasing support for the Revolution. In this case, propaganda proved a powerful tool which was able to reach a receptive audience in the city among a small segment of educated elites and their children. Beginning in the 1930s, the communist underground movement built a secret following among students attending the most elite French colonial schools in Huế, as well as a handful of local intellectuals and religious leaders. According to a Communist Party history of Thừa Thiên Huế, these recruits were primary concentrated at two school elite schools, Quốc Học and Chaigneau. Additionally, some success was had recruiting in the local theater, among the xích lô drivers, as well as among the merchants at Đông Ba market.⁵²

The earliest Communist Party members in Huế lacked the professionalism and experience of the deep cover underground agents which were later developed by networks of the

⁵¹ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #1 with Lê Công Cơ, recorded, August 14, 2013.

⁵² Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 81.

Party, the Việt Minh and the National Liberation Front in the 1950s and 1960s. Not long after the founding of the first network in Huế in 1930, a number of these early Party officials and underground agents were quickly identified and rounded up by French police during a particularly brutal suppression of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The Party Secretary Lê Việt Lương was himself arrested near the end of October in 1930. A trial for a large group of local Party members was held and more than 30 were thrown in prison with sentences ranging in severity from 3 years in prison to 9 years of hard labor.⁵³

While a prisoner, Lương began another tradition among communist officials in Huế when, in 1931, he organized the first Party cell at the then French operated prison Thừa Phủ. Thừa Phủ is a large French built prison that is located directly across the street from Đồng Khánh High School for girls. According to one early member, the cell included Trịnh Xuân An, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Võ Thuần Nho (Giáp's younger brother), Lê Thế Tiết, Giáp's mentor at Quốc Học, Đặng Thai Mai, Bùi San and Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái.⁵⁴⁵⁵ How much of the Communist Party that remained free in Thừa Thiên Huế to continue recruiting and organizing in the 1930s is difficult to know, but it seems clear that the leadership of the Party had suffered a major setback from which it took the better part of decade to recover.

The Japanese occupation of Vietnam in 1941 imposed an additional layer of governmental oppression above that of French colonial authority, increasing the already heavy burden on Vietnamese society, political order and the economy. However, it also created a political opportunity for the ICP which in order to attract a broadest coalition of supporters

⁵³ Nhiều Tác Giả, 82.

⁵⁴ B. Currey, *Victory at Any Cost, The Genius of Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap*, 25.

⁵⁵ Giáp attended Quốc Học high school for two years and after participating in several demonstrations joined the Communist Party while imprisoned in Huế at the age of 20. (Peter McDonald, *Giáp The Victor in Vietnam*, p20) During his imprisonment at Lao Bảo, Giáp met and fell in love with his first wife Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái (younger sister of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai who was a 15 year old school girl at Đồng Khánh high school when she was arrested. (Currey, *Victory at Any Cost*, p25)

possible, created the Việt Minh in May 1941. This much more inclusive alliance of Vietnamese nationalists, leftists and communists quickly agreed as a matter of policy to oppose both Japanese and French oppression with equal ferocity.

By having first raised and then dashed the hopes of a number of prominent intellectual of a real collaboration between the Japanese and the Vietnamese with “Asia for Asians” rhetoric, the Japanese swiftly made it clear that no significant policy improvements were to be forthcoming. Any hopes of cooperation with the Japanese were rapidly put to rest. However, as the historian of Vietnamese Revolution John T. McAllister has pointed out “it was not so much the elimination of colonial administrative personnel, as its consequences for French hegemony that was the real significance of the Japanese intervention.”⁵⁶ The abrupt and humiliating transition of power from the French colonial government to the Japanese helped to dispel the aura of invincibility which the French had worked so hard to cultivate, while at the same time thoroughly undermining claims of racial and cultural superiority made by European colonialists.

Prior to the Japanese occupation, the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in Vietnam had focused its efforts primarily on exploiting class conflicts through strikes and demonstrations in hopes of fomenting unrest. Beginning in 1940 with the arrival of the Japanese military, the economic situation for ordinary Vietnamese citizens in Central Vietnam grew steadily more dire. Intending to broaden their appeal as much as possible, in 1941, the Communist/Việt Minh leadership made the decision to de-emphasize class conflict and concentrate their efforts entirely on uniting as much of the country as possible around nationalist goals. According to McAllister “the wider political focus being adopted by the Vietnamese

⁵⁶ McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*, 163.

Communist Party in 1941 was not merely a change in idiom or perspective; a fundamental change in strategy was occurring through new organizational forms and operational doctrine.”⁵⁷

In 1942, Nguyễn Chí Thanh began building the foundations of an underground urban network of Việt Minh cadres in Huế. Establishing the “Office of the Provisional Government” in the modest home of his close friend and protégé Lê Tư Minh (aka Lê Minh) in the Việt Minh controlled village of Vinh Giang in Phú Lộc district, from here Nguyễn Chí Thanh planned and organized the growth of the Việt Minh movement in Thừa Thiên Huế.⁵⁸

During these early years of the Việt Minh’s resistance in Thừa Thiên Huế, Lê Minh worked closely with Thanh to build a revolutionary movement throughout the province. (Lich Su Dang Bo p119) After Nguyễn Chí Thanh was arrested at Phú Lộc in 1943 and imprisoned at Buôn Mê Thuật, the provincial Party headquarters nonetheless remained located in Minh’s house (at least until 1968 when Lê Minh was summoned to Hà Nội) and the local leadership of the movement in Huế was taken over by Lê Minh and a small group of communist officials, many of whom were living as underground agents of the Communist Party at the time.⁵⁹

Under an ever more oppressive double yoke of the Japanese-Vichy French political alliance, particularly in the wake great famine of 1944, the Việt Minh had found a cause with sufficient urgency to enable them to being the process of recruiting and mobilizing a substantial portion of an increasingly radicalized Vietnamese population. As the war was coming to a close it was increasingly obvious to American and French intelligence officers stationed in the area that the Việt Minh were the best organized and most capable political force opposing the Japanese in Vietnam.

⁵⁷ McAllister, 137.

⁵⁸ “Di Tích Cơ Quan Tỉnh Ủy Lâm Thời Thừa Thiên Huế (1942 - 1945),” n.d., <http://dautramlovebaby.com/tin-tuc/di-tich-co-quan-tinh-uy-lam-thoi-thua-thien-hue-1942-1945-c01-15105.html>.

⁵⁹ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 120.

According to McAllister, towards the end of the war both the French and Americans began supplying the Việt Minh with thousands of weapons to aid in their fight against the Japanese. At the time, in the US anti-communism had not yet developed into the overwhelmingly dominant ideology in foreign policy circles that it would later become. Achieving a military victory in the Pacific as rapidly as possible was deemed more important than the suppressing the increasingly popular communist leaning anti-colonial movement.⁶⁰

On March 9, 1945 Japanese forces began an operation to seize control of all the major urban centers throughout Vietnam, arresting and imprisoning almost the entire French colonial government. The campaign to remove the French from power lasted over two months. According to historian David G. Marr, the commander of Japanese forces in Vietnam, “General Tsuchihashi declared mopping up activities complete as of the 15th of May.”⁶¹ With the scattered remnants of the old French colonial regime disorganized and no longer able to resist, in August 1945, Việt Minh networks in urban centers around the country made assuming political authority in their local areas a the top priority. Upon assuming control of the of the government, Việt Minh cadres in Central Vietnam immediately began working diligently to establish political legitimacy by allaying the insecurities of a very nervous Vietnamese public through the arbitration of disputes, the keeping of legal records and transactions records, and by policing the streets of Huế. This demonstration of their ability to govern at a critical moment in Vietnamese history had an important impact on their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese public.⁶²

During the war, members of the ICP had taken primary responsibility for organizing the Việt Minh. To speed the process of recruiting new members priority was placed on bringing as

⁶⁰ McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*, 162.

⁶¹ David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945, The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 61.

⁶² McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*, 163.

many prominent individuals into the movement as possible. Focusing on the recruitment of respected community leaders and intellectuals was a fast and effective means of leveraging large scale support for the revolution among those who admired and revered them. The recruitment of a single highly respected community leader as an underground agent would often result in many others from their entire extended family's being brought with them into the revolutionary fold. This strategy was especially effective in Huế where a great many highly respected religious leaders, intellectuals and student activist leaders were recruited, bringing large numbers of their followers, students, friends and relatives with them into the movement. According to one rice farmer living in a village just south of Huế, during the French War "my uncle helped start the Việt Minh in this area, and he came to us first. We respected him, so everyone listened carefully to him. I didn't know about politics, but everyone in the family always had respected him, so my mother and my father didn't stop me when I went with my uncle. After a year or two, my father came too!"⁶³ Each respected community leader the Việt Minh could rally to its banner was akin to adding another building block to Việt Minh revolutionary project adding further to the influence and perceived legitimacy of its political arm in the region.⁶⁴

For many living in and around Huế during this period, the arrival of the Việt Minh inspired them with feelings of hope and a sense of empowerment. Local residents of the region could see for the first time a genuine opportunity to stand up to their oppressors, both French and Vietnamese alike. During an interview, one local tradesman from the village of Mỹ Thủy Phường described the transformation, "slowly we began to understand everything better. But first of all, we studied our local area. We saw how the French used the village chief and the rich

⁶³ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 32.

⁶⁴ The recruitment of the mandarin Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt and his son Nguyễn Thúc Tuân which took place around the time of the August Revolution in 1945 is an excellent example of this.

people to get richer. We saw that the French did only bad things in the village. We saw how the rich, who liked the French, had more land, and we saw how the poor were exploited.” (Village p 33)⁶⁵⁶⁶

The appeal of the Việt Minh was strong enough for many that concerns regarding the potential economic consequences of joining and ideological differences between the leadership and its members were set aside or ignored.

I felt that love for my country had to come before any selfish desire for money, so I joined the Việt Minh. There were so many people who joined for the same reason. Many of us knew that there were Communists in the Việt Minh, but the Việt Minh was not a Communist organization. If it was Communist, then there were too many of us who did not like Communism who were members.”⁶⁷

Communist Party cadres were trained to emphasize unity and make a concerted effort not to divide the Việt Minh politically by pushing controversial communist ideas or ideology.

Another former Việt Minh from a village near Huế recalled that:

the Communist [Party] cadres during that time did not talk much about Communist ideas or socialism. They only said, “We are all nationalists. We must unite to fight the French... They did not want to frighten the people. But, you know, they never forgot their Communist ideas.”⁶⁸

During the joint Japanese-French dual occupation of the early 1940s, networks of the Việt Minh and the Communist Party in Huế were successful in increasing the levels of support and active engagement among the larger Vietnamese population. According to the political scientist James Trullinger, who spent two years living in Huế and (1973-1974) studying support for the Việt Minh and NLF in the village of Mỹ Thủy Phương just on the outskirts of the city, these levels quickly exceeded a plurality of residents in the countryside around the city, “during

⁶⁵ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 33.

⁶⁶ Trullinger’s use of the name My Thuy Phuong may be incorrect. To my knowledge the village he is referring to is simply called Mỹ Thủy.

⁶⁷ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 33.

⁶⁸ Trullinger, 35.

the WWII years 70 to 80 percent of My Thuy Phuong's people supported the Việt Minh... a reflection of similar strength throughout the entire area" among these "about 50 percent of such people were very firm, active supporters."⁶⁹

Despite having received very little funding or other resources from the national organization, the Việt Minh in Central Vietnam were at this time riding a wave of popular participation that quickly took hold in rural communities all around Huế.⁷⁰ According to one of Trullinger's informants who was a teacher from My Thủy Phương village, "It happened in about one or two years. The Việt Minh suddenly became very strong and popular. They had almost everyone on their side. It was very exciting."⁷¹

In 1946, the Việt Minh government in Huế was forced into exile by returning French forces. The Việt Minh withdrawal from Huế was part carefully planned and prepared strategy. In spite of their retreat from the urban areas, the Việt Minh were able to retain a great deal of informal authority within French occupied areas and continued to administer "liberated" areas in the more remote regions of the countryside in Thừa Thiên Huế province.⁷²

On March 25, 1947, local leaders of the Việt Minh in Thừa Thiên Huế province met to lay out their strategy for resisting the return of the French colonial regime to the region. Below is a summary of the main points decided upon:

1. To continue the armed resistance, resolutely fight the rural puppet authorities and traitors, strengthen the people's confidence in the Government, the Party and the national resistance following the line: a long resistance of all the people in all fields.
2. To step up production, practice thrift, conceal food and belongings, establish resistance bases for a long struggle.
3. The cadres of various levels should go back to their bases, return to the plains, and cling to the population, holding firmly to the resistance bases.

⁶⁹ Trullinger, 40–43.

⁷⁰ Trullinger, 45.

⁷¹ Trullinger, 42.

⁷² Trullinger, 45 and 48.

4. To consolidate the leadership of the Party, the Front, the administration, simplify organization, and maintain steady communication in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the directives, decisions and policies issued.
5. To reorganize the army, militia, guerilla units, security services, restore military activities within a short time, put the accent on guerilla warfare while creating conditions favorable to mobile warfare.⁷³

Forced to retreat to their hideouts in the countryside and the jungle in the face of overwhelming French firepower, the Việt Minh organization in Thừa Thiên Huế nevertheless retained much of its popularity with the local population. This was particularly true in the provincial countryside and villages adjoining Huế city where in many communities' support for a Việt Minh led insurgency at this time, according to Trullinger, was overwhelming:

[In the village of My Thuy Phuong] the training and expansion of the local Viet Minh leadership group and continuation of Viet Minh proselytizing attracted most villagers to the movement. People variously indicated that after 1945 "everyone followed the Viet Minh," "95 percent liked the Viet Minh," "the Viet Minh was very popular," and "this was a Viet Minh village." These comments and other evidence indicate that between 1945 and 1954, about 5 percent of the villages people supported the colonial cause, about 80 percent supported the Viet Minh, and the remaining 15 percent assumed uncommitted positions but leaned toward support of the revolutionary movement. An estimated half or more of the Viet Minh followers were reliable, active supporters, and the remainder were not reliable, so might be considered passive supporters of the insurgency.⁷⁴

During WWII, political rivals of the Việt Minh in Huế, such as the Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim governments failed to build sufficient public support and political infrastructure to create a viable alternative. The Vietnamese demand for complete independence from foreign domination that swept the country had spawned a movement so powerful that even the puppet emperor was momentarily caught up in the call. In a letter written to General Charles De Gaulle written during the August Revolution Bảo Đại reminds De Gaulle of France's own struggle to resist German occupation while pleading for his support for Vietnamese independence from colonial domination:

⁷³ Trullinger, 49.

⁷⁴ Trullinger, 62.

You have suffered too much during four deadly years not to understand that the Vietnamese people, who have a history of twenty centuries and an often glorious past, no longer wish, no longer can support any foreign domination or foreign administration. You could understand even better if you were able to see what is happening here, if you were able to see the desire for independence that has been smoldering at the bottom of all hearts and which no human force can any longer hold back. Even if you were to arrive to re-establish a French administration here, it would no longer be obeyed; each village would be a nest of resistance, every former friend an enemy, and your officials and colonials themselves would ask to depart from this unbreathable atmosphere.⁷⁵

Bảo Đại's support for the Việt Minh was short lived. Not long after the Việt Minh forced him to abdicate while standing atop the Ngọ Môn Gate of the Imperial Palace in Huế on August 30th, 1945, the new Việt Minh government appointed him "Supreme Commander of the DRV". Perhaps this title was too authoritative for their liking, however, because they soon changed it to head of the "National Committee of Advisors." After only a short time in Hà Nội, the deposed emperor became dissatisfied with his new living conditions and the political course the Việt Minh government was charting for the country. In 1946, the Bảo Đại escaped the country and fled to Hong Kong.⁷⁶⁷⁷

By this time already well entrenched within a broad swath of the Vietnamese population, the coalition of Việt Minh that emerged from WWII was composed primarily of the farmers, laborers and intellectuals (frequently the relatives of former mandarins) in the countryside and intellectuals in the city who had supported the Việt Minh insurgency. Most Communist Party officials sent to Huế and Đà Nẵng were drawn from the intellectuals born in the surrounding countryside. Regardless of where they were born, virtually all had been educated in the cities and, as a consequence, had strong connections to urban communities of academics

⁷⁵ McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*, 192. (Printed in the Newspaper Viet Nam Tan Bao, Hue, August 20, 1945)

⁷⁶ Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance, Ngo Dinh Diem the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 45.

⁷⁷ Lê Hiếu, "Cách Mạng Tháng Tám ở Huế: Dấu Chấm Hết Cho Chế Độ Phong Kiến," 2020, <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/cach-mang-thang-tam-o-hue-dau-cham-het-cho-che-do-phong-kien-1083326.vov>.

and scholars. A significant number of these officials and Party members became underground agents in the years between 1946 and 1954.

After the agreement at Geneva was reached in 1954, the Party Secretary of the Communist Party for Zone 5, Trương Quang Giao, ordered that all activities of the Communist Party should go underground, and the Party should only maintain small cells that would be more difficult to discover. Additionally, all publicly known Communist Party leaders who did not wish to travel north were instructed to withdraw from public view and begin to build networks of underground agents. Among the 100,000 to 150,000 Vietnamese who traveled from central and southern Vietnam to the north between 1954-56 were mostly former Việt Minh officials and bureaucrats and others known publicly to be loyal to the Hà Nội government.⁷⁸

During the French War, the Communist Party and Việt Minh infrastructure had grown in tandem on a national scale, gaining in political power, military strength, experience and perceived legitimacy as the war progressed. Beyond word of mouth, support for the Việt Minh revolution was augmented primarily through the dissemination of propaganda to raise awareness and “revolutionary consciousness.” This was often accomplished through indoctrination sessions hosted by local Việt Minh cadres with those who had already joined, but the primary means of reaching new potential members was the publication of propaganda leaflets and small newspapers and magazines. These fly by night publications, generally printed on flimsy, cheap, occasionally reused paper could be written and printed at secret locations virtually anywhere, including in the middle of dense urban areas. Such was their popularity among villagers around

⁷⁸ Le Ho Duy, “Mười Chập và một thời...,” *Công An Thanh Phố Đà Nẵng*, 2008, http://cadvn.com.vn/news/65_9002_muoi-chap-va-mot-thoi.aspx.

Huế that according to Trullinger “many of the My Thuy Phuong’s illiterates had relatives or friends read the materials to them.”⁷⁹

Early Revolutionary Newspapers:

Increasing literacy levels among Vietnamese using the Romanized script Quốc Ngữ in the 1920s brought an end to classical Chinese and French language dominance of public discourses in Vietnam. By 1929, the widespread acceptance of Quốc Ngữ in the publications of newspapers in Huế had become regularized. One of the earliest well-known activist publications in Huế was called *Tiếng Dân*. This reformist newspaper was created by a famous mandarin and contemporary and colleague of Phan Châu Trinh in the Duy Tân movement named Huỳnh Thúc Kháng. The magazine employed a young student at Quốc Học High School named Võ Nguyên Giáp as a writer and called for political reform and sought to address the issues of the day and was one of numerous publications that sprung up in Central Vietnam around this time contributing to a growing public sphere of political, social and cultural discussion and debate.⁸⁰⁸¹

In the decades that followed, the number and variety of new Vietnamese voices and opinions continually multiplied, morphed, reconstituted and evolved, invigorating an ongoing national dialogue that was followed with great interest by many educated elites from around the country. By 1936, the first iteration of the weekly *Tạp Chí Sông Hương* (The Perfume River Magazine) was published. Just as it does to this day, writers at *Sông Hương* contributed articles focused primarily on discussions related to literature, history, short stories and fine arts. In its pages, Vũ Trọng Phụng published a serialized version of his novel “*Làm đĩ*.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 41.

⁸⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế* (Hue: Thuận Hóa, 2013), 44.

⁸¹ B. Currey, *Victory at Any Cost, The Genius of Viet Nam’s General Vo Nguyen Giap*, 24.

⁸² Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*, 59.

The Communist Party began publishing the first wave of underground revolutionary newspaper in Thừa Thiên beginning in 1937 with the first printing of *Nhành Lúa* under the supervision of Phan Đăng Lưu, Nguyễn Xuân Lữ, Hải Triều and others.⁸³ This publication was quickly followed up by the newspaper *Dân*, which was widely distributed in Central Vietnam, producing an average of 5000 copies per issue.⁸⁴

Years of tight suppression of print media first by the French and then by the Japanese during WWII drove the publications of the Communist Party further underground, while at the same time increasing the level of urgency for revolutionary action among the population. The Việt Minh Declaration of Independence in September 1945 created an entirely new space for political expression of ideas leading to the establishment of a number of revolutionary newspapers in Huế (such as Quyết Thắng, Quyển Chiến, Đại Chúng, Tay Thợ, Xã Hội Mới, Ánh Sáng and many others). These newspapers were frequently tailored to specific audiences such as students, women, workers, intellectuals and members of the military and were intended to raise awareness of and increase support for the August Revolution.⁸⁵⁸⁶

During the 1940s, a significant number of communist officials and intellectuals who would later become important Communist Party leaders in the urban movement in Huế and Central Vietnam edited and contributed articles to these early revolutionary newspapers and magazines. Nguyễn Chí Thanh, who was already a prominent leader in Huế by 1945, considered the work of disseminating news and revolutionary propaganda to be among the most important tasks necessary to strengthen support for the revolution. Before moving to Hà Nội to join the national government, Thanh wrote articles and poems and worked as an editor on three

⁸³ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, 95.

⁸⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 98.

⁸⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*, 123.

⁸⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, 98.

publication, *Tay Thợ, Xã Hội Mèi* and *Ánh Sáng*. Around this time, the local Việt Minh military also established its own paper called *Chiến Sĩ*. Other examples from around this time include, Hoàng Kim Loan's *Giết Giặc* an early newspaper produced outside Huế at a nearby military base, and Trần Anh Liên's, *Công Đoàn*.⁸⁷ In 1951, Hoàng Kim Loan also worked on a paper called *Đoàn Kết* which was published on a military base in the jungle.⁸⁸

These newspapers and magazines were distributed alongside a variety of other publications which were printed by other parties and organizations wishing to express their views on a broad array of political, social, cultural and economic topics. Others like *Dân Đen* were published by rival political parties that had political infrastructure behind them. Some, such as *Tiếng Gòi*, were financed and supported with assistance from the Diệm government.⁸⁹

In August 1954, the first issue of *Ngày Mai* was published in Huế and disseminated throughout much of the south. The first issue being 76 pages in length. This magazine brought together distinguished Buddhist leaders with prominent leftist intellectuals. During its time in circulation Nguyễn Hữu Đính, Võ Đình Cường, Tôn Thất Dương Ky, Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, Lê Khắc Quyến, Tôn Thất Hanh, Lê Quang Vịnh and a number of other prominent community leaders in Huế contributed to its pages. *Ngày Mai*'s primary mission was to advocate for peace, national unification and that the provisions agreed upon in the Geneva Accords be carried out.⁹⁰

A number of contributors to this newspaper belonged to a Communist Party cell, which

⁸⁷ Trần Anh Liên is a leader from the north who was assigned to support the Party network in Huế, possibly as early as the late 1940s. Liên is one of the few northern leaders sent to Thừa Thiên Huế who is respected and admired by the local intellectuals in the Communist Party. Mark Bowden claims to have interviewed him for his book on the Tết Offensive, but a Huế city government website says he passed away 15 years ago. (Trần Anh Liên/ Lê Việt Lượng and Lê Minh have streets named after them in Huế)

⁸⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*, 144.

⁸⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, 151.

⁹⁰ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 52.

according to the historian Chu Son, the poet and Party official Tố Hữu scornfully referred to as the “chi bộ sữa” (buttermilk cell) because of its members wealthy and aristocratic backgrounds.⁹¹

Ngày Mai’s call for national reunification predicated on democratic elections was a direct challenge to the Ngô Đình Diệm government and Diệm’s intentions to undermine the agreement at a time when Republic was in the early stages of establishing and consolidating its political authority. After producing only four issues, the magazine was shuttered by the local government and Tôn Thất Dương Ky, at the time a professor at Quốc Học High School, was arrested and imprisoned for one year. Ky was released in 1955 after agreeing to move to Sài Gòn where he began teaching at Lycée Marie Curie.⁹²

The Network Revitalized:

The years immediately following the agreement at Geneva in 1954 were a tense and challenging time for the agents of the Communist Party and Việt Minh who remained living south of the 17th parallel. Greatly weakened by the exodus of Party officials to the north and with very little support from the government in Hà Nội, many Communist Party and Việt Minh networks had gone inactive and were not yet ready to openly oppose the Diệm government. However, throughout the countryside in Central Vietnam, particularly within areas formerly administered by the Việt Minh, often referred to as “liberated zones”, there remained a great deal of residual loyalty and good will for the northern government among those who had supported them against the French.

During this period, Communist Party members and former Việt Minh took little direct action to oppose the Diệm government despite a brutal crackdown by the RVN police and military. Several important factors contributed to the inactivity of many former Việt Minh

⁹¹ Trần Huệ (aka Chu Sơn), Interview 3.

⁹² Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 46–54.

networks in Central Vietnam between 1954 and 1959. At this time, the Hà Nội government opposed any largescale military operations, encouraging their supporters in the south instead take political action, such as the creation of the magazine *Ngày Mai* by a group of intellectuals in Huế discussed earlier in this chapter. Another important reason was that a significant number of Vietnamese veterans of the French War were hoping for a democratic political solution and were willing to wait for a time to see if the Diệm government would incorporate and accommodate the various factions vying for political power in the south.

The coming wave of popular resistance in the southern countryside that would ignite a bitter civil war in the 1960s was not necessarily inevitable had Diệm pursued a more democratic policy of accommodation with his political opponents. As the former underground agent Trương Như Tảng, one of the original organizers of the NLF in 1958, has pointed out, “had Ngô Đình Diệm been a man of breadth and vision the core of people who filled the NLF and its sister organizations would have rallied to him. As it was, the South Vietnamese nationalists were driven to action by his contempt for social progress in which they believed.”⁹³ Tảng was a wealthy French educated business leader with nothing to gain personally and a great deal to lose by becoming an underground agent. By cutting off all avenues for democratic processes, Diệm alienated idealistic nationalists like Tảng who could no longer see any non-violent means of achieving their goals for the future of Vietnam, which for Tảng and for many others like him, meant a Vietnamese nation that was united, independent and democratic.

When Diệm had first come to power in 1955, Tảng viewed the unyielding former mandarin as an unknown quantity. From 1955 to 1958 Tảng observed, unsure how the political situation in the south would develop, hoping that the Diệm government would institute real and

⁹³ Trương Như Tảng, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York City: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, 1985), 68.

meaningful democratic reforms, and even perhaps work toward unifying the country and institute progressive domestic policies free from American influence and dependence on American resources.⁹⁴ True national independence from foreign domination was Tàng's highest priority, even overriding any concerns he may have had about the absence of democratic processes in the north. The Việt Minh victory at Điện Biên Phủ had already demonstrated the Hà Nội government's ability to achieve that goal:

Though I had hope that the South would undergo a democratic political development, it would be misleading to say that I was firmly opposed to what was happening in the North. The wholehearted nationalism that had consumed me in France (and that I shared with so many others) was in essence far more a diffuse patriotism than political philosophy. My personal struggle had been one to realize my Vietnamese identity against the cultural and psychological backdrop of French colonialism. Compared to this, adopting a systematic political philosophy was for me an important but secondary endeavor. My years of struggling to understand the character of Ho Chi Minh had convinced me that at heart his motivations were similar, that the Leninism he espoused was an accretion that served the cause of Vietnamese nationalism. Whatever my personal inclinations, I would have been willing to accept almost any regime that could achieve real independence and that had the welfare of the people at heart. I was quite prepared to give Ho's Northern government the benefit of the doubt on this score, knowing that the restoration of nationhood would be a long and difficult process.... Moreover, Ho Chi Minh himself had already been crowned as a national hero, by Southerners as well as Northerners, and the entire Hanoi government was bathed in his immense prestige.⁹⁵

Having just recently fought a bitter war of decolonization side by side with the communists in which they worked closely together as members of a united front, many Vietnamese who supported the Việt Minh but never joined the Communist Party, had become accustomed over the years to being guided, supplied and looked after by local networks of communists. The leadership and experience of these network provided the critical organizational infrastructure needed to carry the revolution forward. In the early years of the Republic and the American War, before some of them began to feel manipulated by the Hà Nội government, they

⁹⁴Trương Như Tàng, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*, 44.

⁹⁵ Trương Như Tàng, 37.

trusted their colleagues from the north, even if they did not uniformly agree with their political ideology.⁹⁶

During these first few years of the Republic of Vietnam's existence, RVN police and military forces had considerable success in identifying and eliminating underground communist networks. However, the total number of communists imprisoned and executed during this period remains disputed and is difficult to nail down because the killings were often kept secret. According to Vietnamese sources, by 1958, Ngô Đình Diệm's regime had already killed approximately 68,800 officials and members of the Communist Party living in Republican controlled territory.⁹⁷ In my own research, while I have come across a number of cases in which communist officials have been secretly executed in Central Vietnam in the 1950s, despite having looked for it, I have not yet seen direct evidence to support such a high number of executions at this time in the Republic's history.

In the late 1950s, anti-Diệm and anti-American sentiment was on the rise throughout much of the south. As the political violence aimed at rooting out the remaining networks of the Việt Minh intensified, public perceptions of Diệm as anti-Buddhist, undemocratic and tyrannical dictator became increasingly widespread. Growing feelings of outrage at Diệm's policies provided the impetus for the creation of a broad coalition of opponents to the regime, coming from virtually every strata of Vietnamese society. All over the south, underground groups of likeminded political agitators began to organize secret meetings. According to Trịnh Túc, a student activist and NLF supporter who was imprisoned and tortured by the RVN government in 1964:

⁹⁶ This has become evident through conversation and interviews both formal and informal that I conducted with people in Huế who joined the Việt Minh and NLF.

⁹⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 25.

When Americans came here, they said they wanted to help develop the country, but that was only one small part of it. Especially after the 1059 law was introduced, and then in the year 1960... the Americans poured money, equipment and soldiers into the country to help subdue the Vietnamese people, and that increased the feeling of urgency among the people to rise up....[The strategic hamlet program] made the villagers even more angry. They felt the government was interfering in their lives. We lived like fish in a pond....⁹⁸

Promulgated in May of 1959, the new law titled 10/59 mandated the creation of a special military court specifically for Communist Party members and a new punishment for traitors, anyone accused by the government of being a communist could according to its provisions be put death by guillotine.⁹⁹ During an interview with Christian Appy, Ngô Vĩnh Long, who was working as a surveyor and traveling around the south of Vietnam making maps of the countryside for the US military in the late 1950s, described how the law was implemented:

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...¹⁰⁰

Opposition to Diệm's rigged elections in 1955, his failure to implement key provisions of the Geneva Accords, discrimination against Buddhists, mass arrests of political dissidents, the Agrovillage and Strategic Hamlet programs, executions by guillotine under the new law and torture of students and communist leaders were the most commonly cited reasons by veterans of the war I interviewed for supporting the NLF. However, for many who joined the growing wave of

⁹⁸ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

⁹⁹ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Christian Appy, *Patriots, The War Remembered From All Sides* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 54.

dissent to the Diệm government's unpopular policies in the late 1950s, their eventual decision to take action had been far from inevitable.

Conclusion:

Diệm's violent methods were largely ignored in the US at the time. According to the Vietnam historian Jessica Chapman, in the 1950s, US officials paid little heed to warnings that Diệm was limiting the size of his constituency by alienating nationalists who might have otherwise supported him. "American officials" Chapman writes, "dismissed concerns about... [Diệm's] growing authoritarianism and ignored complaints from South Vietnam's disenfranchised noncommunist nationalists that he was alienating his constituency and driving his opponents into reluctant collaboration with the communists. Yet to ignore these voices was a grave mistake..."¹⁰¹ And, I would argue, a very costly one. Diệm habit of labelling virtually all those who were politically opposed to his government as traitors would help significantly in the early 1960s to broaden and legitimize the coalition that formed around the leaders of the NLF at a critical time while the organization was still in its infancy.

As Chapman has pointed out in the context of Diệm's brutal campaign against the politico-religious organizations in the south, "By the decade's end, even many among the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, which had long histories of vicious antagonism towards Vietnam's communists, saw fit to cooperate with communist cadres in order to mount the strongest possible opposition to Ngô Đình Diệm." This despite being "suspicious and even disdainful of the communists as a result of prior betrayals, many politico-religious followers would find that they had little alternative but to cooperate with communist cadres to form an organized opposition to

¹⁰¹ Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance, Ngo Dinh Diem the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, 7–8.

Ngô Đình Diệm in the countryside.”¹⁰² As a result, “in 1960, many of them would participate in the foundation of the NLF.”¹⁰³

According to RVN government records captured after the war, in March of 1958, the former French colonial prison Thừa Phủ, which was located inside Huế immediately adjacent to Đồng Khánh High School, held 796 prisoners of which 544 were there for political reasons.¹⁰⁴ These numbers would eventually swell to over 2000 by the time NLF forces liberated Thừa Phủ inmates during the Tết Offensive in 1968.

Under constant threat of being rounded up and executed, many former Việt Minh and members of the Communist Party felt they had no other option but to violently resist. As one former revolutionary recalled, during this time “Party members felt it was no longer possible to talk of revolutionary struggle while looking down the gun barrels of the government.”¹⁰⁵ It was in this desperate but opportune moment in 1960 that the Communist leadership in Hà Nội agreed to authorize the creation of a broad-based coalition of southern forces to oppose the most tyrannical and unpopular policies of the Diệm government. At the time the Central Committee of the Politburo issued a statement calling for the NLF to “unite all the people who can be united.” According to Chapman “among those expected to provide support for the project, which was to appear as a truly southern force to facilitate recruitment, were ethnic minorities, petty bourgeois, intellectuals and most promisingly, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai.”¹⁰⁶

At this time, much of the communist leadership in Hà Nội remained cautious, not yet ready to trigger a full-scale war, but instead wishing to concentrate primarily on winning the

¹⁰² Jessica M. Chapman, 192.

¹⁰³ Jessica M. Chapman, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance, Ngo Dinh Diem the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, 190.

¹⁰⁶ Jessica M. Chapman, 191.

political battle for public support. Having grown impatient with being held in check, not all southerners approved of or acquiesced to this strategy. Despite this the Politburo remained determined through much of 1963 that political organizing and political opposition to the Diệm government should remain the primary focus. However, small groups of southerners increasingly began to find violent means to push back against the growing number of RVN police and military raids taking place in the countryside.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Jessica M. Chapman, 191.

*Together with military struggle, political struggle by the masses is also a fundamental form of struggle with a decisive effect throughout all stages of revolution.... The political forces not only serve as a foundation for the armed forces, but they are also built into an organized political army of the masses, the core of the political struggle spearheaded against the enemy right in the areas under his control, including places where his military, political and economic forces are concentrated.*¹⁰⁸ Lê Duẩn

Chapter 2: The Network Before 1968

As is evident from the long list of famous revolutionaries who at one time attended Quốc Học High School (discussed in chapter 1), during the later years of the French colonial occupation of Vietnam, a very significant portion of the top leadership of the Communist Party in Hà Nội were either born or educated at some point in their lives in Huế. One of my most important goals in writing Chapter 2 is to demonstrate conclusively the local/indigenous origin of the Việt Minh and Communist Party networks operating in Central Vietnam in the 1940s 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, important facts about that war which seem glaringly obvious to people living in Central Vietnam today are still frequently being misrepresented in American media and in American debates and discussions about the war. The network of individuals discussed in the following chapter, their families, their friends, supporters and their followers were virtually all “southerners” [it is probably more accurate to say that they were Central Vietnam]. This entire group was uniformly and violently opposed to a permanent division of their country at the 17th parallel. For them, unifying the country under one government was one of the most basic underlying reasons for joining the revolution in the first place.¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

By the time a temporary partition of the country into two military regroupment zones was agreed to at Geneva in 1954, the Communist Party had already been organizing in Huế for

¹⁰⁸ Lê Duẩn, *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*, 65.

¹⁰⁹ Many of the people I interviewed mentioned unifying the country as one of their most important reasons for supporting the NLF.

¹¹⁰ A great many nationalists on the Republican side were also strongly opposed to a permanent partition.

almost twenty-five years, and the networks of the Việt Minh had been active there for more than a decade. Having already successfully fought for independence for so many years against the French, the leaders of this group felt that they had won the right to have voice in the future of their country and were willing to dedicate their lives to achieving their goals.

In many cases, in recent years, as the historian Christoph Giebel has pointed out, documentarians and media figures expounding about the Vietnam War in the American media (aided by US historians) have ignored “the co-existence of mutually exclusive all Vietnamese states prior to 1954... falsely asserting the creation of two discrete Vietnamese countries separated at the 17th parallel thereafter, US documentaries have routinely employed maps that misrepresent the complex political and military situation in simplistic and manipulative ways.”¹¹¹ By framing discussions of the war in terms suggesting that the principal threat to the Republic was an invasion from “North Vietnam” and eliding one of the most basic motivations driving many Vietnamese nationalists to fight for the implementation of the Geneva Accords, supporters of the US war effort are better able to provide a simple and easy to understand moral justifications for what otherwise would appear as an intervention in a bitter civil war. This framing has had the effect of obscuring the reality behind what was actually an extremely complex and often morally grey conflict fought between rival factions within a deeply divided southern Vietnam.

For those working in US intelligence whose duty it was to make a realistic assessment of the facts on the ground, however, such fundamental aspects of the war were not so easily ignored. It is evident from the spotted “leopard skin” maps drawn for the CIA in the 1960s depicting the deeply intertwined nature of two mutually exclusive governments in southern

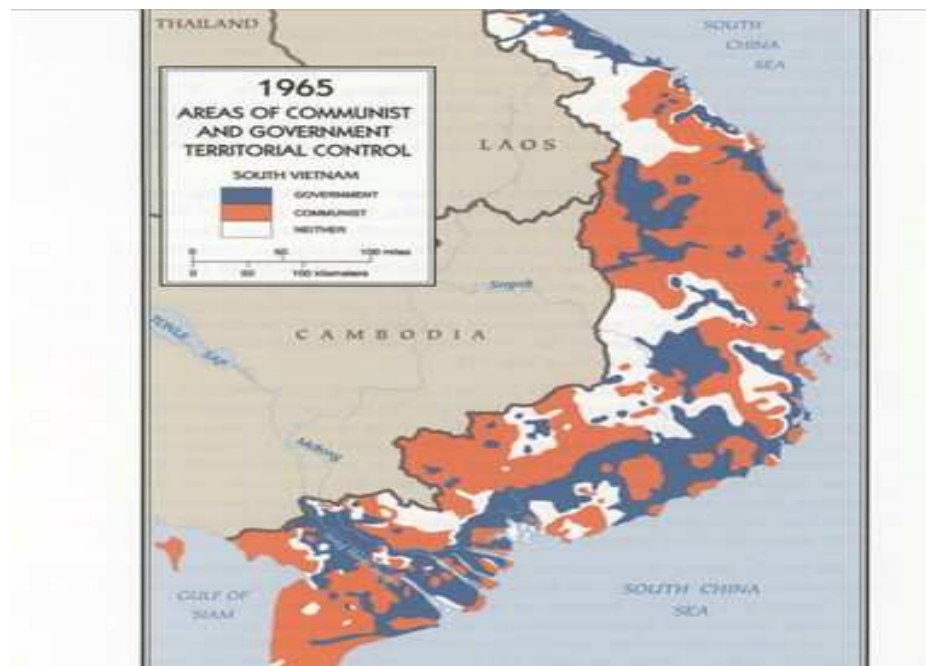
¹¹¹ Giebel, “Terminology Matters: The Fiction of ‘South Việt Nam’ and Representations of the Republic of Việt Nam,” 17.

Vietnam competing for control of territory, that in spite of the incongruity with the preferred narrative of the war, US military planners searching for a military solution to the conflict were forced to confront the political realities that was shaping the dividing lines in Vietnamese society.



“South Vietnam” depict as a monolithic block.

Source Christoph Giebel, “Terminology Matters: The Fiction of ‘South Việt Nam’ and Representations of the Republic of Việt Nam,”



CIA map depicting the extent of RVN and NLF territorial control in the south of Vietnam in 1965. Source Christoph Giebel, “Terminology Matters: The Fiction of ‘South Việt Nam’ and Representations of the Republic of Việt Nam,”

Somehow, in the intervening years since the end of the war, in many public debates and discussions of how and why the war was fought much of the underlying complexity has continued to be boiled down in the most simplistic and advantageous terms for US supporters of the war. Beginning the discussion by framing the most basic underlying narrative as that of an independent nation of “South Vietnamese” people fighting for freedom against the communist invaders to the north eliminates the need to ask difficult questions that might lead to undesirable answers.

In many of today’s public discussions in the US about the war, the voices of southern revolutionaries remain conspicuously absent. It is critical to understanding the true nature of the conflict that when discussing the war that we first recognize and understand the perspectives of all the major political factions that struggled for political power south of the 17th parallel in the years following the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954. While in recent years, a number of scholars such as Keith Taylor and Nu-Anh Tran have taken up writing histories documenting the point of view of Vietnamese who supported the Republic, as yet, very little has been done from the perspective of the NLF.¹¹²

The labelling of southern revolutionaries as infiltrators within their own communities was the crucial first step in an effort by supporters of the RVN to delegitimize their sacrifices and their struggles. By collecting and cataloging the names, birth dates, hometowns, and, where possible, the family backgrounds of members of the network this chapter demonstrates

¹¹² K.W. Taylor, *Voices from the Second Republic 1967-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).
Nu-Anh Tran, “Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963)” (University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

conclusively the deeply entrenched and local/indigenous nature of the revolutionary networks in Central Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s.¹¹³

At its most fundamental level, a revolution is constructed from a group of individuals who have been radicalized to support a particular cause. In this chapter, I hope to shed light upon how and why these building blocks formed into a revolutionary structure and how the disparate pieces of this revolutionary network fit together and related to each other in the context of an area of Central Vietnam known as Trung Trung Bộ. Despite the largescale northward migration of Communist Party members during the mid-1950s, at every level ward, district, city and province in Central Vietnam a committee of Communist Party officials operating as a kind of shadow government was left behind to do the work of preserving and expanding the revolutionary movement. These committees each had a President/Party Secretary and one or more Deputy Secretaries, and a number of the other members assigned to various other tasks, such as journalism, community outreach and military operations. This model of governance by committee was (and remains) uniform throughout the Communist Party in Vietnam.

Particularly since 1945, when many local left-wing political groups were amalgamated into the Việt Minh, the idea of addressing local issues through local governance by locally appointed committees became ubiquitous. These groups were asked to establish “liberation committees” in order to take part in the fight for Vietnamese independence. According to McAlister, these committees served to:

structure the gaps of revolutionary space and to provide justification and direction for what otherwise might have been random and half-hearted protests. Success in actions of this kind was in no small part due to the feeble efforts of the Japanese and their Vietnamese associates to create an acceptable alternative authority. Because of the lack

¹¹³ I have visited many of the family homes of people in the network. A large majority of them were still living on the land owned by their ancestors.

of real competition in filling this gap, the Communists were able to galvanize many of the politically influential behind them.¹¹⁴

This methodology proved essential to the Communist strategy of promoting and organizing the revolution locally in a way that was tangible and encouraged mass participation by a broad array of different groups with varying interests. One of the commonly accepted mythologies of the war, which has remained largely unexamined up to this day, is that the Republic retained uncontested political and military control of the cities in their struggle with the NLF and the communists. This assumption ignores the critical role that the urban movements all over the south, but particularly in Hué, played in creating and supporting the infrastructure of revolution, such as providing leadership, financial support, intelligence, and, in a number of cases, the construction and maintenance of secret bases inside urban areas from which they could operate directly under the noses of the RVN police and military. Throughout the war, each area of Hué city had its own communist officials who were often born and raised in that particular district or were living there at the time. Area knowledge and lifelong connections in the local community were critical advantages enabling underground agents of the Party and the NLF to rely on loyal networks of friends and family to help them move around safely and surreptitiously in the city.

These shadow governments operated quietly in the background and engaged primarily in recruitment, propaganda and intelligence, but they were always intended to be ready to administer the city and the entire province as governing committees when the opportunity arose. Although some underground Party officials would periodically be rounded up and killed, they were usually quickly replaced. As a matter of policy, the Communist Party leadership ranked above military leaders in the political hierarchy, and thus, the officials of the Party in Hué had

¹¹⁴ McAllister, *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*, 163.

authority over local military forces. What it actually meant to be Party Secretary of a province committee like the one in Thừa Thiên Huế, however, would depend very much on the fortunes of the Communist Party in that area at any given time during the Vietnamese Revolutions.

For example, the Party Secretary of the province level Committee for Thừa Thiên Huế in 1940 had few resources to call upon and a relatively small number of underground agents and officials working under them. By 1954, however, the situation had radically changed. At this time, the Party Secretary for Huế province was supervising the operations of hundreds, perhaps thousands of underground agents, significant military resources, including main force military units, as well as professional spies, trained bureaucrats and established military bases. Check back again with the local Party in 1959, and one would find a considerably diminished political and military machine which had gone deep underground to preserve what remained of a beleaguered Party infrastructure. Checking back again in 1968, we find the Party Secretary of the Party in Thừa Thiên has taken on the role of the chief local political leader of a very substantial military force working in close collaboration with a network of thousands of underground agents and political cadres. This network included numerous military bases in liberated areas of the countryside and in the jungle. In 1975, the position of Party Secretary of the Committee for Thừa Thiên Huế was (and remains to this day) comparable to that of governor.

Party leaders generally lived in conditions indistinguishable from their neighbors, frequently administering their networks from headquarters established in humble thatched houses, with some high-ranking officials even working the most menial of jobs like delivering water or farming rice in order to avoid suspicion. Other communist officials served as high school teachers and tutors for wealthy families. Because they were native to the areas in which they carried out their duties, the Communist Party leaders operating in Central Vietnam were

generally able to move freely through Republican controlled territory, acting as administrators for underground networks while living and working side by side with people from all walks of life. Now almost legendary figures in Vietnam, among these highly experienced underground agents were some of the highest-ranking Communist Party officials in the south.

For more than two decades, Võ Chí Công, Lê Tư Minh, Trương Chí Cương and Hồ Nghinh surreptitiously organized and controlled sprawling underground networks consisting of thousands of agents and military personal while often living unobtrusively in areas nominally controlled by the Republic. Despite being virtually invisible to the Vietnamese public, the power wielded by this small group in RVN controlled society was considerable. With an authority and reach in many ways a hybrid of governing official and mafia don, these southern officials held court, collected taxes (which in many cases was accomplished in a fashion not dissimilar from a protection racket), ordered assassinations, organized and executed military operations, collected intelligence and trained and initiated new members into their secret society.¹¹⁵

This following chapter consists of a collection of biographical summaries of the top leadership as well as many of the most active participants in the urban movement in the provinces of Thừa Thiên Huế and Quảng Nam. However, the list of biographies is by no means comprehensive, particularly when it comes to rank and file members and mid-level officials. In addition, hundreds of students and intellectuals participated in the NLF led student movement have been omitted for the sake of brevity, many of these students were working as trained underground agents of the NLF. A smaller number were also members of the Communist Party.

Focusing particular attention on the networks in the urban areas in and around Huế, I hope to provide a broad overview of the Communist Party/NLF network in Thừa Thiên and its

¹¹⁵ All this information on the networks in central Vietnam has been gathered through interviews and by reading numerous memoirs and articles written by participants.

complex relationship to the urban and student movements. All of the individuals about whom I have written biographies were born and raised in Central Vietnam. The small group of northern officials operating in collaboration with the networks they built are omitted because I have chosen to focus my research on the much larger local networks which spread rapidly across Central Vietnam and in Huế in the early 1960s. The biographies try to cover all the relevant details I have gathered up to the early 1960s but also include other information about certain individuals and events up to 1975 to provide context. Some of them may be of little interest having read only this far but could be useful later as a reference while reading Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Communist Party Leadership of the Urban Movement of the NLF in Central Vietnam:¹¹⁶



117

Võ Chí Công (aka Võ Toàn)

Võ Chí Công was born in 1912 in the district of Tam Kỳ in the province of Quảng Nam.

Công and became a political agitator for Vietnamese independence as a young man in the 1930s,

¹¹⁶ Sometime in 1967, Trần Văn Quang was appointed Bí thư Khu ủy Trị Thiên (Party Secretary of a newly created military zone), superseding Võ Chí Công's authority over Thừa Thiên Huế and Quảng Trị. Quang was a military man who knew even less about Lê Minh's and Trương Chí Cương's urban networks than Võ Chí Công. According to Chu Sơn, this is why Lê Minh was placed in charge of Huế during the Tết Offensive. A recently published book about Communist Party policy (*Ho Chi Minh's Blue Print For Revolution: In the Words of Vietnamese Strategists and Operatives*) during the war makes the claim that Lê Duẩn made the decision to place Minh in charge of the battlefield in Huế essentially because Duẩn believed this would reflect more glory on the Communist Party. I suspect the decision was more complex and was in part influenced by the size and strength of Lê Minh's network in Huế, and the enormous benefit of having close coordination between PAVN forces, local guerillas and the hundreds of (and quite possibly more than a thousand) underground agents located in the area.

¹¹⁷ Source: <http://baothainguyen.vn/tin-tuc/chinh-tri/dong-chi-vo-chi-cong-nguoi-chien-sy-cach-mang-kien-chung-55370-97.html>

joining the Communist Party in 1935 and then rising rapidly through the ranks in Central Vietnam. Công became Party Secretary of the Communist Party in Tam Kỳ district of Quảng Nam (Bí thư Huyện ủy Tam Kỳ) in 1939 and rose to the rank of Party Secretary in Đà Nẵng in 1940. Công continued his rise within the Communist Party through the 1940s and 50s, eventually becoming the senior Communist Party leader in Zone 5 (Bí thư khu ủy V) which at the time consisted of Thừa Thiên Huế, Quảng Trị, Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi, as well as being a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Hà Nội. While Công was nominally the ranking official in charge of the Zone 5 committee, he also had numerous other responsibilities. Lines of communication through these territories were frequently unreliable. In practice, his immediate subordinates, who were generally experienced and well entrenched Party leaders operating in contested territories, enjoyed a good deal of independence.¹¹⁸

Công was a highly experienced and cagey political operative whose position within the revolution solidified the marriage between the political and military command structures of the NLF and the Hà Nội government. Công was appointed Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam in 1976 and President in 1987.¹¹⁹¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ “Vo Chi Cong, Vietnamese Leader, Is Dead at 99,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/asia/vo-chi-cong-vietnamese-leader-is-dead-at-99.html>.

¹¹⁹ “Căn Cứ Khu Ủy V - Biểu Tượng Vững Bền Của Lòng Yêu Nước,” *TTXVN Vietnam News Agency*, July 31, 2018, <https://dhtn.ttxvn.org.vn/tintuc/can-cu-khu-uy-v-bieu-tuong-vung-ben-cua-long-yeu-nuoc-6329>.

¹²⁰ “Đồng Chí Võ Chí Công Từ Trần,” *Báo Điện Tử*, September 8, 2011, <http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Home/Dong-chi-Vo-Chi-Cong-tu-tran/20119/98466.vgp>.



Lê Tu Minh (aka Lê Minh real name Lê Nhữ Châu):

Lê Minh was born in 1917 into a wealthy family in Vinh Giang commune in the Phú Lộc district of Thừa Thiên Huế. Minh first became involved with revolutionary politics as a young man in 1936. He was admitted to the Communist Party in 1938. Minh's rise in the Communist Party was rapid. In 1942, Minh's family home in Vinh Giang became the headquarters of the "temporary government" of the Việt Minh in Thừa Thiên province under the leadership of then Party Secretary for Huế Province, Nguyễn Chí Thanh. Through the final years of WWII, Thanh and Minh worked closely together to build political infrastructure for the Party in Thừa Thiên Huế while forming an enduring friendship and working relationship.¹²²¹²³

¹²¹ Source <http://www.tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p2/c16/n18077/Huyen-toai-Tu-Minh.html>

¹²² "Di Tích Cơ Quan Tỉnh Ủy Lâm Thời Thừa Thiên Huế (1942 - 1945)," *Thừa Thiên Huế*, September 13, 2012, <http://baothuathienhue.vn/di-tich-co-quan-tinh-uy-lam-thoi-thua-thien-hue-1942-1945--a3676.html>.

¹²³ According to his Wikipedia, which I believe was probably written by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, after WWII Minh's house sheltered 5 Japanese officers who stayed on to assist the Việt Minh against the French.



The entrance to Lê Minh's home which now hosts a museum dedicated to the period from 1942 to 1945 when it housed the Offices Temporary Government for Thừa Thiên Huế image available at: <http://baothuathienhue.vn/di-tich-co-quan-tinh-uy-lam-thoi-thua-thien-hue-1942-1945--a3676.html>

During the August Revolution in 1945, Minh was assigned to take charge of the Hương Thủy district in Huế province. In 1950, Minh was appointed Party Secretary in Thừa Thiên Huế. Minh acquired a reputation among his subordinates for having an intimate and nuanced understanding of the details of Huế politics, society and culture and, most importantly, of the political ideology, personality and behavior of individual leaders in each religious and political community in Huế.¹²⁴

In the early 1950s, Lê Minh built a network of intellectuals and a community which supported the Việt Minh, many of whom eventually became committed and trained underground agents who would provide much of the early direction and leadership for the urban movement of the NLF in Huế in the 1960s. In the 1950s, Minh's network included prominent aristocratic scholars like Professor Tôn Thất Dương Ky and his younger brother Professor Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, as well as respected physicians like Dr Hoàng Bá, Dr Thân Trọng Phước, Dr Phạm Bá

¹²⁴ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Tập Văn Ngày Mai - Nhóm Ngày Mai Trong Phong Trào Hòa Bình Tại Huế (1954)," *TẠP CHÍ SỐNG HUƠNG*, n.d., <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c255/n9675/Tap-van-Ngay-Mai-Nhom-Ngay-Mai-trong-phong-trao-Hoa-Binh-tai-Hue-1954.html>.

Viên, Dr Lê Khắc Quyến, the businessman Nguyễn Ngọc Bang, retired Nguyễn Dynasty official Bửu Đáp, the wealthy merchant and businessman Thiên Tương, the teacher and the businessman Nguyễn Thúc Tuân and many others.

According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Lê Minh once told him during a conversation at the military base in the jungle that he would, when necessary, seek treatment for his various health problems from the well-known physician, Lê Khắc Quyến. During these times, Minh frequently convalesced secretly at Quyến's home in Huế.

In 1954, under Lê Minh's guidance the magazine "*Tomorrow*" (*Ngày Mai*) was created by a group of prominent Huế intellectuals led by Tôn Thất Dương Ky, Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, Lê Khắc Quyến, Nguyễn Hữu Đính and the Buddhist leader Võ Đình Cường.¹²⁵

The most active leaders of the Communist Party underground network in Huế under Lê Minh's authority in the 1950s were Hoàng Lanh, Trần Han, Phan Nam, Võ Đại Triền, Hoàng Kim Loan, Phan Than Pha and Hương Thọ. In 1968, Minh relied heavily on local City Party Committee leaders like Phan Nam, Hoàng Lanh, Hương Thọ and Hoàng Kim Loan to administrate his sprawling network inside the city. These loyal Party apparatchiks were highly experienced underground agents whose leadership provided the organizational backbone of the Communist/NLF networks.¹²⁶

An elegant and thoughtful man, Minh was widely viewed by his subordinates as having been a brilliant leader who cared deeply about the people under his command and paid particular attention to the intellectual and Buddhist communities in Huế. Described by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân as having the appearance of an intellectual, perpetually nursing a cigarette, tall and thin, upon their first meeting, Minh inquired to him about the wellbeing of various intellectuals in Huế.

¹²⁵ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ).

¹²⁶ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 209.

During an interview in 2017, Xuân also said that Minh was ideologically only “a little bit communist.”¹²⁷ According to Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Lê Minh “was a good leader, but he had a method of doing things that was very unusual.... He had a way of doing things that was most definitely not like other leaders. He was an intellectual with knowledge and understanding, if my country had leaders like Tư Minh, it would be fortunate for us.”¹²⁸



Area Committee for Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên Huế probably around 1967. Source https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu_Tr%E1%BB%8B_Thi%C3%AA_n_Hu%E1%BA%BF

Trương Chí Cương (aka Trương Kiểm, Trương Công Thuận, Tư Thuận)

Born in 1919, in Duy Xuyên district of Quảng Nam province, Trương Chí Cương joined the youth movement of the Party in 1936 and was admitted to the Communist Party in 1941. At that time, Cương created two Communist Party cells in Quảng Nam on his own initiative. These cells were later recognized by order of Võ Chí Công. Shortly thereafter Cương was appointed Party Secretary of the Tam Kỳ district. Cương was arrested in 1942 and imprisoned at Buôn Ma Thuột. While a prisoner he met and began a collaboration with several communist officials who would go on to become among the highest-ranking Communist Party leaders, including Trần Hữu Dực and Nguyễn Chí Thanh. Among the many positions he would hold in the 1950s, Cương

¹²⁷ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân/Not recorded, not recorded, October 15, 2017.

¹²⁸ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Recorded, November 16, 2017.

was a key member of the Zone 5 Committee and was appointed Party Secretary of the Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng Province Committee in 1954. As well as being appointed Deputy-Secretary of the Zone 5 Committee, Cương was also voted a member of the Central Committee in Hà Nội in 1961. In the booklet produced by Lê Công Cơ and Duy Tân on the Association of Youth Highschool College Students for the Liberation of Central Vietnam, Cương is listed as being the most senior leader of the student movement.¹²⁹ “From 1963 to 1966, Cương worked secretly to build up the number of underground agents in Central Vietnam while acting as a leader to facilitate communication between reconnaissance and headquarters and protect officials who travel to and from their areas of operation... and promoting the Struggle Movement of the people.”¹³⁰

Cương was appointed Party Secretary of Quảng Đà in 1971. He passed away from illness in 1975. Cương was also a high-ranking member of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front.¹³¹¹³²

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmO2U6eWkvc>

Hồ Nghinh (Tên thật Hồ Hữu Phước aka Ba Phước):

Hồ Hữu Phước was born in 1915 in the Duy Xuyên district of Quảng Nam Province. Few details are available about the early period of his life other than that he was said to have been involved in revolutionary activities in the 1930s. Having participated in the August Revolution in

¹²⁹ *Kỷ Yếu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975)* (Đà Nẵng: Đại Học Duy Tân, 2011), 6.

¹³⁰ “ANH HÙNG TRƯỞNG CHÍ CƯƠNG,” *Bộ Chỉ Huy Quân Sự Tỉnh Quảng Trị*, n.d., <http://bchqsquangtri.com.vn/truyen-thong-llvt/anh-hung-llvtnd/anh-hung-truong-chi-cuong.html>.

¹³¹ “Trương Chí Cương (1919 - 1975),” *Cổng Thông Tin Điện Tử Thành Phố Đà Nẵng*, n.d., https://danang.gov.vn/gioi-thieu/chi-tiet?id=1701&_c=46.

1945, Phước was admitted to the Communist Party in 1946. In 1947, Phước was voted Deputy Secretary of Duy Xuyên District. In 1949, he was elected to the Party Committee for Quảng Nam Province. In 1955, like many other important officials at the time, Phước was assigned to a position in the north. In 1959, Phước returned to Đà Nẵng and was promoted to the rank of Party Secretary of the Party for Quảng Đà province in 1962 and was made a member of the Zone 5 Committee.¹³³

Phước played a very active role in organizing the student movement. He was the primary high-ranking official to work directly with the young communist official and student organizer, Lê Công Cơ, in order to organize a student movement in Central Vietnam. In the period between 1962 to 1964, Phước arranged for Cơ to lead more than 80 students (usually in groups of ten or more), on a pilgrimage away from their privileged lives in cities like Huế and Đà Nẵng to a military base deep in the jungle where they could then be trained and mentored by Phước and other officials.¹³⁴

Nguyễn Trung Chính:

Nguyễn Trung Chính is the younger cousin of General Nguyễn Chí Thanh and the younger brother of the Communist official, former Party Secretary of Thừa Thiên Huế, Nguyễn Hùng. Chính is a mysterious figure whose role and actions during the war have remained largely unknown to historians and participants in the events in Huế. As early as 1966, Chính was known to other members of the Communist Party as an intimidating enforcer, who, according to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, kept a very close eye on events in Huế through a network of spies. Chính took direct control of NLF forces on the north side of the Hương River in Huế during the Tet Offensive.¹³⁵

¹³³ “Hò Nghinh - Một Đòi vì Nước, vì Dân,” *Báo Điện Tử Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam*, February 27, 2017, <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-tuong-van-hoa/ho-nghinh--mot-doi-vi-nuoc-vi-dan-428207.html>.

¹³⁴ *Kỹ Yếu Ảnh - Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975)*, 6.

¹³⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 3)* (Hà Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012), 19.

Chính seems to have had a strong working relationship with Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm) He is currently still alive and living on Hùng Vương street in Huế. Chính was the senior Party leader present during the initial days of the battle for Huế during the Tết Offensive in 1968. In Vietnam today, the relatives of Nguyễn Chí Thanh have continued to hold enormous influence in the military and the Communist Party. For example, Nguyễn Chí Thanh's son was Deputy Minister of Defense.¹³⁶

Nguyễn Đình Bảy (Bảy Khiêm):

Born in Huế in 1917, Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm) was the seventh of thirteen children. According to one account, as a young man Nguyễn Đình Bảy worked in the fire department as a minor official in the Nguyễn Dynasty. In 1943, Bảy was recruited by the Việt Minh to lead a “Self-Defense Team” in Khánh Hòa province. During the August Revolution in 1945, he was appointed head of the Khánh Hòa province police. A few years later, Bảy was transferred to Huế and he began training Việt Minh police in 1946 becoming a member of the Huế City Party Committee in 1947. Khiêm is credited with eliminating important French oligarchs in Huế in 1948. That same year, he was awarded “Hồ Chí Minh's Cotton Shirt” for his efforts.¹³⁷

In 1952, Bảy was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior in Hà Nội. In 1956, he was assigned to train police in the north and send them back across the 17th parallel to locations around Central Vietnam and Sài Gòn. In early 1964, he was transferred to the southern battlefield as Deputy Head of Security Zone 5 where he remained until 1966 when he returned to

¹³⁶ Lê Hiếu, “Cách Mạng Tháng Tám ở Huế: Dấu Chấm Hết Cho Chế Độ Phong Kiến.”

¹³⁷ Nguyễn Nhiên, “Những Kỷ Niệm Của Một vị Tướng Trên Đất Bình Trị Thiên Khói Lửa,” *Công an Thành Phố Đà Nẵng*, n.d., (http://cadn.com.vn/news/64_5482_nhung-ky-niem-cua-mot-vi-tuong-tren-dat-binh-tri-thien-khoi-lua.aspx).

Thừa Thiên Huế. Here he held the position of Deputy Head of the Security Tri-Thiên during the Tết Offensive.¹³⁸

Phan Nam:

Phan Nam was born in 1928. He seems by all accounts to have been a native of Huế, but I was unable to find information on his family or place of birth. A member of the province level committee, beginning in 1964, Nam was responsible for administering the entire urban network inside Huế.¹³⁹ Nam was a longtime communist cadre and underground agent who until Minh's recall to Hà Nội in 1968, worked for Lê Minh as the senior leader of the urban network station inside Huế. Nam had a brother who was a very high-ranking police officer in the Sài Gòn government.¹⁴⁰ After the war, Phan Nam was President of the Peoples Committee for Thừa Thiên Huế, but like many others who joined the urban movement in Huế, he also experienced intense persecution from Bảy Khiêm which seems to have ended his political career in the late 1970s.

Hoàng Kim Loan:

Hoàng Kim Loan was born in 1919 in Phong An commune in the Phong Điền district of Thừa-Thiên Huế province. Loan participated in the August Revolution in 1945 and held several minor positions in the local Việt Minh government before being officially admitted to the Communist Party in 1947. Beginning in 1946, Loan became actively involved in the editing and publication of underground revolutionary newspapers. Loan gained valuable experience as he continued to work on various publications through the 1950s until 1956, when he was assigned a post by the Communist Party as research official and later on as an irrigation officer in the north.

¹³⁸ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 177.

¹³⁹ *Kỹ Yêu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975)*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Interview #2 Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), August 20, 2015.

By 1960, Loan was serving as a high-level official in the irrigation department of the Hà Nội government.

Loan had a son serving as a lieutenant in the ARVN. According to the police chief Liên Thành, Loan's son eventually achieved the rank of Captain in an armored division.¹⁴¹ As a source, Thành has proven unreliable, however. In the same article he makes the false claim that Loan himself was a Lt. Colonel in either the PAVN or the PLAF. Apparently, by 1964 Loan's identity and at least some of his activities had become known to the RVN government, because at that time when he was assigned to return to Huế, he had to be secretly smuggled into the city by the underground agents Hương Thọ and Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. Loan was sent to Huế with instructions to assist in the building of underground networks under the leadership of his old friend and mentor, Lê Minh.¹⁴²

Despite having taken an active role in the assault on Huế in 1968, two of the most senior leaders in the urban movement, Hoàng Kim Loan and Phan Nam, were able to keep their identities secret and remained underground in Huế after the Tết Offensive. Loan was eventually arrested by police working for Liên Thành in 1972 and, under torture, divulged the names of numerous student activists and underground agents working for the NLF. To my knowledge, Loan did not reveal anything that led to the arrest of any Communist Party officials.¹⁴³

Phan Thanh Pha:

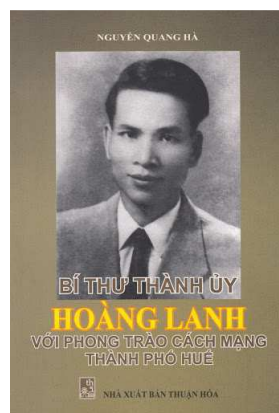
Born in 1922, Phan Thanh Pha was a longtime member of the City Party Committee in Huế. Pha is the only official before 1968 that I know of who worked closely with both the older

¹⁴¹ Liên Thành, "HOÀNG KIM LOAN HẸN LÀ AI?," n.d., <https://www.uybantruyto.com/2018/06/03/hoang-kim-loan-han-la-ai/>.

¹⁴² Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế, phần 3/3," Diễn Đàn Forum, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-3>.

¹⁴³ Chu Sơn, Interview #1 Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), recorded, March 29, 2015.

urban movement of intellectuals as well as in support of Lê Công Co's student movement. Pha was an important leader in the urban movement in the early 1960s.¹⁴⁴



Hoàng Lanh:

Hoàng Lanh (real name Nguyễn Mậu Huyền) was born in 1926 in Hương Thủy district of Thừa Thiên Huế. Lanh was admitted to the Communist Party in 1946. In 1949, Lanh was assigned to work as a communist official responsible for Hữu ngạn district in Huế. In 1962, Lanh became a member of the City Party Committee. Lanh worked closely with Phan Nam, sometimes as an underground agent in the city and was active as a leader of NLF guerilla forces during the Tết Offensive, helping to organize the assault on Huế. After the war ended, Lanh became Party Secretary for the city of Huế. At that time, Lanh was unable to shield many of his former revolutionary colleagues from the scrutiny of the Party leadership in Hà Nội or the local police led by Nguyễn Đình Bậy.¹⁴⁵¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *Kỹ Yếu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975)*, 8.

¹⁴⁵ Nguyễn Quang Hà, *Bí Thư Thành Ủy Hoàng Lanh Với Phong Trào Cách Mạng Thành Phố Huế* (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2017).

¹⁴⁶ "HOÀNG LANH," n.d., <https://thuathienhue.gov.vn/vi-vn/Trang-ch%E1%BB%A7/Th%C3%B4ng-tin-c%E1%BA%A7n-bi%E1%BA%BFt/Th%C3%B4ng-tin-%C4%91%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng-ph%E1%BB%91/Chi-ti%E1%BA%BFt-%C4%91%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng-ph%E1%BB%91/tid/Hoang-Lanh/newsid/A12402D7-A354-4E18-918F-A98F00F51F10/cid/A064E1C0-0A55-462F-A303-988E0859B383>.

Tôn Thất Dương Ky

Tôn Thất Dương Ky was born in 1914 in Hương Thủy District of Thừa Thiên Huế. Ky's family was rigidly traditional, wealthy and aristocratic. Being direct descendants from the emperor Gia Long, they maintained strict family traditions passed down the generations from royal family. An exceptional student, Ky acquired a reputation at a young age for his knowledge of both Western and Confucian scholarship. After the August Revolution, Ky took a minor post in the Việt Minh revolutionary government. In 1947, Ky became a professor at Quốc Học (then known as Khải Định) High School where he continued to teach until 1955. During this time, Ky also worked secretly as a propaganda writer for the Việt Minh and began editing and publishing his own newspaper called *Tiến Hóa* in 1949.¹⁴⁷

After *Tiến Hóa* was shuttered by the French, Ky began working on a new publication in 1954. Ky was one of the founders of a widely distributed journal under the supervision of the local Party leadership. This journal brought together a group of prominent intellectuals in Huế, most of whom were secretly working as underground agents, to write about the news regarding the Geneva Accords and to advocate passionately for the implementation of the agreement. Writers for the publication frequently used pseudonyms. The journal did not overtly support the Việt Minh cause but instead called for specific steps to be taken to facilitate a transition of power from the French to the Vietnamese people. Only four issues were published before *Ngày Mai* was shut down by government censors.¹⁴⁸

Ky was arrested in 1955 for his involvement in printing seditious materials. After a short period of imprisonment, he was released on the condition he would move to Sài Gòn. Ky then taught

¹⁴⁷ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Những Gì Tôi Biết về Giáo Sư Tôn Thất Dương Ky, và Gia Đình,” May 15, 2013, <https://www.gactholoc.com/c31/t31-369/nhung-gi-toi-biet-ve-giao-su-ton-that-duong-ky-va-gia-dinh.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Lê Văn Lân, “Phong Trào Hòa Bình,” May 16, 2014, <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c306/n15329/Phong-trao-Hoa-Binh.html>.

at the Marie Curie school in Sài Gòn until 1962. Near the end of 1962, Ky was arrested again by the Diệm government and then released after its overthrow in 1963. Ky became a high-profile leader of various anti-war and Communist front organizations because of his stature in Huế and his prestige as a scholar, and, probably most importantly because of his many years of loyalty to the Communist Party. In 1964, Ky attended the Second Congress of the National Liberation Front and was elected a member of the NLF Central Committee. I was unable to confirm this, but it seems that in 1964, General Nguyễn Chanh Thi, ordered that Ky be banished to the north. In 1968, Ky returned to the south and was appointed to “Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam” after the Tet Offensive. Ky’s younger brothers Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm and Tôn Thất Dương Hanh were both distinguished academics who were underground agents in Huế during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴⁹

Lê Quang Vịnh:

Lê Quang Vịnh was born in 1936 in Hương Long district. Vịnh became a student and friend of Professor Tôn Thất Dương Ky, regularly visiting him and his family at their home in Huế during the 1950s. Through the introduction of Ky, Vịnh was admitted to the Huế revolutionary youth organization in 1954. Vịnh was arrested in the late 1950s for distributing fliers. Not long after that he was arrested again for demonstrating in favor of the Geneva Accords and arrested again in 1955 for being a member of the “Peace Movement.” In 1961, he was arrested on an NLF military base at Gia Định in Đức Hoà and famously sentenced to death along with several of his companions,

¹⁴⁹ Thanh Tùng, “Một Thời Tranh Đấu qua Những Lá Thư Giữa Hai Miền,” *Tiên Phong*, April 30, 2010, <https://tienphong.vn/mot-thoi-tranh-dau-qua-nhung-la-thu-giua-hai-mien-post192810.tpo>.

Vĩnh was sent to Con Đảo in 1962 and released in 1975. Today he is well known for being a professor, a poet and an author.¹⁵⁰¹⁵¹

Nguyễn Đóa:

Nguyễn Đóa was born in 1896 in the district of Điện Bàn in Quảng Nam province. Đóa attended Quốc Học High School in the 1920s and participated in the student protests and strikes that took place in Huế at that time, graduating high school in 1927. At some point around this time Đóa became a primary school teacher in Huế. For reasons I could not ascertain, Đóa has become an important symbolic figure in Communist propaganda. He doesn't seem to have done anything particularly noteworthy. It is likely that Đóa knew many of the revolution's top leaders who attended school in Huế. His very early participation in the revolution and his contacts in the Communist Party might account for his otherwise inexplicable notoriety. He was appointed to the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam in 1968 and was later named one of three Deputy-Chairman of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the South. Đóa's daughter Nguyễn Thị Đoan Trinh is one the people who has most commonly been accused of involvement in the Huế massacre during the Tết Offensive. I have not seen any convincing evidence to support that charge.¹⁵²

Nguyễn Đình Chi:

Nguyễn Đình Chi was born in 1909 in Bình Định province. Chi began studying at Đồng Khánh High School in 1923 and joined in the strikes in March of 1927 that occurred in Huế. In

¹⁵⁰ Phúc An, “Độc Chuyện Từ Tù Lê Quang Vĩnh,” *Cà Mau*, April 16, 2015, <http://baocamau.com.vn/van-nghe/%C3%B0oc-chuyen-tu-tu-le-quang-vinh-36215.html>.

¹⁵¹ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 217.

¹⁵² Liên Thành, “Liên Thành-Hãy Đưa Cộng Sản Ra Tòa Hình Sự Quốc Tế Hãy Đưa Cộng Sản Ra Tòa Hình Sự Quốc Tế,” n.d., <http://biendongmientrung-lien thanh.blogspot.com/2010/01/lien-thanh-hay-ua-cong-san-ra-toa-hinh.html>.

1952, Chi was appointed principal of Đồng Khánh High School. She resigned in 1955 in protest against the Diệm government policy of forcing the students to stage demonstrations against communism. She then led a counter-protest of Đồng Khánh schoolgirls. Not long before the Tết Offensive in 1968 she escaped to the jungle and was appointed Deputy Chairwoman of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam and later the Provisional Revolutionary Government.¹⁵³

Thích Đôn Hậu

Thích Đôn Hậu was born in 1905 in Quảng Trị province. Hậu's father was a prominent physician who became a monk. In 1927, Hậu began his studies as a monk in a Buddhist school in Bình Định province. Hậu was an excellent student who by 1932 had acquired a job teaching his own students working as a professor at Buddhist universities in Hội An and Huế. Hậu went on to hold a number of important posts in the Buddhist Community in Central Vietnam, including in 1946, having been selected to be Chairman of the Central Buddhist Union. During the Buddhist Movement in 1963. Thích Đôn Hậu was arrested together with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and a number of other Buddhist followers at Diệu Đế pagoda. Xuân told me in an interview that he had been a follower of Hậu since 1956.¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁵ Hậu was a strong supporter of the student movement in Huế and a close friend of the underground agent Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, but does not seem to have joined the NLF or the Communist Party until 1968. Hậu was asked to go the jungle in 1968 and was appointed one of two Chairmen of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam.

¹⁵³ “Bà Nguyễn Đình Chi,” Công Thông Tin Điện Tử, n.d., <https://thuathienhue.gov.vn/vi-vn/Trang-ch>

¹⁵⁴ Hạo Nhiên, “Chùm Ảnh Đại Lão HT.Thích Đôn Hậu Lúc Sanh Tiền,” *Phật Học Đời Sống*, n.d., <https://phathocdoisong.com/chum-anh-dai-lao-ht-thich-don-hau-luc-sanh-tien.html>.

¹⁵⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Recorded, November 11, 2017.



Thích Đôn Hậu with Võ Nguyên Giáp and Lê Duẩn at Thiên Mũ in 1976. Source: <http://namquoc.com/amigalink/thichdonhau.php>

Underground Families in Huế (Gia đình cơ sở)

What is an underground family? An underground family is a family in which virtually every member is united in their support for the resistance. Finding such families in an occupied city is not easy because there are so many revolutionary families where one person has this point of view and another has a different way of thinking. You can even find families where the mother and father do not agree with their child who joins the revolution. There are also families which are unanimously enthusiastic supporters of revolution, but their living conditions, their employment of their locations are not suitable to be trained as underground agents. Additionally, there are also families who meet all these conditions necessary, but their commitment is not strong enough to live and die with the revolution, because harboring and protecting officials or storing weapons and printed documents is accepting the seizure of their property, torture, imprisonment and death. It can be said that an underground family is a fighting unit... a small corner of the political front in the heart of the city, which is both firm and fragile because it is located in the middle of a siege... and can be detected and destroyed at any time. In Huế, such revolutionary families had been preserved since the time of French occupation and belonged to many social classes, including farmers, urban laborers, small business owners, intellectuals, as well as the educated middle class and nobility.¹⁵⁶ (Chu Sơn)

A number of underground families in Huế played a key role in the occupation of the city during the Tết Offensive by providing logistical support, safehouses, and intelligence during the preparations and the led up to the attack.

The Thiên Trường Family:

¹⁵⁶ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 1,” Diễn Đàn Forum, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/co-so-hue-1>.

Among the most well-known revolutionary families of underground agents in Huế were the Thiên Trườngs. A prominent family of local merchants, the Thiên Trườngs owned and operated a large (by the standards of Huế at the time) bustling pharmacy selling traditional medicines with a physician on site, as well as another large shop selling construction materials located about one block away. These two businesses, which because they were substantial in size and often crowded with customers, provided excellent cover for revolutionary activities and the storage of sensitive materials. The family's conspicuous wealth and business acumen helped allay any suspicions about their political activities.¹⁵⁷

The entire family began supporting the Việt Minh during the French War and had remained loyal to them ever since. During the Tết Offensive, Mr Thiên Trường revealed his true political allegiance when he publicly took responsibility for managing revolutionary political affairs in his neighborhood. He and his son were both killed during the fighting, and their bodies were put on display after the battle.¹⁵⁸

Bửu Đáp and Family:

The family of Bửu Đáp were direct descendants of the Emperor Minh Mạng. Bửu Đáp was the family patriarch who served as a mandarin in the Bảo Đại government before he joined the Việt Minh. The family had supported the Việt Minh since the August Revolution. During the 1950s and 60s, local communist officials were sheltered by the Đáp family at their home when they came to stay in the city.

The aristocratic family owned a spacious home with a tall gate surrounded by a large garden facing what is today called Nguyễn Sinh Cung street. Here the family provided lodging

¹⁵⁷ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ).

¹⁵⁸ Minh Khuê, “Chuyện Ông Thiên Trường ở Huế...,” *Thừa Thiên Huế*, n.d., <https://baothuathienhue.vn/chuyen-ong-thien-tuong-o-hue--a1906.html>.

and food for communist cadres and helped them build storage facilities for their equipment. Along the river in front of their home the family owned a wharf where they kept several boats with false bottoms used to transport weapons. The main house was divided into several sections including an upper a lower level, and an annex with an additional hexagonal hut located behind it. According to Phan Nam, Lê Minh knew more about Bửu Đáp's family than anyone else, Minh would sometimes personally make the arrangements for his subordinates to stay with the family when they secretly entered the city on Party business. Bửu Đáp and his wife both died in the early 1970s.¹⁵⁹

Dr. Hoàng Bá:

Hoàng Bá was born in 1906 into a poor family in the Đức Thọ district of Hà Tĩnh province. Orphaned at young age, Bá was an exceptional student, graduating from medical school in 1945. Not long after that he began working at a hospital in Huế. During the French War, Hoàng Bá worked as an administrator and physician in Việt Minh hospitals. Since at least the early 1950s, Bá was close friends with the underground agent Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. Beginning in 1954, Hoàng Bá worked as an underground agent for Lê Minh. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Tuân arranged for Bá to provide lodging for members of the City Party Committee, including Hoàng Kim Loan on several occasions. Loan was arrested by RVN police in 1972 and interrogated by Police Chief Liên Thành. Under torture, Loan divulged the names of numerous underground agents working in the student movement, but never revealed the real structure of the leadership of the urban movement or the *modus operandi* and identities of the communist cadres who were currently tasked with organizing it. Communist Party security chief Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm) would later accuse Hoàng Bá and by extension Nguyễn Thúc Tuân

¹⁵⁹ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 1.”

of feeding the police the information that led to Loan's arrest. Bá spent three years in prison after the war.¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹

Dr. Lê Khắc Quyến:

Lê Khắc Quyến was born in 1915 into a wealthy well-educated family in Văn Xá village in the Hương Trà district of Thừa Thiên Huế. Quyến spent much of his childhood living on his family's 45-hectare farm in Quảng Bình. After attending high school at Albert Sarrault, Quyến graduated from medical school in Hà Nội in 1943. In 1945, he was appointed director of Nha Trang hospital. In 1946, he moved to Huế and was appointed director of the Việt Minh military medical department headquartered in the fortress of Mang Cá. In the early 1950s, Quyến joined a Việt Minh cell of underground agents composed of prominent Huế intellectuals and businessmen. This group worked together to publish the journal *Ngày Mai* in 1954-55.¹⁶²¹⁶³

Dr. Quyến acquired a reputation for saving lives due to his exceptional medical skills and intuition. By 1963, Quyến had been appointed both the Dean of Huế Medical School and Director of Huế Central Hospital. The demand for his skills was so high during this time that he was also asked to begin treating members of the Diệm family. Such was the family's affection for him and appreciation for his services that they gifted him with a Mercedes and hired him as their personal physician.¹⁶⁴

Quyến treated both rich and poor alike, frequently charging the rich higher rates in order to support his work with other patients for whom he would sometimes pay the funeral expenses of

¹⁶⁰ Phan Hoang Quý, Interview with Phan Hoang Quý, recorded, September 21, 2015.

¹⁶¹ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế, phần 3/3."

¹⁶² "Chuyện về Bác Sĩ Lê Khắc Quyến - Tạp Chí Sông Hương," accessed February 19, 2019, <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p2/c16/n21233/Chuyen-ve-bac-si-Le-Khac-Quyien.html>.

¹⁶³ Lê bá Vận., "Các Khoa Trưởng ĐHYK Huế," *Mutual Association of Hue School of Medicine* (blog), 2010, http://www.ykhoahuehaingoi.com/ky/k_CacKhoaTruongDHYKHue_LeBaVan.html.

¹⁶⁴ "Chuyện về Bác Sĩ Lê Khắc Quyến - Tạp Chí Sông Hương."

the deceased from his own pocket. Unbeknownst to the Diệm family, their beloved family physician Dr, Quyển was also secretly providing medical treatment to the head of the Communist Party network in Huế, Lê Minh. Minh was frequently under Quyển's care for his various ailments beginning in the 1950s. Quyển's cousin and close friend was police colonel Lê Khắc Duyệt, a top official in the Diệm government working under the authority of Ngô Đình Cẩn. Based on the evidence, it seems unlikely that Quyển himself was enthusiastic about communism because none of my sources claim that he ever joined the Communist Party, whereas it is well known that other members of the same Việt Minh cell he joined in 1950, for example, Tôn Thất Dương Ky and his younger brother the Quốc Học High School professor Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm were committed communists and Communist Party members.¹⁶⁵



Lê Khắc Quyển meeting Dương Văn Minh in 1964 photo available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/13476480@N07/6051291529>

¹⁶⁵ “Chuyện về Bác Sĩ Lê Khắc Quyển - Tạp Chí Sông Hương.”



A contribution to the journal *Ngày Mai* by Lê Khắc Quyến

Nguyễn Hữu Đính and Family:

Born in 1907 in the Phong Điền district of Thừa Thiên Huế, Nguyễn Hữu Đính was a descendant of the royal family on both sides of his family. A wealthy urbanite, Đính served as a forestry official for the Việt Minh government during the French War. According to David Biggs, Nguyễn Hữu Đính was “Huế’s first post-colonial chief forester” who “worked with foreign experts from the United States and Australia in the 1960s” having retired from service in the Diệm government in 1960.¹⁶⁶ Đính was a passionate scholar of culture and history. As a prominent member of the Huế community of intellectuals, he was able to use the various cultural activities he organized as a cover for his work as an underground agent. In 1964, Đính borrowed money from his relatives so that his spacious home at the intersection of what are today Nguyễn

¹⁶⁶ David Biggs, *Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press, 2018), 197.

Huệ and Lê Lợi St. could be demolished and rebuilt for the specific purpose of creating a base for underground agents to safely carry out their duties in the city. City Party Committee Members Phan Nam and Hoàng Kim Loan both used this location. The house was built in a modern style, surrounded by a very large garden that was enclosed by a low fence, so that the view of the property was unobstructed from the street. The house was deliberately made to look as open to public view and as luxurious as possible in order to help deflect suspicion. Beneath it, in 1964, two tunnels were dug. One of these, which was built directly under the front steps, was large enough to conceal several dozen men. This tunnel was used to store weapons.¹⁶⁷

In 1972, while they were in prison together in Thừa Phủ, historian and former NLF cadre Chu Son asked Nguyễn Hữu Đính why, despite their wealth and influence in RVN society, he and his family had been willing to sacrifice so much for the revolution, Đính replied “It’s simple... Nobody escapes slavery when the country is invaded.”¹⁶⁸

Nguyễn Hữu Trí and Family:

The family of the teacher and wealthy business owner Nguyễn Hữu Trí had been loyal supporters of the Việt Minh since 1947. Trí was admitted to the Communist Party in 1949. During the 1950s, Trí built up his businesses including a small furniture factory, using the proceeds to support Communist Party cadres and their operations in Huế. This workshop was also used as a storage facility and a headquarters to organize and discuss revolutionary business. Their family home was equipped with dressers with false bottoms large enough to conceal a person. They also had a secret bunker hidden behind a carefully fitted bookcase where a group of officials could hide together in an emergency. The family owned several owned boats that they

¹⁶⁷ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 1.”

¹⁶⁸ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

used for their business which were equipped with false bottoms large enough to transport soldiers and weapons.¹⁶⁹

Tô Nhuận Vỹ (real name Tô Thế Quảng):

Tô Nhuận Vỹ (real name Tô Thế Quảng) was born August 25, 1941 in the Phú Vang district of Thừa Thiên Huế. Vỹ followed his father north in the 1950s, graduating from University of Pedagogy in Hà Nội in 1964 with a degree in Literature and History. After graduation, Tô Nhuận Vỹ returned to the Huế area as a newspaper publisher. Vỹ worked on writing and publishing the underground newspaper *Cờ giải phóng* and was assigned to cover the Huế front as a journalist reporting from the battlefield during the Tết Offensive in 1968. After the war Vỹ wrote three books about the Tết Offensive that were made into a film he was awarded a medal by the President of Vietnam for his writings about the battle.¹⁷⁰¹⁷¹¹⁷²



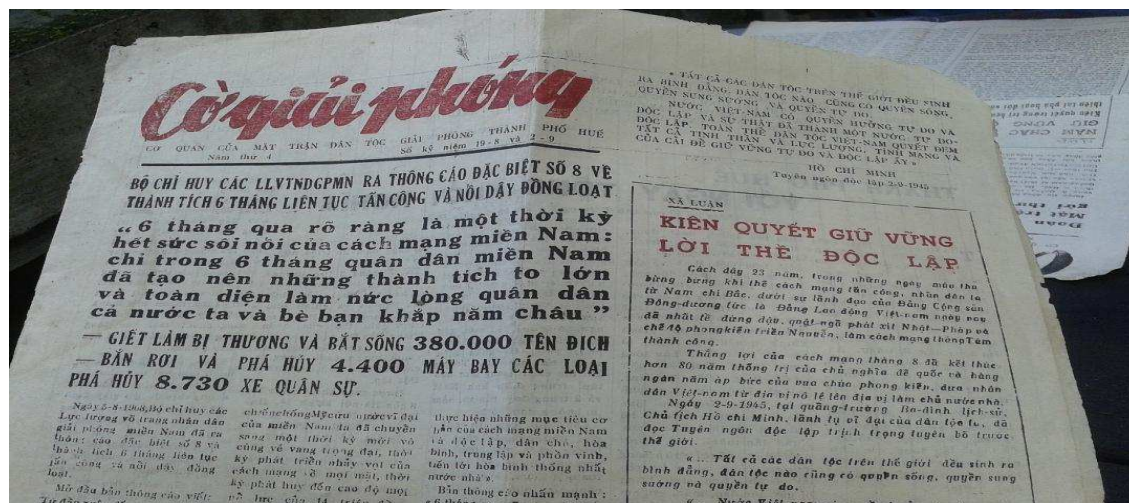
Tô Nhuận Vỹ in the jungle with the activist and Quốc Học High School Professor Ngô Kha, probably very early in the 1970s

¹⁶⁹ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ).

¹⁷⁰ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

¹⁷¹ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #2 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Recorded, November 16, 2017.

¹⁷² Mai Văn Hoan, “Giới Thiệu Chi Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam Tại Huế - Nhà Văn Tô Nhuận Vỹ,” *Sóng Hương*, November 27, 2009, <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c185/n4227/Gioi-thieu-chi-hoi-nha-van-Viet-Nam-tai-Hue-Nha-van-To-Nhuan-Vy.html>.



Tô Nhuận Vỹ brought this to an interview in 2017, pictures taken on my wife's iPhone.

Nguyễn Khoa Điềm:

Son of the famous communist literary critic and author Hậu Triệu, Nguyễn Khoa Điềm was born in Huế in 1943 in the Phong Điền district of Thừa Thiên Huế. As a direct descendant of the famous Nguyễn prince Nguyễn Khoa Đăng, Điềm's unusual upbringing brought together a combination of royal tradition, zealous nationalism and revolutionary communism. Điềm migrated to the north in 1955, graduating from the University of Pedagogy in 1964. Assigned to return to the Huế area in 1964, Điềm assisted in the recruiting of underground agents and writing propaganda for newspapers published by the NLF and the urban movement. At some point during this period Điềm was arrested and imprisoned in Thừa Phủ. In 1968, Điềm was freed along with hundreds of his comrades when NLF forces took over the prison during the Tết Offensive. After experiencing a period of distrust by the officials in Hà Nội because of his participation in the urban movement and his arrest and imprisonment by the Republic in the

1960s, Diêm went on to have a successful political career, retiring in 2006 from the Central Committee of the Politburo. Currently, he lives in Huế.¹⁷³

The NLF Led Student Movement in Huế:

In the early 1960s, the NLF led student movement in Huế was created largely through the organizational acumen and hard work of a single ambitious young underground agent named Lê Công Cơ. Cơ operated under the leadership of Hồ Nghinh based in the Quảng Nam village of Giáng La and was not introduced to the most senior leadership of the Communist Party in Huế until shortly before the Tết Offensive in 1968. This was very likely done to enable the top leadership of the urban movement to remain compartmentalized, thus insulating Lê Minh's older group of former Việt Minh underground agents in case the student networks were compromised. Thus, the Huế network was separated into two completely independently operating arms of the NLF, one was a more senior network administered by Phan Nam and under Lê Minh's leadership, and another composed of more recent recruits who, generally speaking, tended to be a younger group in terms of its members age and their number of years of active involvement in the revolution. This younger group was being organized and trained by the NLF leadership based at Giáng La in Quảng Nam province.

¹⁷³ Khanh Linh, "Nguyễn Khoa Diêm – Kép Lại Sự Nghiệp Hơn 30 Năm Làm Chính Trị, Giờ Chỉ Còn 'Nỗi Lo Văn Hóa,'" *Thế Giới Giải Trí*, n.d., <https://youthvoicescount.org/nguyen-khoa-diem-khep-lai-su-nghiep-hon-30-nam-lam-chinh-tri-gio-chi-con-noi-lo-van-hoa/>.



Từ phải sang, hàng trên : nhà thơ Nguyễn Khoa Điềm, nhà nghiên cứu Nguyễn Đắc Xuân và nhạc sĩ Nguyễn Hữu Văn (lúc đó là đại diện của Liên minh các lực lượng dân tộc vì hoà bình). Hàng trước : nhà văn Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường, nhà văn Xuân Thiều và Lê Công Cơ. Ảnh chụp tại chiến khu Trị Thiên Huế (biên giới Việt Lào), 1969. (Ảnh do nhân vật cung cấp cho Thế Giới Mới).

Taken in 1969, Lê Công Cơ is pictured here on the far left, opposite him on the far right is Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường. In the center sits professor of music Nguyễn Hữu Văn, behind him is Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Nguyễn Khoa Điềm is to Xuân's left.

Lê Công Cơ (aka Lê Phương Thảo/Ngọc):

Small and slight in stature, Lê Công Cơ has been described variously by his comrades as having been handsome, extremely intelligent, a charismatic and gifted math teacher, clever, persuasive, a very talented orator, an outstanding organizer, a highly-dedicated revolutionary, very kind and loyal to his friends, slick, manipulative, an accomplished liar, perpetually self-promoting, dangerous and capable of ordering political assassinations. Throughout his entire 13-year career (1962 to 1975), in countless life or death situations through a combination of cunning and amazing luck, Cơ managed to stay one step ahead of the RVN police and military. Cơ frequently changed his appearance to avoid detection when he traveled, presenting himself as a businessman or as a teacher in search of work.

Born in 1941, Lê Công Cơ was the third of five children in a poor family of laborers in the central Vietnamese village of Ai My in the province of Quảng Nam. Cơ's father worked as a carpenter and showed little interest in looking after the family, eventually leaving when Cơ was

still very young to stay with a woman in a nearby village. After his departure, Co's family struggled with a lack of nutrition, their primary source of sustenance and income coming from his mother's work collecting clams and snails along the Thu Bon river.¹⁷⁴¹⁷⁵

Barely eking out a living in the midst of a bloody war for national independence against the French, Co's family was forced to abandon their home village as the frequency and intensity of the violence in their local area continued to escalate. In his memoirs, Co recalls how while boarding a train at Ky Lam train station to leave their home village, French planes attacked the station and the train, forcing him to run for cover and dive underneath a nearby train.¹⁷⁶

After moving to a small village about ten miles outside of Tam Kỳ, Co and his siblings survived for several months by collecting remnants of rice harvested by farmers which had been dropped or discarded in the fields. During a lull in the fighting, Co's family decided to return to their home village to visit his grandmother who had refused to go with them earlier because she was unwilling to leave her home in her old age. One day while Co's mother and sister were out, Co and his grandmother were at home when a group of French Colonial soldiers arrived to search their home and loot any valuables. The young boy and his grandmother sat together and watched as the soldiers ransacked their home. Co's grandmother was wrapped in a blanket for warmth which she refused to relinquish when the soldiers demanded she give it up. Impatient and angered by her obstinacy, the soldiers grew angry and beat her with a chair until she collapsed dead on the floor. Co watched helplessly unable to intervene.¹⁷⁷

Not long after, near starvation and unable to find any other alternatives, Co decided to travel to a nearby area under French control in order to look for food to steal. Promptly caught

¹⁷⁴ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #1 with Lê Công Cơ.

¹⁷⁵ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người* (Đà Nẵng: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012), 17 and 19.

¹⁷⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 20.

¹⁷⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 23.

and beaten severely by a French soldier for trying to steal rice, Cơ was eventually rescued by a kind African soldier who took pity on him. The soldier protected him from further abuse and sent him on his way, giving him enough cooked rice to take with him to feed his mother and his brothers and sisters. By this time, Cơ's mother's health had been declining for some time. After eating a decent meal, she passed away that same night. For a short time, Cơ and his four siblings were left entirely on their own. Realizing that they needed the care and supervision of an adult, after some debate, they decided to begin searching the countryside around Quảng Nam for their father, whom they hadn't seen in several years.¹⁷⁸

An extended search revealed Cơ's father to be living in At Tân village, not far from Tam Kỳ. At this time, Cơ's father was either unable or unwilling to take care of him, so he went to live with his uncle, who put him to work as a water buffalo keeper. In 1951, around the time Cơ turned 10 years old, the local area where Cơ lived near Tam Kỳ was liberated by the Việt Minh soldiers. Cơ was still working as a animal keeper when he first came into contact with Việt Minh soldiers in his father's home village of Giáng La in 1951. Every night in the village where Cơ was staying, large groups of Việt Minh soldiers stationed in the area would enter the village to socialize, eat and drink with the villagers. Cơ recalls that the visiting soldiers were well received by the locals who admired and respected them. During one of these regular visits the leader of a group of Việt Minh named Triêm recruited Cơ, convincing him to leave the village and join them.¹⁷⁹

Caught up in the excitement generated by the movement and not particularly attached to his life at home, Cơ became a runner for a unit of Việt Minh stationed along the Ru Ri river, moving quickly to deliver messages between two camps of soldiers stationed there (36). This

¹⁷⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 26.

¹⁷⁹ Lê Công Cơ, 34–36.

proved to be a difficult time in Cơ's life. Living conditions with the Việt Minh were extremely harsh, and Cơ would often be awakened in the middle of the night to march long distances. Despite the challenges, Cơ felt a growing sense that he was part of something important and began to take great pride in the Việt Minh successes against the French.

In 1952, the Việt Minh officer who had recruited him, Mr Triêm, arranged for Cơ to attend Phan Châu Trinh secondary school in Hoi An. Cơ jumped at the opportunity to learn and his hard work was rewarded when he received a Việt Minh scholarship consisting of 13 kilos of rice. While he was there, Cơ got to know some of the teachers at the school who were respected Việt Minh intellectuals who would eventually come to have an enormous influence on him. This very early period of his education was a time of hope and happiness and growing ambition in Cơ's life.¹⁸⁰

Cơ returned to his father's village of Giáng La for a summer. While Cơ was there he was enlisted into the village self-defense forces, training as an ambush soldier. Around this same time, he also began organizing classes to train youth in the village in basic literacy and revolutionary propaganda. Hoping to go to the north to study, Cơ made a formal request for permission to make the journey, but he was persuaded instead to stay by Mr Triêm who told him it would be more useful to the revolution for him to remain in the south and study.¹⁸¹¹⁸²

At the age of 12, Cơ was invited to travel to Sài Gòn with a high ranking Việt Minh cadre named Mr Thúy (I am still working on finding out more about Mr Thúy). While in Sài Gòn, Cơ worked as underground agent in a network of former Việt Minh while also working as a

¹⁸⁰ Lê Công Cơ, 37.

¹⁸¹ Lê Công Cơ, 43.

¹⁸² Regarding the use of the term Việt Minh, although the Việt Minh organization officially ceased to exist in 1952, it seems that just about everyone in the south I spoke with still used it to refer to these networks in the 1950s and because of that, I think it would be confusing and impractical for me not to do so as well.

shoeshine boy and a messenger and attending school. In June 1957, Lê Công Cơ was admitted to the Youth Union of the Communist Party on the recommendation of Mr Thúy. After his admission to the Youth Union, Cơ started a new job delivering water to homes in Sài Gòn which he used as a cover while he discreetly distributed revolutionary fliers around the city.¹⁸³

At 18 years old, Cơ began teaching at Phan Thanh Gian Secondary School in Cần Thơ. Around this time, Cơ was tasked with organizing his first student group of underground agents at Chu Văn An High School in Sài Gòn.¹⁸⁴ In July 1960, Cơ received a letter from Mr. Thúy with new orders instructing him to move to Huế and begin organizing a new network at the schools and universities there.¹⁸⁵

Nguyễn Thúc Tuân:

Born in 1914 in Thanh Lương village 12 kilometers north of Huế, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân was the second son of a middle-ranking mandarin whose family had long served the Nguyễn Dynasty. As a young child, Tuân spent much of his time at the imperial court in Huế, and is said to have been a playmate of the future Emperor, Bảo Đại who was born in the same Lunar Year.¹⁸⁶ Raised in a highly educated but not particularly wealthy family, Tuân grew up attending elite schools in Huế and learned to speak fluent French at a young age.

As a young man in colonial Vietnam during the 1930s, Tuân worked as a secretary for a time in the French police headquarters in Hoi An.¹⁸⁷ Nguyễn Thúc Tuân had two sons Nguyễn Thúc Lượng and Nguyễn Thúc Lư. In the 1930s and early 40s Tuân's father, Duyệt, was the personal secretary of the famous Constitutionalist intellectual and Minister of Education in the

¹⁸³ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 56–57.

¹⁸⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 65.

¹⁸⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 73.

¹⁸⁶ Duong Dinh Na, interview #2 with Duong Dinh Na, 29.

¹⁸⁷ Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, “Unpublished Letter Written by Nguyễn Thúc Tuân to the author.”

Bảo Đại government, Phạm Quỳnh. Quỳnh had become a leading figure among Vietnamese intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s and a strong advocate for the Vietnamese monarchy. During this time, Duyệt worked in close proximity to the French puppet Emperor Bảo Đại. In 1934, Duyệt conducted the marriage ceremony between the Emperor Bảo Đại and his first wife, a commoner named Nam Phương.¹⁸⁸ The wedding was highly publicized and controversial at the time because Nam Phương (born Marie-Thérèse Nguyễn Hữu Thị Lan) was Catholic and declined to convert to Buddhism.¹⁸⁹

During WWII, Phạm Quỳnh helped lead a what was perceived by many Vietnamese at the time as a collaborationist government which was based in Huế and had little influence or authority. This had the undesirable effect of making him a conspicuous target in the minds of Vietnamese nationalists, particularly, the communist led Việt Minh.¹⁹⁰ During the August Revolution in 1945, Quỳnh was arrested by the Việt Minh and shot and buried in the jungle alongside Ngô Đình Diệm's older brother, Ngô Đình Khôi.¹⁹¹

At some point in 1945, Duyệt was secretly recruited by both the Việt Minh and the Communist Party. Shortly thereafter Duyệt was made President of his ancestral home of Thanh Lương village under the newly organized Việt Minh government.¹⁹² Duyệt's decision to support the Việt Minh was a fateful one that would eventually bring a large number of well-educated members of his clan into the revolutionary fold. The reasons for his sudden conversion from high level official in Bao 's imperial puppet state to Việt Minh cadre remain a mystery. Whether he

¹⁸⁸ “Người thầy 102 tuổi.” available at <https://thanhnien.vn/giao-duc/nguoi-thay-102-tuoi-637448.html>

¹⁸⁹ “Commoner Is Wed to Annam's Ruler”, The New York Times, 21 March 1934,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1934, 11, <https://www.nytimes.com/1934/03/21/archives/commoner-is-wed-to-annams-ruler-catholic-girl-18-is-married-to.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Keith, *Catholic Vietnam, A Church From Empire To Nation*, 185.

¹⁹¹ “Bắt gọn và tiêu diệt một phái đoàn Quân sự của tướng De Gaulle do Castella chỉ huy, nhảy xuống cố đô Huế (8/1945).”

¹⁹² Dương Đình Na, interview #2 with Dương Đình Na, 29.

decided to join the Việt Minh of out a sense of patriotism and anti-colonialism, a dedication to the principles of communism, fear for his life and the lives of his family members, or some combination of all three (or possibly some other reason entirely) may never be known. With the exception of those few people with an insider's perspective who were alive at the time, Duyệt's true motivations may well have been kept private and remained a closely guarded secret. Indeed, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, was likely to be the last living person who knew the answer to that question. Not coincidentally, Duyệt's son Tuân joined the Việt Minh during the August Revolution in 1945 becoming a low-level official in Zone 5 (military political zone 1945-48).¹⁹³

Apparently unaware of his father Duyệt's defection, in 1946 the French colonial government drafted Tuân into the colonial army. Tuân elected instead to join the Việt Minh and was admitted to the Communist Party in 1948.¹⁹⁴ During the years between 1948 and 1954, Tuân served the Việt Minh with distinction, holding a number of positions within the resistance effort in Central Vietnam, including Departmental Head of Relief and Aid Quảng Nam province, Chief of the military hospital in Quảng Nam, cadre of the Committee of Resistance Administrative South Central Vietnam, Chief of the Medical Department Zone 5 as well as being an intelligence cadre in Zone 5.¹⁹⁵

Tuân was well known throughout most of his life for being a capable and enthusiastic outdoorsman. During the late 1940s, he became actively involved in the Boy Scouts international organization, occasionally traveling abroad to meet with other scout leaders and attend conferences. This would be used against him much later in his life by hardline communist's intent on destroying his reputation by accusing him of being an agent of the CIA.

¹⁹³ Chu Son, Interview #1 Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

¹⁹⁴ Chu Son, "Gia Đình Co so (Tiep Theo). Article by the Vietnamese Scholar Chu Son about the Life of Nguyễn Thúc Tuân," 2.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

After the French defeat in 1954, Tuân was ordered to return to Huế to work as an intelligence cadre under the authority of Le Minh. Around this time, he established a large pharmacy on Trần Hưng Đạo Street which he continued to manage up until the opening of the Tet Offensive in 1968. In 1958, he was arrested by the security forces of Ngô Đình Diệm's brother Ngô Đình Cẩn. (Cẩn was operating his own private army and prison system in Huế on behalf of his older brother Ngô). While imprisoned in Thừa Phủ, Tuân was coerced into signing a document stating that he would not engage in any anti-Diệm political activities and that he would collaborate with the local police in their efforts to root out communists.¹⁹⁶ This episode remained a dark stain on Tuân's war record that would return after 1975 to haunt him for the rest of his life. For the remaining 40 years of his life after 1975 Tuân was forced to defend his actions, and emphatically denied ever doing anything to aid RVN police in their efforts to root out communists.¹⁹⁷

In 1961, Tuân was contacted by an energetic young NLF cadre named Lê Công Cơ. Cơ was seeking to establish a student organization in Huế and had been given Tuân's name by a well-known educator and old Việt Minh Colleague of Tuân's named Phạm Phú Hưu.¹⁹⁸ Tuân introduced Cơ to his second son, Nguyễn Thúc Lư. Already fluent in French, Tuân was instructed by his superiors to improve his English in order to become closer to the Americans stationed in Huế. Tuân became a student at Huế University and rapidly improving his English, earning a BA in American literature in 1964. Around this time, he also began teaching at Đồng Khánh High School.

¹⁹⁶ Chu Sơn, "Gia Đình Cơ so (Tiep Theo). Article by the Vietnamese Scholar Chu Sơn about the Life of Nguyễn Thúc Tuân."

¹⁹⁷ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 2," Diễn Đàn Forum, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-2>.

¹⁹⁸ Lê Công Cơ, interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ, 113. Also see: <http://www.vansu.vn/viet-nam/viet-nam-nhan-vat/1844/pham-phu-huu>

From 1954 to 1975, Tuân reported directly to a member of the City Party Committee named Nguyễn Hữu Hương, more commonly known as Hương Thọ. After the war ended, Tuân was sentenced to 18 years hard labor, having been accused by the police in Thừa Thiên Huế of having been a CIA spy. When asked about Tuân's loyalty in an interview with Chu Son, Thọ replied, "The conviction of Mr. Tuân... is unfounded. As for the commitment he made to work with the enemy, almost everyone who was in prison has a document like that. If Mr. Tuân was a spy, we would all be dead. Because Mr. Tuân and his wife knew our bases of operation for the Huế City Party officials. Our travel, our lives and our activities, Tuân knew them and always protected us."¹⁹⁹



Nguyễn Thúc Tuân with his family in the mid-1960s. Nguyễn Thúc Lư is not present because he has already fled to the jungle at this time. Source: donated from private collection

¹⁹⁹ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 2."



Nguyễn Thúc Tuân at Bạch Mã with the Boy Scouts in 2012 at age 98. Source: donated from private collection



200

Nguyễn Thúc Lư:

Nguyễn Thúc Lư was born in Thanh Lương village, a small rice farming community in Huong Tra district 12 kilometers north of Huế in 1935. From 1937 until 1945 Lư and his father Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, lived in Hội An while Tuân worked at the office of the French Residence located there. For a time, Lư attended elementary school in Hội An. Lư was, according to his father, a “diligent and intelligent student... who was serious, honest and right minded.”²⁰¹ After the August Revolution in 1945, Lư began traveling with his father Tuân as he floated around at

²⁰⁰ Photo donated from a private collection.

²⁰¹ Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, “Letter from Nguyễn Thúc Tuân to Aaron Lillie detailing his son Nguyễn Thúc Lư’s revolutionary activities during the War.” Summer 2014.

various postings while working for the Việt Minh. By the end of the French War, while still a teenager, Lu was working as a teacher at several different middle schools in Central Vietnam. Sometimes around 1960, Lu began to study at Huế University while continuing to work as secondary school teacher. Like his father, Lu was intensely patriotic. (Unpublished letter from Nguyễn Thúc Tuân to Aaron Lillie) When he first met Lê Công Cơ at Huế University in 1960, Nguyễn Thúc Lu, along with like-minded family and close friends had already been organizing and agitating against the Diệm government on their own for several years.²⁰²

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, in the early 1960s, Lu was able to travel freely around to nearby provinces and organize student activists without arousing suspicion.²⁰³



204

Dương Đình Na:

²⁰² Nguyễn Thúc Tuân.

²⁰³ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

²⁰⁴ Photo donated from a private collection

Born in 1942 in Thanh Lương village in Hương Trà district approximately 12 kilometers north of Huế, Dương Đình Na was Nguyễn Thúc Lư's first cousin. Like Lư and his uncle Tuấn, Na was descended from a long line of administrative and military mandarins who had lived in the village while serving the Nguyễn Dynasty and the Nguyễn lords. Na's grandfather on his father's side was a landlord and military mandarin. On his mother's side was his uncle Tuấn's father the mandarin Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt. Na's grandparents on both sides of the family were born in Thanh Lương their families having lived there for generations.²⁰⁵

Na grew up in the spacious and solidly built home of his mother's mother, a wealthy landlord and prominent member of the Thanh Lương community. Well off compared to many of his neighbors, as a young boy he was able to afford a bicycle to ride to school every day. Na's father was an excellent student but somewhat of a playboy who liked to travel and had several wives. He moved first to Laos and then Thailand when Na was three and never returned to Huế.

Since Na's great-uncle Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt the former mandarin had taken a position as a local official in the Việt Minh government and many others in the family had joined or supported the movement, the family had become targets of French effort to reassert control over their former colony. Na still recalls watching as a young boy while his "uncle was arrested and beaten at Văn Xá market and blood covered his entire body."²⁰⁶

"During the French regime, my grandmother's house was very large, but the French burned the entire house,[after that] there was nothing left. In that house there was a wooden frame of large pylons, they burned the house and then the frame, so it was like burning two houses."(Dương Đình Na interview 1) Years later "during the Diệm regime, every night they forced my mother to sleep in a particular spot, because they were afraid the revolutionary forces

²⁰⁵ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na, recorded, July 28, 2013.

²⁰⁶ Dương Đình Na.

would be in contact with her.... My uncle Nguyễn Thúc Tuân was put in Tòa Khâm prison and Thừa Phủ prison... At that time everyone in the countryside joined the Việt Minh, even my sister Lan was arrested. She was active in a women’s organization (Hội Phụ Nữ). I was still young, so when my sister Lan was in prison, I went there to visit her.” As a teenager, Na moved to the orphanage Viện Bảo Anh to attend school. While living at the orphanage Na was recruited by his cousin Lư into the student organization. “In general, it was a very happy time when I attend Quốc Học High School.”²⁰⁷



208

Trịnh Túc:

Trịnh Túc was born in 1945 into a family of poor farmers in the Quảng Đại commune in Quảng Điền district of Huế Thừa Thiên about 13km north of Huế city. Túc’s father was an early and ardent supporter of the Việt Minh who joined the movement around the time of the August Revolution in 1945, eventually becoming a member of the Communist Party. In 1953, when French military units arrived in their district to scour the area for Việt Minh, Túc’s family was forced to flee their home village. Not long after that Túc’s father reported for duty to a nearby Việt Minh military base, contracted malaria and died. Túc’s mother also died in 1953 around the

²⁰⁷ Dương Đình Na.

²⁰⁸ Photo donated from a private collection

same time, leaving Túc and his siblings orphaned. Still only ten years old, for a time Túc bounced around between different households in his extended family in the area around Huế before eventually moving to an orphanage in the city to attend school.²⁰⁹

For Túc, the time he would spend living at Viện Bảo Anh orphanage in Huế while attending Hàm Nghi Secondary School would prove to be a formative period in his life, “My family had a tradition of revolution because my father fought with the Việt Minh and I met some people who shared the same goals and ideals, for example, Na, Tần and Truyền. The people who came to Huế from the villages and had opposed the French, these people gathered at Hàm Nghi and lived in Viện Bảo Anh orphanage. Everything had its roots in this time period.”²¹⁰

Around this time, Túc was introduced to Na, Tần and Truyền’s older cousin, Nguyễn

Thúc Lư:

At that time, Na, Tần and Truyen were also living at Viện Bảo Anh, and there was also Lư, son of Tuân. He was the vice president of Association of College Students and High School Students Liberation. . . . Lư and Tần and Truyen were all related and from the same village, and I was in that group. We already had the revolutionary consciousness, but Lư was the person who directly connected us to the organization. We lived under the Diệm regime. Everyone in our group naturally gathered together and had a revolutionary consciousness because our parents were from the countryside, and, if there was any news related to the fight against Ngô Đình Diệm, we would discuss it discreetly with each other. So, we had already manifested our revolutionary consciousness.²¹¹

According to Túc, Lư was teaching at Nguyễn Tri Phương Middle School when they met.

Lư first recruited his cousin Nguyễn Thúc Tần as an underground agent. Túc was then introduced to Lư through Tần. “Nguyễn Thúc Lư taught us patriotism and revolutionary ideals to quickly choose to follow the path of the patriot to struggle for independence for the country and

²⁰⁹ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

²¹⁰ Trịnh.

²¹¹ Trịnh.

the freedom of the people... It was Nguyễn Thúc Lư that brought us to his home village and organized for us to study patriotism and revolution.”²¹²

The people who came to Huế from the villages and had opposed the French, these people gathered at Hàm Nghi and lived in Viện Bảo Anh orphanage. Everything had its roots in this time period. In 1954, the Americans came. I grew older and went to Quốc Học high school where I started to participate in revolutionary activities. Na and I created a group of southern students. If we saw something we didn't agree with, we would oppose it. At first we just did this independently without any organization, but, after that, we associated ourselves with the center of central Vietnam's organization of high school students and college students for national liberation under the leadership of the Communist Party in Zone 5. At that time, I was assigned responsibility for journalism in Huế. (Tuc Interview 1) At that time, Na, Tàn and Truyền were living at Viện Bảo Anh, and there was also Lư, son of Tuân. He was the vice president of Association of College Students and High School Students Liberation of the center of Central Vietnam. Lư and Tàn and Truyền were all related and from the same village, and I was in that group. We already had the revolutionary consciousness, but Lư was the person who directly connected us to the organization. We lived under the Diệm regime. Everyone in our group naturally gathered together and had a revolutionary consciousness because our parents were from the countryside, and, if there was any news related to the fight against Ngô Đình Diệm, we would discuss it discreetly with each other. So, we already manifested our revolutionary consciousness. We witnessed all of these wrongs and felt the urgency to participate in the NLF.

Nguyễn Thúc Tàn:

Born in 1945 in Thanh Lương village, Nguyễn Thúc Tàn was a student at Quốc Học High School with a talent for English. A younger cousin of Lư, Na and nephew of Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, Tàn was a committed revolutionary activist.²¹³

²¹² Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng* (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2013), 20.

²¹³ *Kỹ Yếu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975)*, 25.



214

Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo)

Nguyễn Văn Ninh was born in 1946 in Thủy Xuân village seven kilometers southwest of Huế city. Đạo's father was a committed communist who joined the Party during the French War. His mother had a small business selling fish to locals in Huế at Kim Long market. During the height of Diệm's anti-communist campaign in the mid-1950s, Đạo's entire family changed their names and assumed new identities and as a result were able to avoid being caught up in the purge. Đạo was a good student, but his family was poor and had difficulty paying for his schooling. His admission to Quốc Học in 1962 was an honor, but it also put additional financial strain on his family as even the school's fairly modest tuition fees were at times a stretch for his struggling family.²¹⁵



216

²¹⁴ Photo donated from a private collection

²¹⁵ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo), Recorded, August 6, 2013.

²¹⁶ Photo donated from a private collection

Phạm Thị Nga:

Phạm Thị Nga was born in 1930 in the Quảng Diên district of Thừa Thiên Huế. In the early 1950s, Nga was a young woman who had already married when the French colonial regime arrived to reassert control over her home village. Nga's first husband joined the Việt Minh and many members of her family were also strong supporters. During the French War, Nga says she "was very devoted to resisting the French, and many times my husband would go to the city to ask for donations of money or rice to feed the soldiers, and he himself donated 20 large (thùng) containers of rice."²¹⁷ Nga also became actively involved in other ways, such as concealing anti-French propaganda pamphlets "I had hidden large stacks of pamphlets. I had to carry them and swim across a pond and hide them in the bushes. I used to do all those tasks. I used to go ask for donations of rice to feed the Việt Minh soldiers. My house at that time was a place where the whole village brought the food, the uncooked rice and fish, to store in my house to feed the soldiers. This was at the beginning of the French War."²¹⁸

The area around her home village was a war zone through much of the early 1950s, The French periodically firing artillery shells directly into their village to punish the locals for their obstinacy. After her entire family was killed by French artillery fire in the early 1950s, Nga remarried and moved to a new house inside the Citadel in Huế. Early in 1963, when her cousins Nguyễn Thúc Tần and Đường Đình Na asked for her help in hiding printed documents for their new student organization, despite knowing the risks Nga didn't hesitate:

Well my motivation [for helping] was from the resistance against France. I already understood since I participated in the countryside, and I understood the path of the revolution. I had participated in classes with the Party, introductory classes and supplementary classes. And these people were my siblings, Tần was my cousin, Na was my cousin, Túc was my nephew, Truyền is my brother, Lu was my cousin; all of them

²¹⁷ Phạm Thị Nga, Interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga, recorded, September 2, 2013.

²¹⁸ Phạm Thị Nga.

were in my family. I understood what they were doing, and they sought my help. So, I had to do it what they asked of me...²¹⁹



From left to right: Thích Đôn Hậu, Trịnh Đình Thảo, Lê Văn Hảo, Nguyễn Đình Chi. Source:

<https://phathocdoisong.com/chum-anh-dai-lao-ht-thich-don-hau-luc-sanh-tien.html>

Lê Văn Hảo:

Born in Đà Nẵng in 1936, Lê Văn Hảo was the son of Lê Văn Tập one of the richest businessmen in Central Vietnam. In 1953, Hảo went to France to study, graduating from the Sorbonne with a PhD in anthropology in 1961. Hảo worked as a researcher in France for several years before returning to Huế in 1965. Soon after arriving in Huế, Hảo began teaching at Huế University. According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, he first met the young professor when Hảo came to see him about a poem Xuân had written that had been turned into a song performed by Phạm Duy called *Để Lại Cho Em*.²²⁰

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường:

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was born in Huế in 1937. Tường's family hailed from Quảng Trí, but he spent much of his childhood in Huế where he graduated high school, apparently not at

²¹⁹ Phạm Thị Nga.

²²⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, "Nhớ Tiên Sĩ Lê Văn Hảo Thời ở Huế," *Sông Hương*, January 21, 2015, <http://tapchisonghuong.Com.vn/tin-tuc/p2/c16/n18384/Nho-Tien-si-Le-Van-Hao-thoi-o-Hue.html>.

Quốc Học. Tường attended Sài Gòn Pedagogical University at some point in the late 1950s, graduating in 1960. Tường's father lived in Huế during the 1960s, but his name and profession seem to have been deliberately kept out of the media so, to my knowledge about most of his family history and information about his childhood is limited.

After graduating from Sài Gòn Pedagogical University in 1960, Tường returned to Huế to being teaching and received a second BA, this time in philosophy, from Huế university in 1964. Tường was part of a famous group of intellectuals known in Huế as the *Thế Hệ Vàng*, which consisted of a close circle of friends including Trịnh Công Sơn, Bửu Ý, Bửu Chi as well as Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm. During this time, Tường wrote essays and articles and debated politics with his friends, collaborating with other prominent members of Huế society like Le Văn Hảo and Lê Khắc Quyến in support of the Struggle Movement.²²¹

While teaching at Quốc Học, Tường also became actively involved in the student movement and began collaborating with a group of prominent student activists leaders including, Phạm Thị Xuân Quế, Đinh Cường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân. Tường was an extremely popular teacher, who built a substantial following among his students, many of whom were active in the Buddhist Movement, the Struggle Movement and the NLF with the most militant of them becoming underground agents of the Communist Party.²²²

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan:

²²¹ Bửu Nam, “Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường Với ‘Thế Hệ Vàng’ và Tâm Thức Huế,” *Sông Hương*, December 28, 2015, <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p75/c155/n22035/Hoang-Phu-Ngoc-Tuong-voi-The-he-vang-va-Tam-thuc-Hue.html>.

²²² Trang Chủ » Thơ Việt Nam » Chùm Thơ Bất Hủ » Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, and Huỳnh Minh Nhật, “Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường,” n.d., <https://ocuaso.com/tho-viet-nam/chum-tho-bat-hu/10-bai-tho-hay-nhat-cua-nha-tho-hoang-phu-ngoc-tuong.html>.

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan is the younger brother of Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and was born sometime around 1948. Very little biographical information is available about Phan before 1964. Phan was a medical student at Huế University in the mid-sixties. Phan was recruited by Lê Công Cơ through one of his underground agents, a poet named Phan Duy Nhan.²²³ Ngọc Phan is famous today for his alleged involvement in the Huế massacre. While many revolutionary colleagues of the two brothers have spoken up to defend Phan's older brother Tường against accusations of being a butcher, those same individuals seem to be much less enthusiastic about defending Phan. Phan has faced accusations of killing three German professors at medical school where he was student.



224

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân:

Named after the old Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân (founded in 1558), which once inhabited the area that is now the city center of Huế, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was born in Huế Central Hospital in 1937. Xuân's father grew up in Thuy Van (known at the time as Da Le Chanh village) and worked as an accountant at the prosperous Morin Trading company and Sài Gòn Morin Hotel on Le Loi St (built in 1902) near the Trang Tien Bridge. Xuân's mother was a lounge singer from the village of Thanh Oai in Thanh Hoa Province. Xuân father had two wives

²²³ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 132.

²²⁴ Photo owned by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân

and a serious gambling problem. After being caught embezzling funds from the company, Xuân's father lost his job and his family fell on hard times, struggling to pay back his debt and keep him out of prison. Xuân's father did not provide much support for the family. Often living hand to mouth, Xuân and his mother, moved around to different places in the south, Quy Nhon, Dalat and Quang Ngai, while she worked as laborer for a local tea company. Xuan's family struggled to grow their own food and was periodically forced to live on potatoes when rice was unavailable.²²⁵

Xuân remembers how when he was 9 years old during the August Revolution in 1945, he was caught up in the excitement and optimism for the future that swept the area around Đà Lạt the entire country as he and the other youths in his neighborhood were armed with pointed sticks and taught by a local revolutionary youth group to sing the song (Diet Phat Xit) "Eliminate the Fascists." Around this time, his mother brought him to Cau Dat to witness the execution of collaborators for treason.²²⁶

Because his family struggled financially for many years finding work wherever they could, Xuân was unable to afford the tuition to attend primary and secondary school. Xuân remained functionally illiterate until the age of 15, uncertain that he would ever have the opportunity to get an education. By 1952, Xuân's mother remarried a violently abusive man and was living in miserable conditions with a stepfather who resented him. Xuân was eager to leave and was delighted when he received a letter containing an airplane ticket provided by his father, who asked him to come to Tourane (Đà Nẵng under French colonial rule) where his father was

²²⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân Đến Huế (Tập 1)* (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012), 27–33.

²²⁶ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 42–43.

working.²²⁷ Around this time Xuân was finally able to begin attending school, learning to read and write and basic mathematics.²²⁸

In 1954, Xuân was 17 years old when his mother placed him in a Primary School in Đà Lạt.²²⁹ Quốc Học High School, changed its name from Quốc Học to Lycee Khải Định to Ngô Đình Diệm and back to Quốc Học again.²³⁰ Xuân's family in Ga Le Chanh invited him to live with them near Huế but were unable to offer him a place to live after the French returned to the area to burn the village. Not long after the end of the French War, Xuân returned to Huế to study and was admitted to Quốc Học in 1955 where he progressed rapidly in his studies.²³¹ In 1956, Xuân became a Buddhist initiate under the tutelage of the monk Thích Đôn Hậu and was given the Buddhist name Tâm Hằng. By the early 1960s, while attending Huế University to study literature Xuân had become an active member of the local scholarly community.

Conclusion:²³²

The arrival of the young NLF organizer Lê Công Cơ in Huế in 1960 on assignment from Sài Gòn marked the beginning of a new era of urban revolutionary activism in Central Vietnam in which students would play a central role. The total number of people who joined the networks of the NLF and the Communist Party in Huế in the 1960s would eventually rise to be in the hundreds, perhaps in the thousands. The line between who was and who was not an underground agent was not always clearly delineated. Service to the revolution could take many forms and had many different levels of risk and commitment required. A large number of these roles were

²²⁷ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 85.

²²⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 113.

²²⁹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 125.

²³⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 147.

²³¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 151.

²³² There is a great deal more work to be done before this chapter is finished. I originally intended to add at least another 10-15 bios of intellectuals and student activists to give a more comprehensive view of the leadership of the entire network but was unable to finish because of time constraints.

unofficial. Activities such as participation in student protests and political agitation were mainly performed by rank-and-file activists, who may or may not have been trained by NLF and Communist Party organizers. However, as I will demonstrate in chapters 3, 4 and 5, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the guiding hand of a professional cadre of locally born revolutionaries maintained a consistent presence in the region which grew rapidly in size and strength beginning with the founding of the NLF in December 1960.



Quốc Học High School lecturer and the first Party Secretary for Thừa Thiên Huế, Lê Việt Lương in 1930. Mugshot
Source: <https://khetre.thuathienhue.gov.vn/?gd=1&cn=97&tc=20982>



From left to right: Hồ Đắc Khải, Phạm Quỳnh, Thái Văn Toản, Ngô Đình Diệm, Bùi Bằng Đoàn
Bùi Bằng Đoàn (father of Bùi Tin) joined the Việt Minh government in 1946. Source
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ngo_Dinh_Diem



Erich Wulff and Trí Quang in 1963

Source: https://hon-viet.co.uk/NguyenVanLuc_NgoDinhCanWhoAreYou5.htm



Erich Wulff with Hòa Thượng Thích Trí Quang và Hòa Thượng Thích Đôn Hậu, 4/14/1964 Source: <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/erich-wulff-1926-2010>



Erich Wulff with the artist and underground agent Đinh Cường. Source:

<https://tranthinguyetmai.wordpress.com/2018/01/07/tan-man-ve-trang-qua-vung-dong-dat-dinh-cuong-bac-si-erich-wulff/>



The leaders of Tri Thiên in 1967. Source:

https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu_Tr%E1%BB%8B_Thi%C3%AA_n_Hu%E1%BA%BF



The leaders of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam in Huế are greeted by members of the Central Committee of the Politburo in Hà Nội in 1968 Source:

<http://www.gatholoc.com/printer.php?id=593&tbl=contents>



Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Ngô Kha, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Nguyễn Khoa Điềm contributed to publishing this newspaper after 1970 Source: <http://www.gactholoc.com/printer.php?id=593&tbl=contents>



Numerous memes like this have been posted online by people claiming Tường officiated a kangaroo court in Huế before sentencing hundreds (some say thousand) to be buried alive.

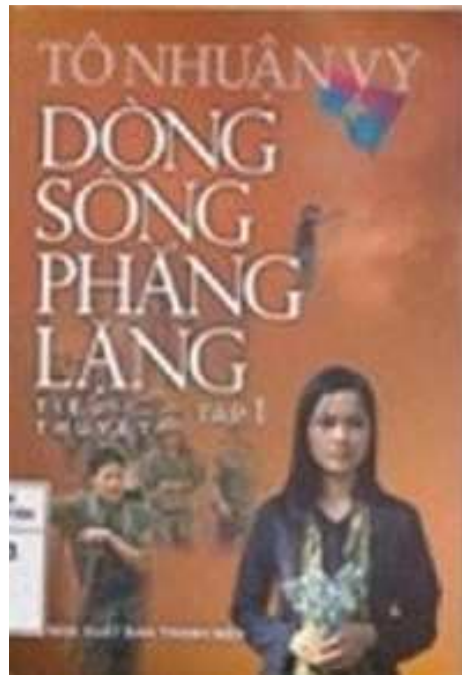
Sources: <https://saigontimes.org/2018/02/21/hoang-phu-ngoc-tuong-thu-toi/> and <https://www.flickr.com/photos/68122808@N00/6512722423>

WANTED
Nguyễn Đắc Xuân




FOR CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY Massacre at Hue, Viet Nam
 TET 1968 . He participated in executions and mass killings
 more than 5327 victims . They were found bound, tortured,
 and sometimes apparently buried alive and 1,200 victims were
 missing.
*Act responsibly and contact the nearest police station ,FBI,
 Homeland Security, US Marshal, US Immigration office.*

Source: <https://vuxep.blogspot.com/2012/05/nguyen-ac-xuan-most-wanted-man-for.html>



This is one of three volumes written by Tô Nhuận Vỹ on the Tết Offensive in Huế



As is indicated on his headstone, Lê Minh's career was exclusively as a political official and not as a member of the military. Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:M%E1%BB%99_%C3%94ng_L%C3%AA_T%C6%B0_Minh.jpg



In 2010, the Deputy Prime Minister Bùi Văn Nam came to visit the “hero” Bả Khiêm as he convalesced not long before his death. According to an article published about the meeting the Deputy Prime Minister praised Khiêm for his great contributions to the revolution and asked him for his advice on the future of policing in Huế. Bùi Văn Nam is currently the highest-ranking security official in Vietnam.

Source: <http://cand.com.vn/thoi-su/Thu-truong-Bui-Van-Nam-tham-hoi-Anh-hung-Nguyen-Dinh-Bay-165856/>



In 2013, Lê Công Cơ held a conference at Duy Tân University which many former members of the student movement from all over Central Vietnam attended. Source: Photo donated from a private collection.

Chapter 3: The Growth of the Urban Movement in Huế, 1960-1965

When Lê Công Cơ first took up the assignment to build a student movement in Central Vietnam he was little more than 19 years old. Upon arriving in Huế in 1960, the young schoolteacher born and raised in the neighboring province of Quảng Nam, knew little about the city and its idiosyncratic inhabitants and traditions beyond the basic knowledge anyone growing up in the region picked up in daily life through osmosis. Cơ was fortunate that his assignment to Huế by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Sài Gòn came at an opportune moment for recruitment of students into the NLF as the city was then undergoing the rapid expansion of its newly founded university which had been established by order of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1957. During this period, the university campus was primarily located along the south bank of the Hương River, and was divided into 5 different departments: Science, Literature, Law, Medicine, and Pedagogy with each department having enrolled less than 300 students.²³³²³⁴

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the security forces of Ngô Đình Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn scoured the countryside around Huế attempting to root out Communist cells and Communist bases, with raids and occasional skirmishes taking place in the most stubborn rural communities, typically well outside the city's boundaries. Cẩn, through the influences of his family had established a private army and was behaving in many ways as an unofficial warlord dominating the local political scene in Central Vietnam from 1955 up until the military coup which removed his older brother Ngô from power in November 1963.

Despite the turmoil in the countryside, Huế itself in 1960 remained a tranquil island of stability and peace seemingly unaffected by the violence going on around it. During this period, students living in the city went about their business confidently within an isolated bubble of

²³³ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #1 with Lê Công Cơ.

²³⁴ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 75.

safety and security. The city's proud history and traditions were respected by local Vietnamese communists, nationalists and republicans alike. As yet, few signs would have been evident to the young and inexperienced underground agent and student organizer, Lê Công Cơ, of the coming bitter religious and political conflicts that in just a few years would take hold and then spread like wildfire in communities throughout the city.

While wandering Huế's bustling maze of streets and alleyways, Cơ took time to familiarize himself with the local geography and layout of the area in and around the city, eventually finding a room near the train station on the south side of town. Relying only on his wits and the education he received in Sài Gòn, he swiftly found steady employment as a tutor for several local families. After only a short time working, Cơ secured himself a plum job teaching the children of a high-ranking local police official named Lê Khắc Duyệt. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Duyệt was the Chief of Police for an area called Trung Nguyên và Cao Nguyên Trung Phần.²³⁵ In need of a tutor for his children and impressed with Cơ's abilities as an educator, Duyệt soon invited him to stay in his home and the two formed a friendship that would prove extremely useful for the young underground agent and his mission as an intelligence gatherer and organizer.²³⁶²³⁷

Colonel Duyệt remains, for me, an enigmatic figure because a great deal about his background seems to have fallen into a memory hole reserved for individuals who could not be fully reconciled to supporting either side during the war. A high-level official in the Diệm

²³⁵ Huy Phương, "Người Việt," *Tháng Tư... Thù Hận* (blog), n.d., <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/nhin-tu-little-saigon/Thang-Tu-thu-han-1546/>.

²³⁶ Trần Nguyễn Anh, "Trăm Năm... Cờ Bỏ Oan Khiên," *Tiên Phong*, n.d., <https://tienphong.vn/tram-nam-coi-bo-oan-khien-post687577.tpo>.

²³⁷ This relationship, despite its obvious benefits for his mission, would later come back to haunt Cơ in the years immediately after the war ended when his war record was called into question by leaders of the local public security forces under the leadership of communist security chief, Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm), who accused him of working for the CIA. Info on Duyệt available at <https://tienphong.vn/tram-nam-coi-bo-oan-khien-post687577.tpo>

government, the events surrounding the life of this unusual individual serve to undermine commonly held assumptions about the war and the Vietnamese Revolution held by supporters of the Republic and the Revolution alike. Disliked both by the communists and by many who supported the Republic, Duyệt's passionately held personal political beliefs appear to have been incompatible with the policies and ideologies of either side. As a top ranking RVN police chief in Central Vietnam and close advisor to the Diệm family, Duyệt became deeply troubled by many of the policies of the government which he served, and (according to Lê Công Cơ) by the early 1960s was rapidly losing faith in the leadership of Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn. Duyệt was a devout Buddhist and not entirely unsympathetic towards the Hà Nội government or the NLF.²³⁸ For years Duyệt struggled with his conscience regarding the treatment of Buddhists and the torture of prisoners, his disgust with Ngô Đình Cẩn's treatment of the Buddhist community in Huế finally leading to his resignation from the Diệm government in 1963.²³⁹²⁴⁰

It seems that Duyệt eventually took another position as head of Interpol in Vietnam as the war was nearing an end, passing away in 1977 after spending 2 years in a reeducation camp.²⁴¹ One of my sources informed me that his family was persecuted by the Communist Party after the war and sympathetic former members of the NLF helped them escape to Australia.²⁴² The difficulty in finding information on his background very likely stems from the fact that he had deep reservations about fully committing to supporting either side in the war, and as result, was

²³⁸ At least one (and probably two) of Duyệt's younger brothers joined the Việt Minh and the Communist Party in the 1950s. One of these brothers, Lê Khắc Diễm, was appointed the head of the revenue department in Hồ Chí Minh City after 1975. <https://baomoi.com/tram-nam-coi-bo-oan-khien/c/13672568.epi>

²³⁹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 112.

²⁴⁰ Đại Tá Lê Khắc Duyệt, nguyên giám đốc Công An Trung Nguyên và Cao Nguyên Trung Phần dưới thời Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa.

²⁴¹ My sources for this are just internet blogs, but they have certain commonalities that lend legitimacy to some basic facts and this version of events is consistent with what I have heard from a close friend of Duyệt's daughter regarding the persecution of the entire family by the Communist Party which occurred after the war ended.

<https://www.geni.com/people/Ho%C3%A0ng-th%E1%BB%8B-Hu%E1%BB%87/600000015233397632>

²⁴² Lê Thị Nhân, Interview with Lê Thị Nhân, Recorded, November 29, 2017.

distrusted by both. The mere fact of his existence has, therefore, fallen into a kind of special historical void created for supporters of the Struggle Movement who refused to join the NLF. Because his story has little utility for supporters of either side undermining narratives of both groups and making them uncomfortable, it has been little discussed or investigated. Duyệt and his more well-known cousin, Lê Khắc Quyến, who was the Dean of Huế University Medical School and for a time personal physician to the Diệm family, were both vocal supporters of the Buddhist movement and strongly opposed the Republic's most heavy-handed and discriminatory policies. However, while Quyến had been working as an underground agent in the network under the leadership of the Communist Party official Lê Minh since the mid-1950s, based on available evidence, neither Quyến nor Duyệt ever went as far as actually joining the NLF or the Communist Party.²⁴³

During the time he worked as a tutor to Duyệt's children, Cơ's relationship with the RVN police colonel and his family grew steadily closer. According to the former student activist and underground agent, Lê Thị Nhân, who knew them both well during the war, at one point while living at their family home, Cơ became romantically involved with Duyệt's daughter.²⁴⁴ Ever the professional underground agent, during this time, Cơ continued to collect any potentially useful information he was able to extract from Duyệt, regularly reporting back about his progress to his superiors in Giáng La.

As part of his mission in Huế, Cơ was instructed by his mentor and handler, Mr. Thuý, to approach and befriend as many people as possible whether or not he thought they could be recruited as underground agents. Applying himself to the task with vigor, Cơ sought to

²⁴³ Hoàng Minh Tường, "Thi Pháp Tiểu Thuyết và Chất Sử Thi Trong Phả Chí [*]," *Sông Hương*, April 23, 2013, <http://www.tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p4/c18/n11727/Thi-phap-tieu-thuyet-va-chat-su-thi-trong-pha-chi.html>.

²⁴⁴ Lê Thị Nhân, Interview with Lê Thị Nhân.

systematically ingratiate himself with anyone and everyone he thought might be useful in assisting him to gather intelligence or to enlarge his network. Over the next five years, Cờ focused his considerable energies into the work of methodically organizing as large and influential a network as was possible, while doing his best to maintain a high level of secrecy and professionalism. Patience and caution were key elements of the long-term survival of an underground agent. Simply knowing where prominent individuals stood ideologically was extremely valuable information which was essential to the task of safely and effectively recruiting new underground agents.

In order to get a better sense of how people could be influenced, who could be recruited, and for what purposes, Cờ, while attending Huế University as a student in the Math Department, spent much of his time between 1960 and 1962 meeting and socializing with local intellectuals and Buddhist leaders, mostly speaking about entirely mundane topics that would have little chance of arousing suspicion. Engaging targeted individuals with gossip and very tame political discussions were his most commonly employed methods for discovering people's political ideologies and sympathies.

Each day while attending Huế University as a student in the Math Department, Cờ would arrive at an office at the school to check the university rolls for incoming students, paying special attention to the names of those who came from rural areas which had a history of being firmly under the control of the Việt Minh, often referred to as "liberated areas." In the process of finding new recruits for his organization it had quickly become evident that simply by knowing the hometown/village or community in which new students arriving at school were raised, Cờ could predict with a high degree of accuracy how much risk he would likely be taking by approaching and attempting to recruit them. At first, this proved an extremely effective method

for finding new underground agents, but Cơ was eventually forced to discontinue his visits to the office after an employee at the university took note of his interest in the school's rolls and questioned him about it.²⁴⁵

Continually seeking new ways to expand his network in Huế, during a visit to the nearby town of Hội An in 1961, Cơ met with his former teacher and mentor, the old Việt Minh cadre, Phạm Phú Huru to seek his advice. Huru was a prominent educator who was very well connected in the scholarly community in Central Vietnam. During his visit, Huru wrote him a letter of introduction to five intellectuals whom he knew to have been supporters of the Việt Minh that were currently living in the Huế area. During an interview in 2014, Lê Công Cơ described his meeting with Huru:

After I consulted with him, he introduced me to five people. These people were part of the anti-French movement. During the French war, the area from the Thu Bồn River up north was occupied by the French. The area south of the Thu Bồn was the liberated zone under the control of the Viet Minh. These were people who lived in the liberated zone and taught at the schools of the resistance. Mostly they taught in middle schools. At that time middle school was much more important than now. Of the five people one of them was Lu's father Nguyễn Thúc Tuân.²⁴⁶

Upon returning to Huế, Cơ reached out to each of the five intellectuals suggested by Huru, but with the exception of the former Việt Minh underground agent Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, who was then operating a prosperous pharmacy on Trần Hưng Đạo street, those on the list were wary and remained extremely cautious in their speech and attitudes when approached by the unfamiliar and enthusiastic young organizer.^{247,248}

For their first meeting with the former Việt Minh cadre and underground agent, Cơ brought the letter of introduction from Huru. While Tuân received him with considerably more

²⁴⁵ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 76.

²⁴⁶ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ, Recorded, April 3, 2014.

²⁴⁷ Lê Công Cơ.

²⁴⁸ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 77.

warmth and enthusiasm than the others, he initially remained guarded and non-committal about helping the energetic young organizer directly. In order to get to know him better, Tuân brought Cơ to his home inside the citadel and introduced him to his two sons. Tuân's oldest son at the time was an RVN soldier named Nguyễn Thúc Lặng, while his second son, Nguyễn Thúc Lư was a secondary school teacher and a student in Huế at the University of Sciences.²⁴⁹ Over the next several months, Cơ returned to visit Tuân's home often, becoming close friends with both Tuân and his son Lư and eventually recruiting Lư as an underground agent in April 1961.²⁵⁰²⁵¹

In his memoirs, Cơ recalls the announcement on December 20, 1960 of the formation of the NLF (National Liberation Front) by the newspaper *Báo Chí Sài Gòn*. Shortly thereafter he received a letter from his handler Mr. Thúy ordering him to return to his father's home in Phong Thử village to meet with Communist Party officials to discuss the creation of new networks and new student organizations for the Front. After arriving in Giáng La, Cơ spent the next two months tutoring the children of revolutionary families in Quảng Nam, doing his best to inspire them to support and participate in the revolution. From among his pupils, Cơ chose a group of 20 of the most promising students to take with him to Đà Nẵng and Hội An to begin their studies at Republican controlled schools in the city. Simultaneously, Cơ began training them to become underground agents of the revolution. In August 1961, all 20 students selected passed their examinations and were admitted to secondary schools in Hội An and Đà Nẵng.²⁵²

In September 1961, Cơ returned to Huế to meet with his contacts and resume the work of building an urban movement of students and underground agents. One of his earliest recruits in the city, Nguyễn Thúc Lư, turned out to be an extremely dedicated operative who used his work

²⁴⁹ Lê Công Cơ, 78.

²⁵⁰ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

²⁵¹ Dương Đình Na, Interview #2 with Dương Đình Na, not recorded, September 3, 2013.

²⁵² Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 84.

as an itinerant secondary school teacher teaching in and around Huế as a cover for recruitment and organizing activities.²⁵³ During Cơ's several months long absence from Huế, Lu had been busy recruiting new agents from among his most trusted family members and friends. At their first meeting following Cơ's return, Lu informed Cơ that he had recruited six new underground agents who were all currently students at Quốc Học High School: Nguyễn Thúc Tàn, Nguyễn Ích Hà, Dương Đình Na, Trịnh Túc, Phạm Truyền and Ái Phương.²⁵⁴

Born in 1935, although still in his 20s, Nguyễn Thúc Lu was significantly older than Lê Công Cơ and the other students whom he recruited into the underground movement. According to Trịnh Túc, "Lu... met with our group several times a week... if we needed anything, he would try to help us so our activities would run smoothly."²⁵⁵ According to another young recruit from Quốc Học High School named Đạo, "Lu was very smart, personable and elegant... and was in charge of the Huế network... Lu used his position as a teacher as cover to organize revolution under the leadership of Lê Công Cơ. He was always travelling around to organize revolutionary activities...."²⁵⁶

In those early years working as a revolutionary organizer for the NLF, Lu was most successful at enlisting new underground agents from among his closest friends and family members, particularly those from his family's ancestral village, Thanh Lương. Because the residents of the community had never abandoned their loyalties to the Việt Minh, it was decided that Thanh Lương would be the safest place to set up a meeting between the group of high school students and their new leader, Lê Công Cơ, while surrounded by friends and family and protected by a sympathetic community.

²⁵³ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

²⁵⁴ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 85.

²⁵⁵ Trịnh, Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded.

²⁵⁶ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

Thanh Lương Village and a Meeting of Likeminded Youth:

Located 12 km north of Huế, Thanh Lương was (and is) a quiet and pastoral rice farming community which traces its history back to the 1500s and the earliest years of Vietnamese settlement in Central Vietnam. In the words of one former NLF nurse who grew up in the village, during the revolution, Thanh Lương was a “heroic village” whose residents were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the cause of a united and independent Vietnam.²⁵⁷ Despite their proximity and strong economic and cultural connection to the city nearby, in the three decades between 1945 and 1975 residents of the village sided overwhelmingly with the Việt Minh against the French and then with the NLF against the Republic and the US.

Of the initial group of students recruited by Lư, four of the six young men were family members who hailed from the village which was the home of the former mandarin Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt (Lư’s grandfather) and the ancestral village of a prominent clan of which Duyệt was a leading patriarch. The descendants of mandarins (most of them on both their mother’s and father’s sides) who had long served the Nguyễn Dynasty, following Duyệt’s defection from the Nguyễn court to the Việt Minh during the August Revolution in 1945, virtually the entire family became active supporters of the Việt Minh movement, and then later underground agents of the NLF. Highly educated and financially well off, but not wealthy by the standards of city dwellers in Huế, the Nguyễn Thúc family was extremely influential in their home village where Duyệt was elected commune president (of Hương Thạnh) under the Việt Minh not long after the conclusion of WWII.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Dương Hèo, Interview Dương Hèo, July 24, 2013.

²⁵⁸ Dương Đình Na, Interview #2 with Dương Đình Na.

Like many villages in this area, Thanh Lương had been a battleground and a hotbed of anti-French organizing activity during the years between 1945 and 1954.²⁵⁹ During the French War, Thanh Lương like many neighboring villages believed by the French to be allied with the Việt Minh, faced punitive raids followed by arrests, with particularly troublesome families, like the Nguyễn Thúc clan, being singled out for house burnings and imprisonment.²⁶⁰

One family member, later recruited as an underground agent for Lê Công Cơ's youth group whose mother was from Thanh Lương but moved with her husband's family to a nearby village, experienced similar harassment. During an interview in 2013, she described the catastrophic losses she and her community endured as a result of their staunch support for local Việt Minh forces and refusal to accept French authority:

In those days they were firing artillery everywhere all the time. We would wake up after a night and see this family died and that family died, or this person died, and that person died.... I witnessed a time when they fired artillery. They were on a hill on Phú Ốc and they fired into the villages Xuan Tuy, Nghia Lo and Bao La from a long distance. People died suddenly, there were many families, but I witnessed my family. We lived in a house, and in the yard. We dug a number of foxholes. Whenever they fired artillery, we would jump in the holes. I was married to my first husband and was with my first husband's family. At that time, my husband and his sister in-law and my husband's nephew were all in the house, and I heard a hissing sound and I jumped into a foxhole, but everyone else was killed. Including my husband... only I survived. At that time, they would fire a series of artillery rounds and then stop. After that I went out into the yard and they fired another series of shells and I jumped in another foxhole. So, the two foxholes saved me, the rest of my family died. There were four of them who died. It was very scary. I myself witnessed that.²⁶¹

Because of their reputation for intransigence, many residents of rural communities like Thanh Lương village were especially hard hit by the Diệm government's terror and intimidation tactics in the years following the Geneva Accords in 1954. Similar to many other farming communities around Huế, residents of the village often lived their professional and educational

²⁵⁹ Dương Hèo, Interview Dương Hèo.

²⁶⁰ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

²⁶¹ Phạm Thị Nga, Interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga.

lives inside the city while simultaneously maintaining 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 Lương, although somewhat isolated geographically, were in many cases, the ancestral homes of well-educated Vietnamese whose lived experiences intersected regularly with both urban educated elites and rural peasant farming communities. Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, strong familial connections with the countryside and the nationalist revolutionary movement begun by the Việt Minh were preserved between the village and the children of local community leaders. These leaders were sometimes either former mandarins themselves, or more often the descendants of mandarins and other rural educated elites. During the war of decolonization in the 1940s and 1950s, a significant number of prominent residents of local villages around Huế who supported the Việt Minh like former mandarin Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt secretly joined the Communist Party.²⁶²²⁶³

During the intervening years between the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954 and the Declaration of the NLF in 1960, in the absence of national leadership south of the 17th parallel, much of the political infrastructure of revolution which had been created and nurtured by the Việt Minh had gone underground and become largely (but not entirely) inactive. By the time the NLF finally declared itself in existence in December of 1960, members of families like the Nguyễn Thúc's and their relatives in the village were eagerly awaiting guidance and support

²⁶² Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 2."

²⁶³ Two top ranking mandarins from Bảo Đại's imperial court, Bùi Bằng Đoàn and Ứng Úy joined the Việt Minh government in 1945.

from the leadership of the local networks of former Việt Minh, who prior to this time were still largely relegated to secret bases in the jungle. During an interview in 2013 Dương Đình Na recalled how as young man he:

became a patriot at the age of 20, the most beautiful age in a person's life. In October of 1961, Nguyễn Thúc Lư met with Nguyễn Thúc Tần and me, Lư was our cousin... Lư (alias Phương Mai) invited us to join the revolution. We were talking big, but we didn't know anything at all about revolutionary life; but we wanted to devote the energy of our hot-blooded youth to the only choice our generation believed was reasonable. This meant that we must do this in order to bring peace and end the division of country between north and south as soon as possible.²⁶⁴

Already predisposed to support the revolution by their family history with the Việt Minh and connections in the local community, the harsh policies of Ngô Đình Cần towards farming communities in the countryside around Huế in the late 1950s further inflamed passions for political change among local villagers. According to Na, desire in the countryside for revolution was strong throughout this period and simply needed direction to set the process in motion:

Generally speaking, when the Diệm government came to power, people already were speaking against it, but it did not become a movement because they didn't have an organization to rally behind. Not until the NLF was formed, from Trần Hữu Kiếm, at that point there was a student movement from Lê Công Cơ and Nguyễn Thúc Lư... The chain of command was structured that way. Orders came from the chain of command to, for example, distribute pamphlets of political propaganda against the Diệm government, hang the NLF flag and organize political demonstrations. All of those activities were illegal. If the government caught the people involved, they would bring those people to trial. On the local level, we developed the movement into a very large force. When the Buddhists, fought the students also joined their struggle. For example, Từ Đàm Pagoda, people said they were Buddhist students, but Buddhist activist students also supported the Communist Party. In Huế, when I first became active, my group had to connect with the organization in Quảng Nam, because Huế didn't have an organization, and Huế was so close to the 17th parallel. The student couldn't organize because the controls imposed by Diệm were too strict. Until the communist cadre were able to go back to the countryside from jungles they couldn't organize. *Rừng xanh nổ súng đồng bằng đứng dậy đô thị vùng lên* "The people in jungle open fire and people in the countryside rise up and the people in the city rise up" (Vietnamese saying about how the movements began during the war). When the communist cadre came back from the jungle, every province had its own leadership. For example, Lê Công Cơ was the leader of an area consisting of five provinces. When the NLF organized like this, there was enough leadership... So, the

²⁶⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 35–36.

movement in the city had leadership, and in the countryside had leadership and collaborated closely together under the leadership of the province committee and the area committee.... Since I was born and lived in the countryside, I witnessed a lot of oppression and exploitation by the government. They were the upper-class intellectuals and we were the lower-class intellectuals. We were against them. At the central level, area level and province level and city level, all of these levels, the NLF had organizations to gather all these forces against the Diệm government.... There were many movements against the government; I joined the student movement. The student movement organized everything from demonstrations to distributing pamphlets, speaking out against the government; peasants had their movement, women had their movement, and then there was the military which went from the countryside into the jungle. The Front was very big. Youth, Women's Unions, Peasants, Military.²⁶⁵

Because they could meet there in relative safety well protected by the local community, Lu invited the group of students from Quốc Học to a meeting with their leader Cơ in Thanh Lương village. Attendance at this fateful gathering of likeminded youth would forever change the lives of the six recruits brought into the revolutionary fold as underground agents.

During this their first encounter with the charismatic young organizer, Lê Công Cơ's energy and determination made an enduring impression. Once he had instructed them in the techniques he had been taught in the jungle, Cơ then directed the group to form a committee with each student being assigned a rank and the responsibility for a particular task. At the meeting, Dương Đình Na was made Committee Secretary, Phạm Văn Đức was chosen as Deputy Secretary in Charge of Military Affairs, Trịnh Túc was given responsibility for journalism and propaganda, Nguyễn Thúc Tần (a skilled English speaker) was made Committee Secretary and Phạm Truyền was assigned communications (community outreach?), Nguyễn Ích Hà was not given any responsibilities at this time. Having received their assignments, the newly minted cell of revolutionary agitators began making plans to build up the size of their organization through the recruitment of new members and forming new cells of underground agents.²⁶⁶²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

²⁶⁶ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 85.

²⁶⁷ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 37.

Many years later, in a collection of essays written by revolutionary colleagues of Lê Công Cơ sharing their experiences with him during the war, former Committee Secretary Dương Đình Na remembers meeting Cơ for the first time in December 1961. Na recalls noticing immediately that Cơ was very small, (the smallest person who attended the meeting) and skinny and spoke with a Quảng Nam accent. Despite his diminutive appearance, Na recalls that Cơ made a strong impression on him because he had:

an especially engaging way of speaking and a voice that was pleasant and enthralling. It was at Thanh Lương that we were taught our first lessons in basic revolutionary principles. Both the speaker and his listeners focused passionately on the subject at hand. We felt like we had grown up and become more mature and more confident in our ability. We dedicated all our hearts to following the path of revolution, the path of patriotism.... This was the first time we heard a basic lesson about the 5 revolutionary principles. Investigate, propagandize, delegate assignments, recruit into the organization, encourage the fight (agitate), We tried to remember these lessons because we wanted to transmit this information to other youth whom we targeted to persuade to join our secret revolutionary activities. These clandestine activities were one characteristic of revolutionary organizing that was very exciting and attractive to young people at that time.²⁶⁸

According to another student present at the meeting named Trịnh Túc, Cơ was introduced to them that day by his most frequently used alias, Lê Phương Thảo. Although members of the group knew that the name he gave them was false, they said nothing. It wasn't until many years later after the war had ended that they would learn his real name. Túc describes Cơ as a small man who had “an enthusiastic and lively way of lecturing” and frequently “told stories, gave advice and admonishments, often showing great passion.”²⁶⁹ According to Túc, Cơ had a manner of speaking that was charismatic and extremely easy on the ears and his lectures to the group were very convincing. By the time they had reached the end of their training after two days of lecturing he had “completely conquered” all six of them.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 37.

²⁶⁹ Nhiều Tác Giả, 21.

²⁷⁰ Nhiều Tác Giả, 20.

Once they had completed their studies, the first major organization of high school and college students in Huế for the liberation of Central Vietnam was established and the six newly recruited high school students began to make plans for a rapid expansion of their network into Huế's largest educational institutions including: Quốc Học, Đồng Khánh, Hàm Nghi, Nguyễn Du, Đào Duy Từ, and the Buddhist school trường Phật giáo Hàm Long.²⁷¹²⁷²

According to Dương Đình Na, “From that point on we not only became active ourselves, or only with a small group, including people we had known very clearly for a long time, but also tried hard to propagandize and recruit and build up underground agents at all the secondary and high schools in the city, certainly not just at Quốc Học, the school which all six of us were currently attending.”²⁷³

Huế was the cradle of the urban movement. Everything started from Huế University, and the high school student movements and religious movements originated in Huế. For merchants, teachers and other movements, Huế was significant first. These movements spread to Sài Gòn, Đà Lạt, and Cần Thơ. I am very proud to say that, although, at that time, I hadn't learned or studied much about communism. We recognized the need for revolution early. We were very young, but from that youth we saw what we could do... for the nation, so we did it.²⁷⁴

Because many had already lost family members in what they viewed as a struggle for freedom and independence, the young men and women who joined the student group were well aware of the seriousness of the risk they were taking, but nevertheless felt compelled by patriotism and a sense of duty to their families and community to join.

At that time, life and death was not important. Our suffering didn't matter. We didn't think about being arrested or being put in prison. We knew that if we participated in revolutionary activities we would be arrested, punished, and put in prison, but we still did it because of our ideals. We were miserable when we participated in revolutionary activities like these because, if we revealed ourselves, we would be arrested immediately.

²⁷¹ The full name of the organization was Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh niên – Học sinh – Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung – Trung Bộ, (abbreviated as HLHTNSVHSGPTTH) In this dissertation referred to as the “ the Youth Association”

²⁷² Nhiều Tác Giả, 20.

²⁷³ Nhiều Tác Giả, 38.

²⁷⁴ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

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 (in someone's ear) to another, and that group would whisper to another, and that's how we communicated. There were times when we received orders from the jungle about the best moment to organize an uprising in all of the cities in southern Vietnam.²⁷⁵

Despite the fact that Lư's grandfather Duyệt and his father Tuân were longtime members of the Communist Party, the children growing up in their immediate and extended families, like Nguyễn Thúc Lư, Dương Đình Na, Nguyễn Thúc Tần knew next to nothing about communist ideology and were motivated almost exclusively by nationalism and what they viewed as terrible injustices being perpetrated by the Diệm government. This was also true of Trịnh Túc whose father was a Communist Party member with both of his parents having been active supporters of the Việt Minh.²⁷⁶

At that time, only because we loved our country, we were patriots. We didn't know anything about communism. After that, I was brought to the jungle several times. I went during summer vacation or during Independence Day. We had a one-week break during Independence Day at that time. So, when we had a break, my comrades arranged for me to go to the jungle and during summer vacation we went there for one month. At that time, we gained a deeper understanding of communism. At first, we only thought we were doing the right thing. That was our enthusiastic youth. More importantly, was the blood of my fathers and grandfathers who participated in the revolution in the countryside against the French. That was what was in my mind when I first joined. At that time, no one had indoctrinated us about their ideals, but after that we studied and learned gradually and formed our ideals.²⁷⁷

For most of those who joined they saw their revolutionary activism as a continuation of the struggle for freedom and independence for which their families had already sacrificed so much during the war of French decolonization. A cousin of Trịnh Túc and a relative of the Nguyễn Thúc family, during an interview in 2013, the former Việt Minh and NLF underground agent Phạm Thi Nga recalls that:

²⁷⁵ Trịnh.

²⁷⁶ Túc's father died of malaria while stationed at a Việt Minh military base in the jungle.

²⁷⁷ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

I was born in the countryside, and since I lived there, I participated in the revolution. After that, I got married and I moved to Huế. First, I lived in Phú Bài for two years, and then I moved to Huế. When I moved here, I was able to connect with the network in Huế. I connected with that particular network because they were my family. Because Lu, Na and Tàn came to talk me, it made it very easy. I listened, and I understood. Since I already understood, they assigned duties for me. Because I had already participated by carrying documents and swimming across a pond to hide them in the bushes. I used to do all those tasks. I used to go ask for donations of rice to feed the Việt Minh soldiers. My house at that time was a place where the whole village brought the food, the uncooked rice and fish, to store in my house to feed the soldiers. This was at the beginning of the French War. I was only an underground agent [during the American War]... so that these people could connect with each other. Store their equipment and hide their pamphlets. That is all. Those people participated [in the revolution] together, but me, I only did those things.²⁷⁸

When asked why she would be willing take the risk of assisting the underground youth organization knowing that it could put her and her family in danger, Nga replied:

Well, my motivation was from the resistance against France.... I had done many things and with great enthusiasm. I was very devoted to resisting the French, and many times my husband would go to the city to ask for donations of money or rice to feed the soldiers, and he himself donated 20 large (thùng) containers of rice... When I heard about the Geneva Conference the French signed with us, I was very happy, but when I heard that the Americans would intervene in Vietnam, I knew that we would have to endure a lot of difficulties.... I already understood since I participated in the countryside, and I understood the path of the revolution. I had participated in classes with the Communist Party, introductory classes and supplementary classes [during the French War]. These people were my siblings, Tàn was my cousin, Na was my cousin, Túc was my nephew, Truyền is my brother, Lu was my cousin; all of them were in my family. [I participated] because I understood what they were doing, and they sought my help. So, I had to do it what they asked of me. I had revolutionary consciousness, so I had to do it.²⁷⁹

One of the first students recruited into the group at Quốc Học High School (named Nguyễn Văn Ninh) who goes by the name of Đào, was born into a family with a long history of supporting and participating in the Communist Party in Huế. Because Đào's father had been a longtime member of the Party and active supporter of the Việt Minh, his son Đào was recruited into Lê Công Cơ's youth group by a local Party official and Huế City Party Committee member

²⁷⁸ Phạm Thị Nga, Interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga.

²⁷⁹ Phạm Thị Nga.

named Phan Thanh Pha. Đạo's family was so poor at the time he was admitted to Quốc Học that they had trouble paying the small fees charged by the school for tuition and books.²⁸⁰

During an interview in 2013, Đạo proudly emphasized his family history of membership in the Communist Party going back to at least the 1950s. "My father was a Việt Minh. During the Denounce the Communist campaign we had to change our name. Originally, our surname was Cái but we changed it to Nguyễn Đức. Thanks to changing our surnames, we overcame fate. After the Geneva Accords, we had to change our surname or be denounced... I was a student at Quốc Học High School. During that time, I studied with Dương Đình Na and participated in the National Liberation Front in the Student Youth Liberation Association."²⁸¹

Under the guidance of Nguyễn Thúc Lư, in the over two- and half-year period between the founding of their organization in December of 1961 and the discovery and arrest of most of the members of the group in 1964, members of the youth group collaborated closely together to enlarge their underground organization at Quốc Học, Đồng Khánh and other nearby schools. According to Túc, this was done through a careful vetting process for recruitment of new underground agents. At the same time, the group agitated among their peers in support of demonstrations by the student body:

We gathered a large number of high school and college students who loved Vietnam, and they were not communists but only wanted to defend the country against invasion. We were against the people who followed the French and the Americans. Quốc Học at that time was a place where the movement began. The students there and the students at Đồng Khánh worked together in the movement. From this collaboration, revolutionary consciousness and organization developed and became strong.²⁸²

Printing and Distributing Agitprop in Huế:

²⁸⁰ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo).

²⁸¹ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

²⁸² Trịnh, Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded.

Always on the lookout for targets of opportunity to spread their message, members of the group printed and hid stacks of fliers in their school bags to distribute as they walked casually around the city. When they saw a jeep belonging to an RVN official stopped by the side of the road, as they passed by the parked vehicle, they would quickly toss some of the fliers inside. According to Túc, at this time in the early 1960s in Huế police and RVN military personnel were not yet as vigilant about watching for this type of political activity by students as they eventually became later in the war. Generally speaking, the soldiers would simply jump in the jeep and drive away without noticing anything was amiss. As they accelerated the away wind would send the fliers fluttering out of the back of the jeep.²⁸³

A large number of the fliers printed and distributed by the group were never read because people often assumed that they were garbage, however, according to Túc, a significant number of the people on the street when presented with an opportunity, would scoop them up to take a look at them. By surreptitiously observing people's behavior as they reacted to the fliers they had just retrieved from the ground and read, they could often infer certain aspects of that person's attitude towards the revolution:

We observed the attitude of people who picked up the fliers. People had very different reactions. Some people would read them carefully, while others would glance at the hurriedly and toss them away afraid of being seen. There were some who would read the fliers and after looking around to see if they were being observed and sneakily put them in their pocket and left immediately. Others tore them up and threw them away, afraid they would be identified and harassed by police. Generally speaking, the attitude of people in the city when they came into contact with our fliers was relatively pleasant, none of the people appeared angry or hateful, but of course, there were a number of people who showed fear. Another popular method for distributing fliers was to deliver them at night...²⁸⁴

The group also began distributing fliers by tossing them through the front gates of targeted individuals' houses, in one case leaving a large number of fliers in front of the house of an

²⁸³ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 23.

²⁸⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, 23.

underground agent named Lê Quang, not knowing at the time that he was working for the urban network of the NLF. Lê Quang wisely took the fliers to the local police to avoid any risk of exposure. Shortly thereafter the youth group received orders to not cause any more trouble for Lê Quang. Many of fliers were never read because people assumed that they were garbage, but, according to Túc, a large number of passersby on the street did pick them up and look at them.²⁸⁵

During an interview in the summer of 2013, Túc recounted his experience as one of the first student activist underground agents of the NLF in Huế to create an underground newspaper in support of the NLF:

We conducted the work of distributing fliers and hanging the flag of the National Liberation Front in a number of places around the city.... My friends and I saw that with all of the oppression we had to rise up and fight in many ways. Face-to-face fighting, military fighting, political fighting, fighting with agitprop, with the ARVN soldiers and their families. For me, in the urban movement, we fought politically with agitprop against the ARVN soldiers. To the ARVN soldiers who participated in a war, we canvassed them so they would desert. We made people... realize that the war was unjust. We are Vietnamese, we had to rise up for freedom. We had the newspaper *Hương Sống*. That newspaper was from me. I gathered the news from the radio and news from daily life and distributed it to underground agents, who would then widely distribute it. At that time, I remember my group and I would use the following methods. 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.²⁸⁶

Having been assigned chief responsibility for the group's journalistic endeavors, Trịnh Túc recalls that "The work of producing the newspaper *Tin Tương* was extremely difficult...." Because the task of creating such a newspaper was challenging and dangerous. "Members of the

²⁸⁵ Nhiều Tác Giả, 23.

²⁸⁶ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

group were very proud of their ability to overcome all the obstacles to printing and distributing the newspaper.²⁸⁷ In addition to his later work on *Hương Sống*, in the early days of the youth groups organizing efforts Trịnh Túc: “together with...[his] friends in the organization... made an all-out effort to publish the newspaper Tin Tưởng [Believe] as a method of spreading propaganda advocating patriotism and revolutionary ideals.”²⁸⁸

The work of printing and storing newspapers, pamphlets and fliers was risky and required an extensive support network of loyal underground agents to provide safe spaces, security and logistical support for the students while they did the writing and printing. Much the of this was done in Thanh Lương village, however, because there was less chance of being caught transporting materials if they printed inside the city, two locations inside Huế were also used.

According to Túc, the group:

printed our pamphlets in the home of a family of underground agents. There are three places. The first one was at the house of Tần in Thanh Lương village; the second place was a house at #46 Đinh Tiên Hoàng street; and the third place was a house along the side of the river close to Hiền’s [Hiền is the husband of the underground agent Phạm Thị Nga] house. Hiền already passed away. At that time, we were on the second floor, and, at first, we used a typewriter. Then later on, we had a printer that was very basic manual printer. So, we printed some pamphlets and the other pamphlets we received from the jungle or from Đà Nẵng. Our group was directly connected to the Association of High School Students and College Students for Liberation in the Center of Central Vietnam, and, thus, we were connected to Đà Nẵng. Lê Công Cơ was the president of the association, and Nguyễn Thúc Lu was the vice president of the organization. So, 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. Usually, we distributed the pamphlets after 5 PM. At that time of day, it was dark, in the dark Phan Đăng Lưu and Trần Hưng Đạo were streets (in Huế) where they closed their doors early. In the war, people closed their doors early, and we would stick the pamphlet inside the steel door or inside their front door so that their family would read it. Or we would distribute at 5 AM in the morning because,

²⁸⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 23.

²⁸⁸ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 171.

at that time, the power was off. My friend and I took advantage the power being out and the police having gone home. The police were not at their posts. We usually distributed the pamphlets at those places. In the pamphlets we mostly discussed the news and had some articles about the wicked enemies of our country and some articles about contemporary urban movements, what was going on and what kinds of organizations there were.²⁸⁹

The propaganda and recruitment efforts of this small group of underground agents quickly began to bear fruit. “In Huế, with all the positive encouragement, the network which was created by us at all the schools: Đồng Khánh, Hàm Nghi, Nguyễn Du, Đào Duy Từ, Bồ Đề Thành, had built up the number of underground agents, also at our school Quốc Học the number of underground agents was rising. In this way, one part of the promise we made the day we established the organization at Thanh Lương was achieved.”²⁹⁰

As Lư and Na’s group continued to increase in size, Lê Công Cơ continually sought to expand the reach of his network into new areas. At some point in 1961, Colonel Duyệt also introduced him to his cousin Lê Khắc Tố, who at the time was principal of the prestigious Nguyễn Trí Phương secondary school, so that Cơ could apply for a steady job teaching there. Cơ was hired to teach mathematics at the school from 1961-1963. Students at the school were 13 to 14 years old. Throughout much of this time, Cơ remained a guest in Lê Khắc Duyệt’s home.²⁹¹

At the same time, Lư and Cơ continued their recruitment efforts at Huế University working closely with another underground agent named Nguyễn Đức Hoạn. At a meeting over coffee in a cafe in the Nam Giao area, the three youths divided their responsibilities, with Lê Công Cơ being assigned recruitment in the Medical school and the Law school, while Lư was assigned recruitment in the Literature department and Hoạn was assigned the School of Pedagogy. Shortly thereafter the three young men traveled together to Giáng La where Lư and

²⁸⁹ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

²⁹⁰ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, (Dương Đình Na)38.

²⁹¹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 92.

Hoạn were admitted to the Youth Union forming their own revolutionary cell called Thanh niên nhân dân cách mạng, Viên Đại Học Huế, with Lê Công Cơ as the Committee Secretary.²⁹²

Not long after that, Cơ succeeded in recruiting an old friend named Nguyễn Đồng who lived in Hội An, where they had been classmates as children while attending Duy Mỹ secondary school. Since that time, Đồng had been appointed principal at a local primary school. Cơ persuaded Đồng to recruit a new network for his youth group in Hội An. As it turned out, Đồng was a dedicated and capable organizer who, over the next several years, built a strong network of underground agents consisting primarily of students and teachers and mostly concentrated around two secondary schools near Hội An, Duy Xuyên and Nguyễn Duy Hiệu.²⁹³

After returning to Huế in May of 1962, Nguyễn Đức Hoạn accompanied Cơ to Quảng Ngãi to introduce him to a new group of students for recruitment and training. For a time, Cơ stayed in Quảng Ngãi with Hoạn, organizing and training underground agents to become local leaders in his youth organization. In August 1962, a Quảng Ngãi network was officially established with the new recruits Hoàng Mai as Committee Secretary and Nguyễn Vĩ Đại was Deputy secretary. Furnished with a freshly trained group of organizers and agitators, the movement spread rapidly through the local secondary schools (there were no high schools in the area).²⁹⁴

Returning to Huế, through introductions provided by the Lê Khắc Duyệt's family, Cơ with the assistance of the local network of friends and underground agents he had already built, was able to meet and ingratiate himself with a number of prominent Buddhist leaders in the area around Huế establishing important new contacts.

²⁹² Lê Công Cơ, 87.

²⁹³ Lê Công Cơ, 88.

²⁹⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 89.

During the period of several years which he spent living with the RVN police Colonel Lê Khắc Duyệt, Cơ and Duyệt became close friends, at times, staying up together late into the night discussing politics and current events. In his memoirs, Cơ recalls that one night in 1962, Colonel Duyệt returned home from work tired and distraught and informed his family that he would be unable to continue working with Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn any longer. Cơ recalls that Duyệt was visibly upset by something that had happened. That night Duyệt informed Cơ that he no longer wanted to work in law enforcement and that the next day he would submit his resignation.²⁹⁵

Duyệt, Cơ would later learn, had been pushed beyond his limits when Cẩn's had issued an order to the local military police and security forces instructing them to establish spy networks in every department at Huế University in order to observe and report on the activities of the professors and students. This order was the result of growing anxiety on the part of the Diệm government regarding increasing feelings of alienation, anger and disaffection within the Buddhist community in Huế brought on by its discriminatory policies. The order calling for increased surveillance and spying at the university was aimed in particular at a number of academics and professors who were greatly respected by students and the Buddhist community. Targets of the order included beloved community leaders such as Duyệt's cousin, Lê Khắc Quyến, the lecturer and local politician Hoàng Văn Giàu and even the Catholic Priest Cao Văn Luận who was the Rector of Huế University, having originally been appointed by the Diệm family in 1957.²⁹⁶

Not long after this discussion, Cơ asked Colonel Duyệt to introduce him to his cousin Dr. Lê Khắc Quyến and Duyệt agreed to arrange a meeting. According to Cơ, on the way to meet the

²⁹⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 113.

²⁹⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 113.

famous physician, Duyệt told Cơ that Dr Quyến was a staunch patriot who supported the DRVN, which is why Ngô Đình Cẩn suspected that Quyến might be sheltering communist in his home. During his first meeting with Cơ, Dr. Quyến remained very guarded about his political sympathies, but because his cousin introduced them, Quyến received Cơ warmly.²⁹⁷

Cơ recalls in his memoir how upon meeting him he introduced himself to Quyến, declaring that he was a student from Quảng Nam province. Hearing this, Quyến spoke with intense feeling about the strong traditions of patriotism and revolution that were deeply instilled in the people of Quảng Nam (numerous important anti-colonial and revolutionary resistance leaders were born in the province). Cơ quickly found that he liked and respected Dr Quyến and returned to visit his home many times over the next few years, each week stopping by at the Medical School or at his home near the Thượng Từ Gate in the Citadel. Day by day, Cơ grew closer to the longtime underground agent of Lê Minh, probably hoping to groom him for recruitment into the NLF, but not knowing that Quyến had been working for the leaders of the Communist Party in Huế since at least 1954.²⁹⁸

At some point during his time living in Huế in the early 1960s it had become apparent to Cơ and other NLF organizers in Huế that by strengthening the ties between Buddhists and Vietnamese revolutionary nationalists and communists, it would be possible to further drive a wedge between Diệm's government and the Buddhists population. In many ways, this was a natural collaboration given the amount of support the Hà Nội government already had among Buddhists in the south dating back to days of the Việt Minh insurgency against the French in the 1940s and 50s.

²⁹⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 114–15.

²⁹⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 115.

According to the historian of the Buddhist Movement Robert J. Topmiller, “Vietnamese monks had historically taken an active role in political affairs... and [during the French War] pagodas... served as supply depots and centers of resistance...”²⁹⁹ The Buddhist alignment with the Việt Minh led insurgency against the French colonial occupation did not however translate into support for the Communist Party. It seems likely that majority of Buddhist had deep reservations about supporting a takeover of the south by a group of dogmatic communist ideologues in Hà Nội. Thus, while nationalist support among the Buddhist population of the south for complete independence and the Vietnamese revolution remained high, fear of the consequences of an NLF victory was also an important consideration for many.

As Topmiller has pointed out many “Buddhists believed that hastening an American exit and creating a coalition government in South Vietnam remained the only ways to deny the NLF victory, because the GVN and US actions served as the most potent recruiting tool for the NLF. Thus, the Buddhist movement could be viewed as a last, desperate effort to prevent a complete Communist victory in Vietnam.”³⁰⁰ This view has been frequently (and conveniently) poorly understood by members of the US media and the American public who have generally interpreted any opposition to US intervention in Vietnam as support for the communists.

In order to exploit the growing political and religious divisions in Huế to the maximum extent, Lê Cong Cơ was continually searching for ways to tap into growing levels of anger and disaffection within the Buddhist community to enlarge his network of underground agents. In the past, Cơ had tried to visit the famous and influential dissident Buddhist monk Thích Trí Quang at Từ Đàm Pagoda on numerous occasions but had always been turned away. However, in 1962,

²⁹⁹ Robert J Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 11.

³⁰⁰ Topmiller, 6.

Cơ was finally able to arrange a meeting when he convinced a member of Lê Khắc Quyến's family (name unknown) to take him to Từ Đàm to introduce him to the fiery young monk whose religious and political influence within the Buddhist community in southern Vietnam was at the time in rapid ascendancy.³⁰¹

In his memoir, Cơ describes noticing in his first meeting with the famous monk that Trí Quang was tall and well-built with sharp eyes and a face that conveyed his intensity and a strong will. Once they had been formally introduced, Trí Quang asked Cơ a long series of questions about his background. To help allay any suspicions he might have regarding his motives, Cơ produced a letter of recommendation written by Dr. Quyến. Apparently, this was sufficient to satisfy him because Trí Quang then asked Cơ if he wanted to become a Buddhist. Undoubtedly seeing this invitation as an opportunity, Cơ agreed to become a Buddhist novice (perhaps a footnote about what a novice is here). Not long after that, Trí Quang introduced him to some of the monks at Từ Đàm. Cơ left Từ Đàm that day elated with his success, confident that the new relationships he had begun would be useful for helping him build and expand his networks in the Buddhist community.³⁰²

Cơ recalls that the monks at the pagoda were very welcoming. One of the first monks that he met and befriended that day, was a prominent activist in the Buddhist community called Thượng Tọa Thích Đức Tâm. According to Cơ, Thích Đức Tâm was a staunch nationalist who was known for being strongly opposed to military intervention by any foreign power in Vietnamese affairs. After the two had hit it off, Thích Đức Tâm decided to bring Cơ to the Pagoda on Cồn Hến Island where he was currently a publisher of Liên Hoa Newspaper and where the famous Buddhist leader Võ Đình Cường and former Việt Minh underground agents

³⁰¹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Ngày Người*, 115.

³⁰² Lê Công Cơ, 116.

was the chief editor.³⁰³ This magazine was circulated from many years under the leadership of Thích Đơn Hậu, a highly respected and influential monk who eventually joined the NLF and was convinced to leave Huế for the jungle through the persuasive efforts (either in 1967 or early 1968) of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. Every issue of the magazine has been scanned and posted online and is now available for viewing at:

<https://thuvienhoasen.org/a30422/tap-chi-lien-hoa-lien-hoa-van-tap->

Over the coming months and years, Cơ returned often to visit the monks working at the newspaper often, forging many new contacts within the Buddhist community in Huế. According to Cơ, it was based in large part on these relationships that when the Buddhist Movement exploded in 1963, the Buddhists and the NLF worked very closely together. Operation of Liên Hoa newspaper was suspended in 1966 by the RVN government.³⁰⁴

Political Training and Indoctrination:

After his meeting with the monks at Từ Đàm and Cồn Hến, Cơ returned to the military base at Giáng La. At this time, there was an extensive network of underground agents who provided support for communist and NLF agents traveling through Giáng La to Phong Thử District, to Đà Nẵng and to Huế. This route was functioning quite well at the time, but the local leadership wanted a second route to be prepared as a backup should the main route be discovered. To get it started, Lê Công Cơ was ordered to recruit new agents for service along this route.³⁰⁵ At the same time, he was also instructed to begin making arrangements for his student recruits to travel from cities and towns all over Trung Trung Bộ (the center of central Vietnam) to the military base for training. The Tết holiday season offered the best opportunity since the

³⁰³ Lê Công Cơ, 117.

³⁰⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 117.

³⁰⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 118.

students would take this time off of school and no one would think it odd for students to suddenly disappear for several weeks claiming they were going to visit relatives.

After doing some of the initial planning and preparation, Cơ delegated responsibility for organizing the new route to one of his agents. Cơ then selected three candidates from each of areas he was currently recruiting in for training at a military base in the jungle (Huế, Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi) instructing each of them in how to wear a disguise and to use false names for their journey. The true identity of each of his chosen recruits was only known to the other two members of their group who accompanied them and they were each given instructions that they should never share their real names or backgrounds with anyone on their journey. Each of them was also asked to bring gifts for the soldiers at the base. One of Cơ's underground agents in Đà Nẵng named Cẩm Nhung also requested that they bring embroidered handkerchiefs with inspiring slogans sewn on to them to distribute to the soldiers at the base. In all, on this occasion, Cơ arranged for 19 underground agents to travel from cities around Trung Trung Bộ to gather in his home village near Giang La during Tết in 1962.³⁰⁶

Once all 19 students arrived safely at his home village, Cơ brought them to his father's house and the group waited patiently for Mr. Thúy to arrive with a military escort. The 19 students were then separated into 6 groups. Each group was assigned 1 soldier to act as guide, who walked 100 meters ahead of the students to scout. First crossing the Bình Phước river in small bamboo sampans, then climbing steep jungle covered slopes for a time before crossing the An Nghia river, all the while moving deeper into Đại Hiệp district until they finally reached a valley in the jungle where they halted. The journey was an arduous one. The students followed their guides as they walked through the night until sunrise when they finally encountered a group

³⁰⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 120.

of soldiers in the jungle who were living in a collection of small, thatched huts. They would soon find out that this humble cluster of dwellings hastily built in a remote valley covered in jungle was the military base. Here they were allowed to sleep through the day, not rising until the evening when they were fed a meal and told to wait for the local commander to arrive to greet them.³⁰⁷

Not long after that, an official named Ba Phước was introduced to the group as their leader in the jungle. Ba Phước (aka Hồ Nghinh), as members of the group would later learn was Party Committee Secretary for Quảng Nam province, and an old Việt Minh veteran who had been one of the top leaders of the Communist Party in Central Vietnam for many years. That night the group sat around Phước in circle listening in rapt attention while he delivered an inspiring lecture on the Vietnamese revolution. The next day around noon after they had eaten lunch, the group began the long journey back to their homes.³⁰⁸

A year later, over the Tết holiday in 1963, Trịnh Túc and Phạm Truyền would make a similar journey with Cơ to visit the military base for training. In an article written about his experience as an activist working with Lê Công Cơ during the war Túc describes his experience traveling to the remote collection of thatched huts in the jungle for indoctrination and training. “Phạm Truyền and I were ordered to undertake a period of study of the methods of organizing revolution at a military base in Quảng Nam. This was arranged by Lê Phương Thảo.”³⁰⁹ Túc recalls that after traveling to Giáng La in Điện Bàn district, the students then dispersed to different houses in the village, with each student being assigned a different house to wait inside. None of the other 17 students faces besides his friend and companion Truyền were familiar to

³⁰⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 123–24.

³⁰⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 126–27.

³⁰⁹ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 27.

Túc. For a time, the students waited nervously for a military escort to lead them through the jungle. After the soldiers arrived, they led the young recruits into the jungle under cover of darkness walking through the night and all of the next day until they reached the military base.³¹⁰

Upon arriving at their destination, Túc recalls that they were greeted very casually, informally and affectionately by a man they would later come to know as Ba Phước. Phước told the students, “All of us are fellow revolutionaries. Revolutionaries from the jungle, meet the revolutionaries from the city.”³¹¹ That night, the group of youths recruited from cities and towns all over Trung Trung Bộ, sat down with the old Việt Minh revolutionary and listened as their leader. Ba Phước, aka Hồ Nghinh, lectured passionately on “the path of revolution in the south, the conspiracy of the enemy and about building and developing the urban movement, and he read poems about revolution to inspire us.”³¹² Túc’s group stayed at the base for a total of two weeks over the Tết holiday. During this time, they were given regular training sessions at the base teaching them basic lessons about revolutionary doctrine.

After the two weeks was over the students journeyed back to Giáng La before dividing into smaller groups and setting off to their respective cities and hometowns. Before they left the village, their leader, the underground agent they knew as Lê Phương Thảo (Lê Công Cơ) met with each student individually, giving them detailed instructions on how to return to the city without being observed and cautioned them against using the revolutionary vocabulary they had just learned while studying at the military base.³¹³

Over the next year and half, Túc would return to military bases in the Quảng Nam on several more occasions, each time making time long arduous journey through the jungle on foot

³¹⁰ Nhiều Tác Giả, 28–29.

³¹¹ Nhiều Tác Giả, 31.

³¹² Nhiều Tác Giả, 31.

³¹³ Nhiều Tác Giả, 33.

to arrive at a remote mountainous location. These difficult and exciting journeys made an enduring impression on the idealist young organizer, who, upon seeing the conditions his comrades in the jungle were living in, quickly came to realize how privileged his own life was living as a student at an elite academic institution in Huế. When asked about his most enduring memories of the war during an interview in 2013, Túc shared two stories that had stuck with him through the years:

I was guided by the Zone Party Committee to Quảng Nam for political training. When I walked up a slope in Điện Bàn county, the slope was very steep, and, at that time, we were college students from the city. We couldn't climb the slope. But then we saw some female guerilla fighters who carried on their backs containers of salted fish that weighed 50-70 kilos, but they walked quickly up the hill. When we saw that, and we thought "she's a woman and she can do that, we are young men but we have to sit here," we forgot our fatigue and walked up the hill.

Another story, in 1964, when we went to Đình Môn military base in Huế, our brothers in the jungle fed us with a lot of good food, while other soldiers fighting in the jungle didn't have enough to eat, and we felt that the revolution cared deeply about the student movement. They cared more about and favored the college and high school students in the city. So, if they had something good, something rare and precious, they gave it to us. From that, we recognized that revolutionaries respected the intellectuals and the people who shared their ideals and wanted to be part of the revolution.³¹⁴

Upon returning to Huế at the end of the Tết holiday in February 1963, Túc and Truyên began applying the ideas and methodologies they had been taught to organizing their fellow students. According to Túc, the youth group "implanted these ideas in the high school and college students. From this, the students recognized the injustices of the RVN and the American regimes."³¹⁵

The Buddhist Movement:

³¹⁴ Trĩnh, Interview #2 with Trĩnh Túc, not recorded.

³¹⁵ Trĩnh.

When not organizing training session for students in the jungle, Lê Công Cơ spent much of his time in 1962 and early in 1963 strengthening his relationships in Huế with members of the Buddhist community. At the same time, he continued his recruiting efforts at the university. During one his absences in the jungle, Nguyễn Thúc Lư had recruited two new agents. However, Cơ was warned by the underground agent and medical student, Phạm Thị Xuân Quế, that one of the two recruits was not to be trusted because he was a member of the Nationalist party.³¹⁶

Meanwhile, as disaffection continued to grow in Huế regarding the treatment of Buddhists by the Diệm government, demands by Buddhist leaders for religious equality with Catholics began to become progressively more confrontational. These tensions finally came to a head in May of 1963 when hundreds of monks and novices joined by a large contingent of academics and students from the university and local high schools came out into the streets to demonstrate against what they viewed as blatantly anti-Buddhist policies being instituted by the Diệm government. In this section I will share the perspectives of three individuals, Erich Wulff, Lê Công Cơ, and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân who were living in Huế during this time and witnessed in the events that would later become known as the Buddhist Movement. These accounts are not intended to create a comprehensive retelling of the events of the Buddhist movement in Huế, but rather offer three viewpoints of individuals who stood at the center of these political currents washing over the embattled community of Buddhists, academics and NLF supporters. Because each of three from different vantage points had an intimate understanding of people involved and their personal motivations, they were uniquely positioned as witness/participants to convey the complexity of the political situation in Huế and offer insight into root causes that led the people of Huế to participate in the Buddhist and Struggle Movements.

³¹⁶ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 120.

Ngày Phat Dan through the Eyes of Professor Erich Wulff:³¹⁷

On May 8, 1963, the day of the Buddha's birthday, among the crowd that gathered on Lê Lợi Street and witnessed the events that day was a German academic and psychiatrist named Erich Wulff. Wulff had moved to Huế from Freiburg after being invited in 1961 to lead the creation of a Department of Psychiatry at the Huế University. While working at the school, Wulff befriended a number of Buddhist intellectuals and students who later became important figures in the Struggle Movement such as, Trí Quang, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân. Wulff was an empathetic listener and one of a very small number of Westerners to have paid close attention to the grievances and charges of religious oppression being made by Buddhist leaders in Huế.

In 1963, after witnessing the massacre in Huế on May 8 that set off a firestorm of Buddhist protests around the south, Wulff became an outspoken critic of the Diệm government and was promptly thrown out of the country. Unable to directly impact the policies of the Diệm government in Vietnam, Wulff decided to share what he had seen and experienced with the American public. In addition to doing radio interviews, Wulff published an article (quoted below) in the New Republic in 1963 in which he described the situation of the Buddhists in Vietnam events of May 8th in Huế. This article was then read into the minutes of the US Senate by Senator Frank Church on September 11, 1963 with the following note attached:

(From the New Republic, Aug. 31, 1963] THE BUDDHIST REVOLT: DIEM'S NEW OPPONENTS DESERVE U.S. SUPPORT (By Erich Wulff) (Note.- Dr. Erich Wulff is head of the psychiatric division at the University of Freiburg hospital in Germany. On leave to establish a new psychiatric program at the University of Hue in Vietnam, he became an involuntary eyewitness of the May 8 massacre of Buddhist demonstrators there. He and two colleagues resigned from Hue University in protest against the government's torture of students and refusal to allow treatment of injured demonstrators.

³¹⁷ To read Professor Wulff's entire eyewitness account of the massacre see:
<https://daihocsuphamsaigon.org/index.php/bienkhao/155-tacgiakhac/765-ngodinhcan>

He was charged with instigating a student riot and distributing poison gas to students, and expelled from Vietnam.³¹⁸

Below is an excerpt from the article in which offers his explanation how and why tensions between the Buddhist community in Huế and the Catholic dominated Diệm government exploded into the massive demonstrations of civil disobedience against the government of the Republic which began on May 8th:

the emergence of the Buddhists as a political force was unexpected only by those who had not followed recent Vietnamese history. Certainly, it is hard to believe that Diem was taken altogether by surprise. The Buddhists actually had begun to adapt to modern political realities several years ago. Buddhist youth societies and student and trade organizations were formed and attracted a large following, particularly in Central Vietnam. Young monks streamed to the universities. The pagodas gave up being merely homes, schools and places of devotion for monks, and once again became spiritual centers for the whole people. Although there was no indication that this Buddhist revival was political in purpose, Diem from the first carried on a campaign of discrimination, intimidation and persecution against it. The legal basis for all this was "ordinance 10," a vestige of French colonialism. This law had been designed to help Christianize Vietnam by improving the competitive position of the missionaries. It put Vietnamese Buddhism on the same legal basis, and made it subject to the same organizational restrictions, as a private club. The Buddhists had to obtain a permit in advance (e.g., the purchase of land on which to build schools had to be authorized by the provincial administration). Everything depended on official good will. Once the Buddhist revival began, this good will evaporated. Ambitious functionaries did all they could to make things hard for the Buddhists, assuming this would put them in the good graces of the Roman Catholic President and his family. Some delayed acting on requests for permits until it was too late. Others refused permits entirely. Some went so far as to put traditional Buddhist holy places like Thieu-But, in Quang Ngai Province, at the disposal of Catholic priests as building sites. In remote provinces, such as Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, which foreigners seldom visit, the Buddhists were subjected not merely to legalized discrimination but to a thoroughgoing religious persecution. At Phu Yen, for instance, a Buddhist monk named Thich Tam Chon protested in his pagoda against religious discrimination. He was murdered. The Government blames the Vietcong, of course. The Buddhists have considerable evidence pointing to the Vietnamese secret police. In other rural areas Government officials tried to win Catholic converts by mixing intimidation and promises. The cook for one of my German colleagues gave me a detailed account of such proselytizing. He assured me, however, with great emotion, that he would rather die than worship the cross. Many Buddhist officers, officials, and university teachers in Hue, the capital of Central Vietnam, were given to understand they had better attend mass on

³¹⁸ Erich Wulff, "The Buddhist Revolt: Diem's New Opponents Deserve U.S. Support" (The New Republic, August 31, 1963), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1963-pt12/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1963-pt12-14-2.pdf>.

national holidays. Some Catholic officers even forbade their men to take part in Buddhist ceremonies.³¹⁹

Similar to many other eyewitness accounts of the events of May 8th, Wulff directly identifies Major Đặng Sỹ as the chief perpetrator of the massacre in the article, stating that “among this group of officers is Maj. Dang Sy, the man responsible for the Hue massacre of May 8. Dang Sy had to be transferred from two commands because his religious discrimination drove the soldiers to the brink of mutiny. Yet that is how he got promoted to deputy chief of the province.” Behind Đặng Sỹ’s brutal attempts to quash Buddhist political dissidence Wulff argues has been a consistent policy of the RVN government to privilege Catholics with favorable treatment with regard to a broad array of policy decisions and political favoritism.

During those same years of increasing harassment of the Buddhists, the Catholic Church kept acquiring more privileges, especially in Central Vietnam where the archbishop of Hue is Diem's older brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc. I have no reason to believe that Diem ordered these privileges. On the other hand, what officer would refuse to loan a president's brother (or his agent) military vehicles and soldiers for work on a Catholic building project? What commander would object when President Diem personally ordered a piece of military property handed over for construction of a Catholic seminary, school, or hospital? As a result of such favors Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc has managed to turn his archdiocese into a going business concern. His goal is to make it financially independent of foreign aid. The tuberculosis ward of the Hue hospital, for example, is directed but not financed by archdiocese. It requires advance payment from even the poorest peasant. These who cannot pay are not admitted, unless they have a powerful advocate. The fees go to the archdiocese. The archbishop also has a monopoly on the import of textbooks. This not only provides an opportunity for censorship but is profitable as well. Thuc's main source of income, however, is his share of the profits from the Government's program for lumbering virgin land. Of course, privileges of this kind are enjoyed only by the politically loyal. The neutral priest in a remote village may have no privileges at all. Nevertheless, such practices give rise to less well-founded rumors. The Buddhists, having no faith in Diem's controlled press, believe anything they hear by the grapevine. In addition, Diem and his family seem convinced that they have the unconditional support of the Catholics but not the Buddhists. As a result, Catholics advance faster in administrative and military careers. Buddhists first have to prove their loyalty. One result is a large number of opportunistic converts among officers and other officials.³²⁰

³¹⁹ Erich Wulff.

³²⁰ Erich Wulff.

On May 8, the day of the Buddha's birthday, Wulff was among the crowd gathered at the radio station to protest. After the events, Wulff went to Huế Central Hospital to view the bodies of the slain protesters. In the article he wrote for the *New Republic* later that year Wulff describes what finally ignited the Buddhist protests and the events leading up to and immediately following what he calls the "Birthday Massacre":

American diplomats appear to have been genuinely surprised when trouble erupted late in May 1963. It all seems to have begun when Thich Tri Quang, president of the Buddhist organization in Central Vietnam, decided not to send Archbishop Thuc a congratulatory telegram on the occasion of his 25th year in the priesthood. Soon after, on May 6, Saigon issued an order forbidding the Buddhists to fly their flags. May 8 is the Buddha's birthday and a most important holiday. Future historians will have to decide whether Diem ordered the ban simply in line with general policy on religion—on the assumption that the Buddhists would suffer the humiliation in silence—or whether the regime deliberately sought an open conflict expecting to crush the Buddhists as it had earlier crushed the other sects. Whatever the intention, the result was that the Buddhist masses, though inclined to pacifism and accustomed to misery, began spontaneous protest demonstrations. At first the Buddhist leaders simply acquiesced in these demonstrations; then they began to lead them. At the start, the demonstrators had the limited objective of a return to the status quo ante; they wanted Diem's new restrictions on the celebration of the Buddhist holiday rescinded. The Hue crowd on which Dang Sy's tanks opened fire May 8, for instance, was asking Saigon to allow the Buddhist leaders to give the traditional annual radio address. Up to now, it is still not clear who gave Dang Sy the order to open fire. Seven children and one woman died on the spot. Painted on the tanks, in big white letters, was the name of the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Khoi, murdered in 1945. And so the Buddhist Christmas became a day of mourning, and the Buddhist leaders decided not only to demand compensation for the victims but to raise the long-latent issue of religious discrimination and persecution. On May 12 the Buddhists requested that the Government lift the flag ban, revoke ordinance 10, permit the unimpeded dissemination of Buddhist teachings, free Buddhists under arrest, punish those responsible for the massacre and provide financial recompense to the families of the victims. Demonstrations spread to several other provinces, but their objective remained unpolitical, limited to the putting through of this program. After the Hue massacre the regime had one chance to pull itself out of the affair undamaged: to dissociate itself from Maj. Dang Sy and admit responsibility for the tragedy. Instead, it designated the Vietcong, as the criminal. In the ensuing weeks, hard and soft tendencies seem to have struggled with one another. Beginning in June the President's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his wife Madame Nhu, incited and supported an anti-Buddhist campaign, ranging in my observation from loyalty telegrams to the employment of poison gas against young girls and the torture of students who refused to brand their Buddhist leaders as Communists. Madame Nhu also launched a political drive to denounce Buddhism as a Communist-infiltrated international conspiracy. Pagodas were surrounded

with barbed wire, and women and children trying to bring water to the monks were clubbed to the ground. This was all quite open, without any effort at concealment. The regime swiftly did everything it could to sharpen the conflict until, immediately after the sacrificial death by burning of Thich Quang Duc, the danger of a popular uprising became so great that an inter-ministerial committee, formed on June 16 under American pressure, accepted some Buddhist demands.³²¹

Professor Wulff's description is that of an eyewitness to the oppression Buddhists were experiencing and, as a result, his empathy for them and his anger at the actions of the Diệm regime are palpable in his writing. Wulff's familiarity with and empathy for this group enabled him to see the Buddhist movement and the Diệm regime through their eyes, something few people outside of Việt Nam were able to do. Despite the Diệm government's refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the massacre, Major Đặng Sỹ and Diệm younger brother Ngô Đình Cẩn did eventually face trial for their crimes under a new government. Cẩn was executed May 9, 1964. Major Đặng Sỹ was arrested and imprisoned for a time but was eventually allowed to leave Vietnam for the US.

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân:

In 1963, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, was a 28-years-old college student studying Chinese Literature at Huế University. Xuân had come a long way, having gone from being impoverished and virtually illiterate at age 14 to becoming one of the most prominent and energetic rising young scholars in the Huế community of intellectuals. Xuân's initial resistance to the Diệm government was motivated by his devotion to the Buddhist community. During this period in the 1960s, in the years before he was persuaded to join the NLF and invited to the military base by his friend the well-known writer and intellectual Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Xuân as yet had no connections with NLF or the Communist Party. Xuân embodied a combination of religious piety,

³²¹ Erich Wulff.

intellect, energy and determination which made him well equipped to provide leadership at a critical time in Huế, enabling to play an important role in bringing together two large and influential communities, Buddhists and intellectuals, who, in 1964, would collaborate to form the Struggle Movement.³²²

In March 1963, Xuân joined a group of Buddhist students led by the lecturer in the literature department and local politician named Hoàng Văn Giàu. The group held meetings at Từ Đàm Pagoda for the purpose of creating a local community of Buddhists similar to Catholic groups that had already been established around Huế, to promote Buddhist teachings, social activities, culture and journalism.³²³

According to Xuân, the increasing level of oppression experienced by the Buddhist community in Huế was a direct result of pressure being applied by Diệm's older brother, Archbishop Ngô Đình Thục. In May 1963, Thục was seeking a promotion within the hierarchy of the Church. Around this time, in order to bolster his chances of success, according to Xuân, Thục made the claim to his superiors in the Vatican that 80% of the population of Huế was Catholic. On May 8th, the Buddha's birthday, Xuân says an overwhelming majority of Huế residents hang the Buddhist flag in front of their home or place of business. That year, when a delegation from the Vatican came to Huế to investigate Thục's claims, Thục was enraged and embarrassed by the number of people flying the Buddhist flag. Thục, therefore, asked his younger brother Ngô to order a complete ban on the hanging of the Buddhist flag from personal residences and businesses.³²⁴ Diệm obligingly issued presidential decree, Cộng điện 9195.³²⁵

³²² Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

³²³ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)* (Hà Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012), 18.

³²⁴ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 20.

³²⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

In his memoir, Xuân writes that on the day of the Buddha's birthday the Buddhists planned procession which would march from *Điêu Đệ* Pagoda to *Từ Đàm* chanting slogans demanding religious equality with Catholics, halting for a time along the route directly in front of the radio station. That day while many Buddhists in the procession were gathering in front of the radio station by the *Trương Tiền* bridge, Xuân was standing among the crowd who witnessed what happened next. As participants and onlookers lingered in the street in front of the bridge refusing calls to disperse by police, a group of soldiers led by Major *Đặng Sỹ* arrived suddenly at the intersection on *Lê Lợi* Street. Without hesitation, *Đặng Sỹ* continued to push forward, ordering his men to attack the demonstrators. Xuân recalls that just before the shooting began, an armored vehicle with the name *Ngô Đình Khôi* painted on its side appeared and descended upon the crowd.³²⁶ Panicked demonstrators began to flee in all directions. Xuân remembers stepping on the bodies of the slain as he fled the scene. Arriving at home, Xuân closed and locked all the doors and windows in his house.³²⁷

The next morning, military vehicles arrived on the scene to remove the dead bodies left on the street and to transport them to *Huế* Central Hospital. All physical evidence of the massacre was removed from the site.³²⁸ Angered by the governments unwillingness to take responsibility for the killings, Buddhist leaders led by *Trí Quang* began a hunger strike at *Từ Đàm* Pagoda. In response, police surrounded the Pagoda cutting off all water and power to the building. Not long after that Dr. *Lê Khắc Quyến* arrived at *Từ Đàm* to check the health of *Trí Quang*, who had collapsed after going 36 hours without food. Earlier that day, *Quyến* had examined the corpses that were sent to the morgue at *Huế* Central Hospital and determined that

³²⁶³²⁶ *Ngô Đình Khôi* was *Diệm*'s older brother who was murdered shortly after the August Revolution by the *Việt Minh*.

³²⁷ *Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)*, 24.

³²⁸ *Nguyễn Đắc Xuân*, 24.

some of the demonstrators had been killed by a grenade and others by being crushed under the wheels of an armored car. Quyến's conclusions directly contradicted government reports on the incident which claimed that the explosion had been caused by plastic explosives planted by communist agents.³²⁹

According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, the Diệm government's harsh treatment of the Buddhist demonstrators gathered at Từ Đàm Pagoda two days later further angered locals, precipitating a battle in the streets that lasted for over one month. Throughout this time, Xuân reports in his memoir, leaders of the Buddhist community in Huế continued their call for exclusively non-violent resistance. By this time, however, many in the movement were becoming weary of passing out fliers with little effect and dissatisfied with the limitations the monks had placed on their tactics. On June 11, 1963, a monk from Thiên Mụ Pagoda named Thích Quảng Đức publicly immolated himself in a public square in Sài Gòn in protest against the government's policies toward the Buddhist community.³³⁰

On August 17, 1963, Xuân, who was by this time becoming increasingly influential as a Buddhist and a student organizer, was preparing a speech to give at the radio station at Diệu Đế when he received the news that Cao Văn Luận had been fired from his position as Rector of Huế University. The priest had run afoul of the Diệm government for his refusal to take any action against the students at the university for their participation in the demonstrations.³³¹ At this time, Xuan recalls that over 500 hundred students marched to the government office at 5 Lê Lợi demanding that the Catholic priest be reinstated as Rector. According to Xuan, this could be considered the first act in a new phase of protest beginning in Huế that would come to be known

³²⁹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 32.

³³⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 35.

³³¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 40.

as the Struggle Movement in which large groups of students, intellectuals and patriots acted independently of the leadership of the Buddhist community.

On August 20, 1963, the police strengthened their blockade around the two most troublesome pagodas in Huế, Từ Đàm and Diệu Đế. Around this time, Xuân remembers the leading monk at of Diệu Đế, Thích Đôn Hậu went out to speak with the police, emphasizing to them the non-violent nature of the protests. Xuân was still at the pagoda when just past midnight early the next morning a group of several hundred handpicked soldiers from military units mobilized in a predominantly ethnic minority region of the country broke down the door and began arresting the demonstrators inside.³³² As they swept through the pagoda, the rampaging soldiers smashed the main altar at the center of the temple. Xuân could do nothing except sit beside Thích Đôn Hậu and cower helplessly as a group of soldiers began to beat them with their rifle butts. Terrified, Xuân crawled underneath a nearby table in an attempt to escape the blows raining down on him. Not yet satisfied that they had done their duty, the soldiers kicked the table over, toppling a Buddhist statue and dragged Xuân out into the open as they continued beating him. Appalled by their behavior, Thích Đôn Hậu begged the soldiers to stop, saying, “just kill me, don’t beat my followers.”³³³ The soldiers took all the radios, newspapers, banners and printing presses before smashing everything in sight and arresting hundreds of monks and Buddhist followers who had been worshipping at the Pagoda, driving them through the city, as shocked onlookers stood by horrified by the violence being directed at Buddhists living in their community. Từ Đàm was attacked the same night just before Diệu Đế but was fiercely defended leading to stiff resistance.³³⁴

³³² These soldiers were thought to be more reliable than local troops for this type of action because they were less likely to be sympathetic to the Buddhist community.

³³³ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)*, 51.

³³⁴ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 51.

The Buddhist Movement and Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association:

What had begun as a relatively small protest on Lê Lợi five days before the Buddha's birthday, with just a few hundred male and female monks and Buddhist followers surrounding the office the province governor, would within a week turn into a massive display of Buddhist civil disobedience. As the numbers of teachers, students and Buddhist followers joining the protest continuing to increase by the day, tensions between the government and the Buddhist population of the city reached new heights.³³⁵

After spending several days demonstrating in front of his office and having been refused a meeting with the governor of Huế Thừa Thiên, Buddhist protesters began marching through the streets holding up banners demanding religious equality. At this point, because local officials began to view these demonstrations as a challenge to the authority of the Diệm government and a potential threat to the stability and long-term viability of the regime, the order was given to retake control of the streets with tanks and armored vehicles and riot police were deployed around public buildings. A few days later RVN police and military occupied the streets surrounding Từ Đàm, Tiên Mụ and Điều Đế controlling all access in and out.³³⁶

According to Lê Công Cơ, on May 8, 1963, as the Buddhist population of Huế began preparations to celebrate the Buddha's birthday, the local radio station headquartered adjacent to the Trương Tiên bridge on Lê Lợi Street made an official announcement that Buddhism should only be practiced at the pagoda, not at home, not at work and not in public. Just a few days prior to this announcement the government had announced that it would begin enforcing a widely reviled and rarely invoked law promulgated in 1958 known as Decree #10. The law banned the display of Buddhist flags outside of a pagoda. Buddhist flags were therefore prohibited from

³³⁵ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 146.

³³⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 147.

being displayed in front of private homes, businesses and public buildings.³³⁷ The combination of these two blatantly discriminatory government policies was more than an already infuriated Buddhist community was willing to tolerate and provided the spark which swiftly ignited a powder keg of public outrage and dissent which swept across the city.

Later that day, the radio station next to the Trương Tiên Bridge was completely surrounded by a large densely packed crowd of angry demonstrators which included a diverse assemblage of groups of high school, college students, novices, monks and intellectuals. As the day went on, the gathering grew progressively larger, eventually filling the entire area with demonstrators. At one point during the protest several Buddhist leaders entered the radio station demanding that the radio station issue a new announcement that Buddhist worshippers were allowed to fly the Buddhist flag anywhere they saw fit and to celebrate the Buddha's birthday unrestricted by government authorities.

In his memoir, Lê Công Cơ recalls that the arrival of the military at the radio station, led by the now infamous Major Đặng Sỹ was very sudden. Panic quickly spread within the crowd as a tank began to drive over fleeing demonstrators. At this time, Cơ, Lư and Tàn retreated across the Trương Tiên Bridge to Trần Hưng Đạo street where they climbed to the second floor of the Information Department which had already been occupied by a crowd and was under now Buddhist control. Someone had already planted a Buddhist flag on the building which Cơ snatched up and began to wave in front of the crowd as they followed him back across the bridge toward the scene of the massacre next to the radio station. As time passed the crowd continued to swell while more and more people arrived on the scene.³³⁸

³³⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 146.

³³⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 147.

Cơ then began to lead a chant with some of the students he had gathered, as a group they began to shout together, “End the oppression of the Buddhists!” and “The murderers must pay penance.” According to Cơ, these chants quickly spread to the entire crowd, which was then attacked by a group of RVN policemen. In response, Cơ led a group of underground agents composed primarily of students from Quốc Học High School, including Phương Hà, Ái Phương, Lư, Đồng, Tần and Na, with each holding a Buddhist flag as they marched down Lê Lợi street taking the lead in pushing back the riot police. The battle between the students and RVN police on Lê Lợi street continued throughout the day and long into the night, only finally coming to a close at 2am in the morning when a jeep flying the Buddhist flag and carrying a man speaking with a megaphone asked for the demonstrators to return home and await further instructions from the leading Buddhist monks in the local community. At this time, the youth group dispersed, and the wounded were taken to Huế Central Hospital.³³⁹

Early the next morning, Cơ and Lư went to Cồn Hèn (a small island on the Hương River) to meet with Thích Đức Tâm. The monks at the pagoda told Cơ and Lư that the situation was extremely dangerous because a number of Buddhists had already been killed and that Trí Quang would be speaking to a crowd of Buddhists at Từ Dam Pagoda at 8am the following morning. Cơ recalls suggesting to Thích Đức Tâm that they should demand compensation and an apology from the government for those who had been killed. Đức Tâm responded that it would be difficult to convince the government to make an apology and that Buddhists were only interested in demanding equality. According to Cơ, the monk then took his hand and told him that if he had plans to help organize the movement, he should discuss them with the other Buddhists and put them into action.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Lê Công Cơ, 148.

³⁴⁰ Lê Công Cơ, 148–49.

On the same day, Lu and Cơ returned to Lu's family home around noon where they encountered a group of around 10 professors, distinguished academics and intellectuals who had all actively supported the Việt Minh during the French War meeting in Nguyễn Thúc Tuấn's living room to discuss what sort of actions they should take to show support for the Buddhist community. Professor Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, a highly respected intellectual in Huế trusted by the Buddhists community, immediately changed the subject as Cơ and Lu entered the room³⁴¹. Tiềm made a clumsy attempt to conceal what they were discussing by pretending he had been speaking about attending an upcoming anniversary party. Playing along, Cơ reacted innocently by asking "May I go with you to the party? Another prominent teacher and Việt Minh veteran who would later become a Communist Party city official in Huế named Trần Thân Mỹ laughed and interjected, "Not to that place. We are going to Từ Đàm."³⁴²

Another Việt Minh veteran to whom Cơ had already been introduced named Nguyễn Văn Nguyên asked him, "Where have you been? You look like you are in a hurry." Cơ replied "We have been discussing the situation with some close friends, we are going to Từ Đàm tomorrow morning to listen to Trí Quang speak" Hearing this and realizing that any further attempts at concealing their purpose from the two youths was useless, Nguyễn Thúc Tuấn laughed and said, "Everyone knows. There is no point in keeping it secret. Everyone should join us."³⁴³

Later that day, Lu held a meeting of the Youth Association attended by Nguyễn Thúc Tần, Dương Đình Na, Nguyễn Ích Ha, Ai Phương, Trịnh Túc and Phạm Truyền in which he asked them to prepare a plan to begin a strike at Quốc Học High School. Cơ then asked Nguyễn

³⁴¹ Tiềm was a teacher at Quốc Học and the younger brother of Tôn Thất Dương Kỳ the well-known professor who would become one of the top leaders appointed to the largely symbolic PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government) Supposedly Kỳ was exiled to the north by General Nguyễn Chanh Thị who held a ceremony in which Ky and three others were walked across a bridge at the 17th parallel.

³⁴² Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 150.

³⁴³ Lê Công Cơ, 150.

Minh Triết (a friend of Phạm Thị Xuân Quế), a medical student at the hospital whom he had recruited as an underground agent, to attend the gathering the next day at Tù Đàm in order to make a speech on behalf of the all the students in Huế. That night Cơ wrote a speech for Triết to deliver the next day. While riding his bike to hand over a copy of the speech to Triết early the next morning. Cơ recalls that as he rode across the small city to meet him, the streets were crowded with demonstrators along the way. Arriving at their appointed meeting place, Cơ could tell immediately upon seeing him that the young medical student was extremely agitated. As he spoke to Cơ about the speech Cơ had written for him, Triết's voice trembled. Before they parted ways, Triết told confided to Cơ that he was terrified that after making the speech he would be thrown in jail. "If they arrest me," he said solemnly "bring meals to me at the prison."³⁴⁴

According to Cơ, by this time most Buddhists in Huế were weary of constantly being afraid of imprisonment, torture or having their family torn apart by the government. As a result, anger which had been building for some time finally exploded on May 8 into full scale civil unrest.³⁴⁵

According to Cơ, that day in front of a large crowd of angry Buddhists gathered at Tù Đàm Pagoda, Trí Quang spoke about the Diệm government's attempts to destroy the Buddhist religion, and the recent massacre of Buddhist demonstrators. Buddhists must follow their hearts Trí Quang told his followers. They must listen to the monks and they should refuse to follow those who would harm the monks. After Trí Quang had finished speaking Nguyễn Minh Triết stood up to speak on behalf of the college and high school students and read the speech that Lê Công Cơ had prepared for him. As he spoke tears rolled down his cheeks. Thousands of people

³⁴⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 153.

³⁴⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 153.

from the audience chanted along with him “Kiên quyết, không khuất phục, không khuất phục!”³⁴⁶

Not long after this a crowd of Buddhists coming from Từ Đàm Pagoda marched down Điện Biên Phủ to Lê Lợi street to stand in front of the local parliament building. As the shaken young medical student Nguyễn Minh Triết tried to slip quietly away among the crowd, he was followed by three men from the audience hurling threats at him, asking him if wanted to go to prison and accusing him of being a communist. Triết headed promptly for a nearby bus station where he bought a ticket to Đà Nẵng, fleeing Huế convinced that if he did not, he would soon be arrested.³⁴⁷ Meanwhile at Huế University, Dean of the Medical School, Lê Khắc Quyến, had enlisted a group of 56 faculty members from the university who resigned in mass from their positions at the school in protest against Diệm’s discriminatory policies. Shortly thereafter, a group of professors at Huế University lead by Quyến marched to a nearby building (called the Dai Bieu Chinh Phu) where local elected officials regularly held legislative session in order to read a statement they had prepared.³⁴⁸

In his memoirs, Cơ recalls hearing the shocking reports of the self-immolation the highly respected monk Thích Quảng Đức in Sài Gòn on June 11th. The news heightened sympathy for the Buddhists even further, increasing tensions in Huế to a new level. The night of August 20, 1963 was bloody and infamous night in the memory many of the people of Huế. At this time, thousands of demonstrators were arrested, hundreds of people were injured, but according to Cơ, the people of Huế fought back fiercely. After that night, the pagodas around Huế became important centers of resistance against the Diệm government. All over the city, university and

³⁴⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 154.

³⁴⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 154.

³⁴⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 159.

high school students stood guard holding pointed sticks ready to protect their local neighborhood pagodas.³⁴⁹

Through the coming weeks and months, as the Buddhists in Huế escalated their protests, Co's Youth Association continued to organize and agitate among the high school and college students in Huế, frequently providing leadership for opposition to the RVN government and the American presence in Vietnam. According to Trịnh Túc, students in the youth group took their responsibilities very seriously:

When we were involved in revolutionary activities, we were very secretive and rarely went out, but at that time we were very young, and we loved to hang out together. We went to eat Che (corn sweet soup) at Cồn Hến island on the Huong river. We went to the train station and went to Thiên Mụ pagoda and Vọng Cảnh 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 Communist 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.³⁵⁰

As time went, and US troop levels in the area rose, the group gradually changed their focus from the Buddhist protests against Diệm's Republic to a broader opposition towards American presence in Vietnam and US intervention in Vietnamese politics. Shortly after the signing of the Vũng Tàu charter 1964:

The anti-American campaign began and all of the student movements in Huế, 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 test; they refused to go to school; and they didn't study. At that time, some high school and college students had been arrested. So, the strikers demanded Diệm and the Americans release these people because they were fighting for their ideals and they were fighting for their country. They didn't do anything wrong. At Quốc Học, 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." ... They tried every way they could to wash it off, but the students kept rewriting it on the wall. Finally, they tore the wall

³⁴⁹ Lê Công Cơ, 173.

³⁵⁰ Trịnh, Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded.

down. That wall is next to the playhouse and a bell house at Quốc Học High School. 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 Huế province to visit the school and give a speech for the students. They 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 arrest and kill all of the student activists, but among my group no one was caught.³⁵¹

While the students of Lê Công Cơ’s Youth Association at Quốc Học continued their campaign for the hearts and minds of the students, they also periodically combined forces with Buddhists, intellectuals and nationalist groups to protest the war and American intervention in Vietnam.

Around this time, the medical student Pham Thi Xuân Quế brought Cơ a letter from his superiors in the jungle instructing him to order his underground agents in Thừa Thiên Huế and Đà Nẵng to begin organizing strikes. Shortly thereafter, Lê Công Cơ took a trip to Đà Nẵng in order to meet with a group of underground agents he had recruited there. Upon arriving in Đà Nẵng, Cơ met with two of his agents based there, Sơn Hải and Cẩm Nhung, and ordered them to infiltrate Buddhist groups in the city.³⁵² It wasn’t long before students at high school and secondary schools in Huế, Đà Nẵng and Quảng Ngãi began a strike.³⁵³

Increasing Politicization of the Movement:

The outbreak of Buddhist political opposition to the Diệm governments religious policies was at first a gradual and disorganized outgrowth of widespread disaffection among Vietnamese Buddhists living in the south. As the historian of the Buddhist movement Robert Topmiller has

³⁵¹ Trịnh.

³⁵² Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 156.

³⁵³ Lê Công Cơ, 159.

pointed observed, this was due to specific policies directed at their religious faith, “Especially infuriating to Buddhists, Diệm had retained the French imposed Decree #10, which labeled Buddhism an association rather than a religion. While the French had used this law to limit the authority of Buddhists and increase the power of their Catholic supporters, Diệm’s refusal to throw out the onerous law served as a constant reminder of their inferior status in South Vietnam despite their claim to represent over 80 percent of the populace.”³⁵⁴

In the early 1960s, the Buddhist population in Vietnam was split into a myriad of different religious and political factions with the Buddhist Movement in its entirety claiming about 1 million adherents. Following the unrest of May 1963 in Huế, a majority of the more militant Buddhists, many of whom lived in Huế and Central Vietnam, chose to follow Thích Trí Quang as their primary religious leader. Further to the south, a less politicized and generally more pro-government faction of Buddhists, based primarily in Sài Gòn, chose instead to follow the Buddhist monk Thích Tâm Châu.³⁵⁵

While Thích Tâm Châu was nominally Trí Quang’s superior in the hierarchy of the Buddhist organizational leadership, Trí Quang was the director of a Buddhist organization known as the Viện Hóa Đạo, the primary political arm of the UBC(United Buddhist Church). Unlike the UBC as a whole which, generally speaking, took a position more in line with the policies of the government of the Republic, in the mid- 1960s, the Viện Hóa Đạo was calling for a negotiated settlement between the NLF and the RVN which if successful might lead to the creation of a coalition government.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 2.

³⁵⁵ Topmiller, xi.

³⁵⁶ Topmiller, 6.

Trí Quang's political stance on the war as leader of the Viện Hóa Đạo was not always entirely clear leading to confusion and misunderstanding on the part of reporters in the US who wrote about him at the time.³⁵⁷ His influence on the politics of the Republic before 1968, however, was enormous. Mislabeled by many US officials, journalists, historians and members of the media as a communist underground agent, Trí Quang was, in fact, staunchly anti-communist and never cooperated with the NLF, in some cases quietly advocating for US military action against the DRVN in order to suppress communist forces and decrease their hold in the south. In fact, Trí Quang's fervently anti-communist views were well known to American officials who worked closely with him in Huế between 1964 and 1966 to try and negotiate an end to the Struggle Movement.³⁵⁸

Had the stubbornly intractable monk been a longtime agent of Hà Nội as some have claimed, he undoubtedly would have been recognized for his contribution after the war ended and his treatment by the Communist Party would have been much different. Instead, after the war he remained isolated, spending most of the remainder of his life under house arrest in quiet

³⁵⁷ When asked about Trí Quang was a communist agent in the 1960s, retired communist city official in Huế Nguyễn Xuân Hoa replied "Certainly not. That was a story of Liên Thành, he speaks nonsense. It should be said that Mr. Quang was too clear about [his feelings] regarding communism because he had experience from 1945 to 1965. The people in the Sài Gòn government consider their failure to be caused by many different people among them a group of Buddhists whom they concluded were the lackeys of the communists. They were not. They had their own leanings and their own opinions. Although their sympathies had similarities to the liberation front[NLF]. (NXH interview 2)

³⁵⁸ McAllister, "“Only Religions Count in Vietnam”: Thích Tri Quang and the Vietnam War.”

obscurity translating Buddhist scriptures under the watchful and suspicious eye of Vietnamese public security.³⁵⁹³⁶⁰

In 1963, at the age of 40, Trí Quang was a charismatic and uncompromising militant whose fiery speeches deeply inspired his audiences. Such was his influence in Huế during much of the 1960s that, should he desire it, an impassioned speech from Trí Quang could rouse thousands of angry followers and monks out of their homes and into the streets in order to take

³⁵⁹ According to James McAllister, the author of an article on how Trí Quang has been misrepresented by the US officials, journalists and historians "... Trí Quang was later tortured by the communist regime and spent his life under house arrest." A 1979 report printed in the New York Times said that Trí Quang was being held at that time at Chi Hoa prison in Sài Gòn and had been "turned into a skeleton like cripple during a year and a half of solitary confinement" P754 McAllister Only Religion Counts. I spent several years living in close proximity to Trí Quang on Điện Biên Phủ St near the end of his life. During that period, I would periodically ask someone (usually a Buddhist veteran of the NLF in Huế) if I should go see him, I have always been told I should stay away. Former city officials in Hue such as Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, who participated in the urban movement of the NLF, told me during interviews that Trí Quang was never a communist. I suspected at the time that the elderly monk was still being watched.

³⁶⁰ McAllister's article on Trí Quang is useful for its thorough debunking of claims that Trí Quang was a communist agent, however, McAllister's argument is much weaker with regard to his claims about Trí Quang's attitude toward American military intervention. McAllister seems to have relied entirely on American records of US official's interactions with the Trí Quang for understanding the enigmatic monk's political views and goals. While these records are undoubtedly useful, McAllister does not cite any Vietnamese sources or make any attempt to account for the fact that while meeting with American officials, Trí Quang was, in all likelihood, tailoring his speech in a way he believed would give him the best chance of achieving the desired effect on his audience. McAllister appears to take everything Trí Quang said while negotiating with US officials at face value. Assuming that the monk was entirely sincere when he told US official's he was negotiating with that he was not opposed to the American presence in Vietnam. McAllister's assumption, explicit in the title of his article but never actually stated within in it is that religious considerations alone guided the aims and negotiating positions of Trí Quang and the other leaders of the Struggle Movement. It would be foolish to assume that the Struggle Movement, as McAllister's title implies can be reduced to a religious squabble. In fact, for many of Huế most prominent intellectuals the Struggle Movement was most certainly a political movement. Many of the individuals who were the most vocal and influential leaders in the Struggle Movement wrote and spoke passionately against authoritarianism and for peace. Certainly, if you look at the political views of some of his more prominent followers, such as the law student and publisher of *Lập Trường*, Cao Huy Thuần, it would seem the movement of which Trí Quang was perhaps the most revered member had many well-known adherents who were outspokenly opposed to both dictatorship, (Catholic or Buddhist led), and to US military intervention. I think if McAllister had spent some time talking to people who joined and led the movement or reading their writings rather than exclusively relying on US sources, he would very likely take a much more nuanced view.

A number of journalists, US officials and historians on the RVN and US side have assumed correctly that the Buddhists movement was infiltrated by communist agents, while this is certainly true in the case of professional underground agents like Lê Công Cơ, the communist's greatest successes in gaining influence within the Buddhist movement came from winning the support of prominent Buddhists who decided to join the NLF. The most well-known example of this in Huế being Thích Đôn Hậu who was won over through the efforts of prominent followers like Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. A number of Buddhists, for example the underground agent, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, had been communist agents since the 1940s, while others, like Đôn Hậu, were persuaded to join the NLF much later. Since these individuals had, generally speaking, been devout Buddhists their entire lives, it hardly seems fair to label them as infiltrators in a community to which they had belonged since birth.

direct action. In the 1963 article that Professor Wulff wrote for the *New Republic*, he describes the exhilarating effect the influential monk had when speaking to his followers:

Among the monks who guide the movement, one in particular stands out a born leader. He is Thich Tri Quang, president of the Buddhist organization in Central Vietnam and the man whose refusal to congratulate Archbishop Thuc is thought to have caused the ban on the display of Buddhist flags. In private conversation with Thich Tri Quang I was struck by his precise grasp of the situation, the modesty of his appearance, and the mixture of tolerance and determination which he embodies. Addressing a crowd, he produces an electrifying effect. His audience clearly is ready to obey his every command. He has that direct access to the heart of the people which Diem so completely lacks. In Central Vietnam he is venerated almost as a saint by students and peasants alike. Were he not a monk he would be a logical successor to Diem. As it is, he could be a kingmaker-and that is why his life is reckoned in constant danger.³⁶¹

From Buddhist Movement to Struggle Movement:

In the early 1960s, the great diversity of Buddhist sects throughout the central region of Việt Nam and the traditional autonomy of each pagoda within the larger Buddhist community compounded the difficulty of building enduring and effective political organizations.³⁶² As a result, despite having successfully pressured the RVN military into toppling the Ngô Đình Diệm regime in November of 1963, the leadership of the Buddhist movement, nevertheless, still lacked any centralized authority or organization around which Buddhists could coalesce. As a consequence, prominent intellectuals and student organizations provided much of the organizational leadership for the movement, incorporating their own beliefs and ideology into the platform of reforms being demanded of the Sài Gòn government.

According to Mary Beth Clark, an American teaching at Đồng Khánh High School in Huế around this time, the “students were naturally interested in politics, they were interested in their own futures and the future of the country, and most of the students I know were very much

³⁶¹ Erich Wulff, “The Buddhist Revolt: Diem’s New Opponents Deserve U.S. Support.”

³⁶² Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 6.

concerned about Vietnam as a nation and what was to become of Vietnam.”³⁶³ Empowered by their victory over the Diệm regime, which they saw as battle to preserve their traditional way of life and religious freedom, a number of the local student leaders who had joined the demonstrations of 1963 in Huế came to see it as their duty to transform their struggle from a spontaneous uprising into a political movement. A movement which could offer an alternative to the violence and the steady stream of propaganda being put out by the governments in Hà Nội in Sài Gòn and instead reflect their most deeply held convictions by placing Buddhist traditional values of compassion, nonviolence and love above Cold War political ideologues.³⁶⁴

Early in 1964, as it was becoming increasingly clear to US officials that the leaders of the Buddhist and Struggle Movements in Huế could not be coopted or controlled, coverage in the American media of Trí Quang and other prominent supporters of the Struggle Movement began to experience a radical change in tone. While a number of US newspapers and magazines had initially expressed at least some sympathy for the Buddhists movement, this changed rapidly as the situation progressed, and US officials began to take the view that US interests in Vietnam might be undermined by this new powerful political force that was taking shape. By 1964, in their coverage of the protests in Huế, American journalists began ascribing sinister motives to the leadership. In particular the those of the increasingly popular and influential monk Trí Quang, whom they now begin referring to in unflattering terms like power hungry, provocateur, schemer and possible agent of the Communist Party in Hà Nội.³⁶⁵³⁶⁶

³⁶³ Nguyễn Thị Diệu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67),” 247.

³⁶⁴ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 5.

³⁶⁵ Topmiller, 8.

³⁶⁶ “VIETNAM’S FAITHS UNDERLIE RISING; Buddhist□Catholic Disputes Sharpened Under Diem,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1964.

Dissatisfaction with the new constitution put forth by the government of General Nguyễn Khánh in August of 1964, and the promulgation of the Vũng Tàu charter led to further anger and disappointment for many who had supported the demonstrations in Huế. Khánh's seizure of power from Dương Văn Minh and suspension of civil liberties strengthened the perception that the country was moving towards perpetual military dictatorship. According to Topmiller, "Buddhists in particular understood this would wreck any chance to end the war. Suddenly, the burst of democratic activity that had been the fruit of a hard-fought victory against Diệm seemed endangered."³⁶⁷

In 1964, the student activist Lê Văn Thuyên was young man who had just begun his studies at Quốc Học High School when the Struggle Movement was beginning to take shape. Thuyên was a staunchly anti-foreign intervention nationalist and a devote Buddhist, who had participated in the Buddhist movement, but did not at this time have any direct connections to the NLF. After graduating Quốc Học in 1966, Thuyên attended Huế University where he would eventually become President of the school's Student Association (Tổng Hội Sinh Viên). During his time as a leader in the student government he worked closely with a number of Lê Công Cơ's underground agents who had been voted into leadership positions by the students. In an interview in 2017, Thuyên recalled what inspired the students to continue resisting the Sài Gòn regime after the collapse of the Diệm government in 1963:

After the Ngô Đình Diệm government was overthrown... most of the ruling government regimes in the south, starting from 1964 onwards, were controlled by southern generals. The Huế student movement at that time was against military dictatorship in South Vietnam. Because in any country, when the military is in power there will be militaristic tendencies. Militarism and dictatorship are twins, so this led to turmoil in southern society, escalating the cost and political chaos, making life precarious.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 18.

³⁶⁸ Lê Văn Thuyên, Interview with Lê Văn Thuyên, November 3, 2017.

According to the former NLF cadre, Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, who was a student activist during this time, the period between 1964 and 1966:

It turned out that the development of the press at that time was undertaken directly by the participants in the political movement, not professional journalists, but to that is not say they were not sharp writers, because they were mostly university professors and high school students [at Quốc Học], who were knowledgeable about literature and politics. The most famous of the journalists at that time was Cao Uy Thuận, and today Thuận is still a sharp writer, who teaches at a university in France. The number of students who grew up in the movement such as Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Trần Quang Long, Ngô Kha, they were about 8 years older than me. At that time, they were sharp writers in student newspapers and magazines about social issues in Huế.³⁶⁹

After the war ended, Nguyễn Xuân Hoa became a Communist Party member and government official in Huế. During his retirement, Hoa wrote an excellent history of newspaper and journal publishing in Huế. According to Hoa, the most respected and impactful publication in Huế during the mid-1960s was the journal *Lập Trường* which was both anti-communist and anti-American military intervention:

As I wrote in my book on the history of journalism in Huế, in the 1960s, the press [in Huế] was not as exciting as in Sài Gòn, but Huế was the number two publishing center after Sài Gòn, with regular daily newspapers.... [*Lập Trường* was] a newspaper from Huế which had an academic quality, and the information it contained was well researched, but it also included strong social popularization. In the period of 1964-1966, dozens of newspapers were born, but the most important newspaper published in the whole central region was the *Lập Trường* journal by Tôn Thất Hanh and Cao Huy Thuận at the university.³⁷⁰

Most American journalists and other US observers failed to comprehend the underlying logic behind the growing anti US intervention sentiment being expressed by a growing number of pro-Buddhist publications in Central Vietnam during this period. These newspapers and magazines expressed a point of view felt very strongly by many Buddhists and intellectuals in Central Vietnam, who saw the largescale use of violence by the US against Vietnamese villages

³⁶⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Recorded, October 23, 2017.

³⁷⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

as source of political strength for the Communists and possibly as a greater threat to the existence of the Republic than either the NLF or PAVN military. Members of this influential group did not see a contradiction in being simultaneously both fervently anti-communist and anti-American intervention.³⁷¹ Perhaps the best-known advocate of this position was a young law student and lecturer at Huế University was Cao Huy Thuần, the founder of the journal *Lập Trường*.

Thuần was a devoted follower of the monk Trí Quang who believed it was not sufficient to be anti-communist and simply throw support behind any regime or policy imposed by the regime in Sài Gòn. For Thuần opposing any dictatorship regardless of its ideological underpinnings was a matter of both duty and principal. Around the time of Trí Quang's death in November of 2019, Thuần posted online a passionate tribute to his former teacher and spiritual mentor in which he describes the founding of this influential but short-lived publication:

In early 1964, a group of teachers from Huế University met at the Pedagogical University to arrange the work of creating a newspaper to preserve the momentum of the "revolution" in 1963. And to oppose the tendency to form another Diệm regime, only without Diệm, which the Americans supported. In its original intention, the journal was to be a voice for the teachers and students in Huế involved in overthrowing Diệm. In light of the victory of our successful uprising, our ambition was to turn the university into an anti-dictatorship stronghold. Youth often have blasphemous dreams. At the meeting, we agreed that the three of us, Mr. Tôn Thất Hanh, Mr. Lê Tuyên and I, would manage and control the journal. The name of the journal, *Lập Trường*, was created by us.³⁷²

The sudden rise in popularity in Central Vietnam of the controversial journal attracted the ire the New York Times, which plaintively reported in June of 1964 that the publication had “done little up to now except criticize. Its articles speak of the need for national solidarity to

³⁷¹ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 6.

³⁷² See Cao Huy Thuần Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/CAOHUYTHUAN/posts/2440414012848782/>

defeat communism, yet they challenge present United States policy and denounce Washington's unlimited support for Premier Nguyễn Khánh.”³⁷³

The editors and publishers of the journal quickly seized the opportunity to reply to the criticism printed in the United States most respected paper of record in their next edition of the journal, writing “The New York Times sent a reporter to Huế who only met with Rector Cao Văn Luận of the university, they did not have any contact with Buddhists or our group at Lập Trường, yet they strongly criticize Buddhist and Lập Trường forces as being influenced by communists... Labeling Buddhists communists means considering 80% of the Vietnamese population communist. Against whom does the US fight?”³⁷⁴

Buddhist academics like Thuần saw themselves as organizer of their own brand of revolution, one that would not only reject communism and promote religious equality between Catholics and Buddhists, but also demand a comprehensive transformation of Vietnamese society. A transformation which they believed must include broadly defined political freedoms and democratic processes. By bringing together students, academics and Buddhists into a single unified political force, Thuần and his fellow editors and Lập Trường hoped to open dialogue about the possibility of an alternative path to the ones being offered by the regimes in Sài Gòn and Hà Nội:

The masses without organization, are they not like bricks without cement? Obviously, we are looking for cement. That means going to Từ Đàm Pagoda! Where else? Is Từ Đàm not the place that began and created the movement? Shaped and fired it for the struggle? I have said this very clearly to explain why a journal originating from a university became a journal that was seen as the semi-official voice of Từ Đàm, meaning belonging to Buddhism.³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Peter Grose, “Peril Seen in Vietnam Buddhist Drive,” June 9, 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/06/09/archives/peril-seen-in-vietnam-buddhist-drive.html>.

³⁷⁴ Nguyễn Thị Diệu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City (1957-67),” 241.

³⁷⁵ Cao Huy Thuần, “Đại Lão Hòa Thượng Thích Trí Quang: ‘Một Trang Lịch Sử,’” n.d., <https://quangduc.com/a66773/dai-lao-hoa-thuong-thich-tri-quang-mot-trang-lich-su>.

The publication of the influential journal was short lived however, the magazine was shut down ceasing operations in the summer of 1964 because it lost two of its primary contributors when Tôn Thất Hanh was asked to join the government in Sài Gòn as a member of the National High Council (Thượng Hội đồng Quốc gia) and Cao Huy Thuận was offered a scholarship to study France.

In 1964, a number of other journals and newspapers were created around the same time in Huế by different groups supporting the Struggle Movement which played important roles in organizing and inspiring dissent against the discriminatory and authoritarian policies of the Sài Gòn regime. Among these were, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's newspaper Nhận thức (Awareness) published three issues and was shuttered by the government, Máu hồng (Red Blood) published by students at the medical school, Lực lượng (Force) published by a group of students known as the Student Struggle Force and Tranh đấu (Struggle) which was published by The People Council for Salvation led by Dr. Lê Khắc Quyến and Dân (The People) published by a group known as the Professor's Struggle Force and later on the publication of Vietnam! Vietnam! under the leadership of Lê Công Cơ and written by Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.³⁷⁶³⁷⁷

During the three plus years of political upheaval that gripped the city of Huế between 1964 and 1966, the character of the Struggle Movement evolved to become increasingly political in nature. Many students, teachers and intellectuals in Huế began to frame their struggle in overtly political terms. According to the journal Lập Trường, it was only "after nine years of

³⁷⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*, 216.

³⁷⁷ Nguyễn Thị Dị Hương, "Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City (1957-67)," 244.

more severe suffering under Ngô Đình Cần's dictatorship, [the people of Huế] reacted... strongly to the old regime and wholeheartedly dared to live and die for the revolution."³⁷⁸

Supporters of the Struggle Movement consisted primarily of students and teachers, but also included shopkeepers, tailors, xích lô drivers and laborers of all types, most of whom had already participated in the Buddhist movement. In later years, as the Struggle Movement became progressively larger and more influential in Central Vietnam it also came to include a large number of officers and enlisted men from the army as well as local police.³⁷⁹

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan:

In 1964, as the Struggle Movement was just beginning to form itself into a powerful political force in Huế, a young medical student at the university named Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan was recruited as underground agent in Lê Công Cơ's organization by a well-known poet named Phan Duy Nhân.³⁸⁰ According to an account written by Phan, at that time, he knew very little about the politics of revolution but was a devote Buddhist and a staunch nationalist. Phan recalls being approached one day by Nhân who said to him, "through the process of observing you, I can see that you are sympathetic to the revolution. I have received orders from comrade Ngọc (Lê Công Cơ), Committee Secretary of the Association of Youth, High School, College Students for the Liberation of the center of Central Vietnam that you are to be invited to go to the liberated area for a tour. Would you dare to do that?"³⁸¹ Phan quickly agreed to go, saying he was excited at the opportunity because he had been looking for a way to participate in revolutionary activities for some time.

³⁷⁸ Nguyễn Thi Dịu Hương, 246.

³⁷⁹ Nguyễn Thi Dịu Hương, 245.

³⁸⁰ Hạ Nguyễn, "Những 'Lá Thư' Thơ Của Phan Duy Nhân," *Thừa Thiên Huế*, January 14, 2016, <http://baothuathienhue.vn/nhung-la-thu-tho-cua-phan-duy-nhan-a19837.html>.

³⁸¹ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 132.

When the day came to begin their journey to the military base, Phan writes Phan Duy Nhân brought him to the bus station in front of Đông Ba market and purchased a ticket for him to Đà Nẵng. After arriving in Đà Nẵng, Phan was picked by a car and driven to the outskirts of Điện Bàn...”³⁸² So as not to be observed, shortly before arriving in Điện Bàn, Phan and his companions stepped out of the vehicle and began to walk. Along the road they met a group of women going to the market. They exchanged knowing glances without saying a word to each other. The women continued on and they followed a short distance behind. At noon they stopped at a small restaurant at the side of the road and ate mì quảng. Continuing on their journey as they neared the military base Phan met with several communist officials from Quang Đà, including Đà Nẵng City Party Committee Member Hà Ky Ngô and a few others, but the person Phan would eventually come to work with him in Huế was known to him only as Ngọc (aka Lê Phương Thảo, aka Lê Công Cơ). Phan remembers his first impression of the young organizer describing his appearance as wiry, fair skinned, studious looking, not at all like he had been living in the jungle, the young man had “bright eyes and spoke with a Quảng Nam accent.” Ngọc (Lê Công Cơ) quickly went to work indoctrinating his valuable new recruit, telling him “this [trip] is not only a tour of the liberated area, but also for the purpose of study.”³⁸³

In his account of his time at the military base Phan says the first lessons he was taught were regarding the international situation and the situation on the battlefield in Vietnam. The conclusion of the lesson was always that the enemy would be defeated and the revolution would be victorious. At that time, Phan writes that he didn’t believe what he was taught because he thought that the United States was richer, stronger and a more cruel adversary. However, he didn’t debate with Ngọc, instead just accepting his conclusions as a demonstration of

³⁸² Nhiều Tác Giả, *Một Thời Sống Đẹp* (Đà Nẵng: Hội Nhà Văn, 2017), 133.

³⁸³ Nhiều Tác Giả, 134.

revolutionary spirit. “In our discussions about the urban movement Ngọc surprised me because he showed that he understood very profoundly and deeply the personalities of the people and events related to the Struggle Movement in the cities of Huế, Đà Nẵng and Sài Gòn. He was connected with a large number of people and involved in revolutionary business much more than I.”³⁸⁴

As part of his training Ngọc (Cờ) taught Phan the same 5 steps for recruitment of new agents he had taught to the youth group led by Nguyễn Thúc Lu in Thanh Lương village several years earlier. Ngọc told Phan he might need to improvise, “in this situation, with the urban movement exploding like it is currently, there are times when you must be flexible, and skip between steps. You only need to detect signs in their speech and their business.”³⁸⁵ Phan recalls that Ngọc was very sensitive to people’s feelings about revolution and good at detecting their sympathies. “He listened to me talk about my older brother, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, one time when I made a joke. We really wanted to fight America and save the country, but we didn’t see any communists come to network with us. Only saw the Quốc Dân đảng, Đại Việt which tried to recruit us. Ngọc was glad to hear me say that and he asked me to arrange a meeting with Tường, the earlier the better.”³⁸⁶

According to Phan, the result was quite beneficial. Tường was very pleased about the idea of creating the journal “*Việt Nam Việt Nam*” intending to make it the most radical anti-American manifesto yet published during the Struggle Movement and publicly available in Central Vietnam at that time. To add to the authority and prestige of the publication, Tường invited Professor Lê Văn Hảo to be editor of the new publication. After first, Hảo hesitated, but

³⁸⁴ Nhiều Tác Giả, 134.

³⁸⁵ Nhiều Tác Giả, 134.

³⁸⁶ Nhiều Tác Giả, 134.

after he finished reading the entire draft, he agreed immediately, praising it by saying “the first draft is expertly written.”³⁸⁷

The recruitment of a prominent academic and scion of one of the richest families in the country would undoubtedly be a major accomplishment for Ngọc (Lê Công Cơ), so Ngọc assigned Trường the task of continuing to groom Hào as an underground agent. Indeed, it was not long after that Lê Văn Hào joined the revolution, making a breathtaking commitment and escaping to the military base in the jungle together with many other intellectuals who fled the city of Huế at that time.³⁸⁸

The Network Grows in Size and Strength:

Early in 1964, Lê Công Cơ returned to the Đà Nẵng and Hội An area to work as a math teacher. At this time, Cơ established the *Hướng Sống* (direction of life) Newspaper in Đà Nẵng. This newspaper was distributed throughout Trung Trung Bộ.³⁸⁹ During an interview in 2013, Cơ recalled his work on the paper with two of the underground agents he recruited in Thanh Lương village several years earlier:

I worked with Hà to publish *Hướng Sống* newspaper. Ai Phương and Hà were in charge of that newspaper.... Hà and Ai Phương 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 the 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. Hà was very talented as a journalist and publisher, and he worked with great enthusiasm and without fear.³⁹⁰

According to Cơ, the underground agents Cẩm Nhung and Sơn Hải went to the Đà Nẵng post office and mailed the paper to the offices of all the leaders in the country. Cơ recalls

³⁸⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, 135.

³⁸⁸ Nhiều Tác Giả, 135.

³⁸⁹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 183 and 185.

³⁹⁰ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

learning the news that General Nguyễn Chanh Thi said at the time that he would “catch all the communists in two months. With Thị here there will be no communist underground agents!”³⁹¹

Just before the Tết holiday in 1964, Ba Phước instructed Lê Công Cơ to organize 25 new underground agents and bring them to Giáng La for political training. While Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan doesn't give a timeline in his account for his journey to the jungle for indoctrination and training, it seems likely that he was recruited into this group.³⁹²

Around this same time, Cơ met with an underground agent in Đà Nẵng named Phuc to discuss organizing a popular movement to advocate for punishment of Ngô Đình Cẩn. According to Cơ, Buddhist's at this time were divided on what sort of justice Ngô Đình Diệm's younger brother should face for his crimes which included the torture and murder of numerous dissidents in Central Vietnam. Around this time, Trí Quang stated publicly that Cẩn should be executed. Telling American officials privately that he had no alternative but to support the death penalty because of the intensity of the feeling against Cẩn within the Buddhist community in Huế. (McCallister) Another two groups of Buddhists who were followers of the monks Minh Chau and Tri Thu remained neutral on the subject, however according to Cơ virtually all of the intellectuals were against Cẩn.³⁹³³⁹⁴

Cơ was introduced to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường by the poet Phan Duy Nhân. Cơ had requested a meeting with Tường in order to establish a legal and open group of dissidents at the university. Tường was an active member of the Struggle Movement and his house already was

³⁹¹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 187.

³⁹² Lê Công Cơ, 188.

³⁹³ Lê Công Cơ, 196.

³⁹⁴ Cẩn's case was further damaged by the sudden appearance in and around Huế of thousands of released political prisoners, many of whom had been tortured, beaten and starved while in the custody the Diệm government at prisons like Chin Ham and Thừa Phủ.

being used a meeting place for a group of activist intellectuals which included his younger brother Phan, Trần Quang Long, Lê Tử Thành and Lê Thanh Xuân.

Cơ decided to meet with the entire group and was introduced to them as an NLF agent from the military base who had been assigned to Huế and Đà Nẵng to organize underground agents. Cơ recalls noticing upon arriving at Tường's house that flowers had been planted all around it. The recruitment of Tường was a significant accomplishment for Cơ because the popular teacher at Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh high schools was famously known as one the brightest up and coming writer/scholars in Huế and was very well respected among intellectuals and youth.³⁹⁵

Tường was part of a group of well-known and artists in Huế sometimes referred to as the Thế Hệ Vàng. According to Bửu Ý who was a teacher at Quốc Học at the time, “in that group there was me and a number of others who were famous at that time like Trịnh Công Sơn, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Đinh Cường. [They were called the Thế Hệ Vàng] because these people were close to each other and were the leaders at the university with each one of us being in a different profession.”³⁹⁶

Born in 1941 in Huế, Trần Quang Long was a poet and a senior at the Pedagogy and Literature University who took sides against his own family to support the revolution. Long's parents were Protestants and strong supporters of the Republic. Two of his brothers were officers in the RVN military, one a colonel and the other a captain.³⁹⁷ Long died in a bombing raid on the Cambodian border in 1968. His poetry is still being republished today.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 197.

³⁹⁶ Bửu Ý, Interview with Bửu Ý, Recorded, November 21, 2017.

³⁹⁷ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 198.

³⁹⁸ <https://tuoitre.vn/tran-quang-long---cuoc-doi-amp-tac-pham-62599.htm>

The group, now under NLF guidance but led by Tường and Long, made it one of their immediate goals to infiltrate and gain control of all of the organizations of the student government at Huế University (Tổng Hội Sinh Viên) in order to use them as platforms to wage a public and legal propaganda battle against the RVN.³⁹⁹

The following week in April 1964, Cơ and Lư held a meeting at Thanh Lương village in which they discussed how they could best go about building up the number of underground agents working within open and legal student groups at the university. At the meeting it was decided that their goal was to take control of the voting for student leadership position in each department. Several underground agents were selected to become candidates for leadership positions.⁴⁰⁰

Around this same time, Nguyễn Minh Triết, who had returned to Huế from hiding in Đà Nẵng after the fall of the Diệm government, was elected President of the Medical College branch of the Tổng Hội Sinh Viên (student union). Another student leader in the Struggle Movement named Vĩnh Kha was recruited by Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Phan Duy Nhân around this time. Kha was a popular leader, who was trusted by the Buddhists in Huế and respected by the students at the university.⁴⁰¹ Vĩnh Kha with support from Cơ's underground network was elected President of Tổng Hội Sinh Viên.⁴⁰²

Meanwhile, the underground agent Lê Khắc Quyến provided funds and contributed his time to creation of a new open and legal newspaper called Dân (citizens). The newspaper published articles about the history of patriotic traditions in the country and the need to protect the country from foreign invasion. The paper was not in circulation for long, however, RVN

³⁹⁹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Ngươi*, 199.

⁴⁰⁰ Lê Công Cơ, 200–201.

⁴⁰¹ Lê Công Cơ, 201.

⁴⁰² Lê Công Cơ, 204.

police quickly closed down the dissident publication arresting the editor Tran Ngoc Anh (former Việt Minh who was one of Cơ's teachers when he was a child in the liberated area during the French War).⁴⁰³

During the summertime that same year, Cơ went to the Zone 5 military base in Quảng Ngãi for several months of political training. On the 20th of August 1964, thousands of demonstrators flooded into the streets of Huế in memory of the Buddhists killed by the government in the year before. Around this time, the Tổng Hội Sinh Viên Huế announced their opposition to the Vũng Tàu charter and thousands of people came out in the street to demonstrate in Huế and Đà Nẵng. In Đà Nẵng at the time, Cơ recalls how the underground agents Sơn Hải and Cẩm Nhung led a group of demonstrators to protest in front of the Đà Nẵng hotel where a group of American advisors were staying. In November 1964, 32 additional underground agents from Cơ's networks around Trung Trung Bộ were brought to Giảng La for political training with Cơ.⁴⁰⁴

Cơ was in Quảng Ngãi not long after that when he got the news that Nguyễn Thúc Lư had been arrested. Cơ believes that during his interrogation at the police station in Huế, Lư gave up the location of Cơ's address in Đà Nẵng and the names of many of the underground agents in the network.⁴⁰⁵ During an interview in 2014, Cơ shared his assessment on what he believes happened with Lư:

After that, the network was discovered in Huế. These brothers made some mistakes during their activities, and the enemy investigated them and found out. When the group hung the NLF flag on the Thượng Tứ (gate of the citadel), the police had already been observing them, and they arrested Lư. I am guessing that Lư informed and they arrested other people. Why do I say that? Because, at that time, the house I lived in in Đà Nẵng was very discreet. Only Lư knew about this place, but the RVN police came there to find me.... After that, when I went to the military base and met Lư, he said that I thought you

⁴⁰³ Lê Công Cơ, 204.

⁴⁰⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 206–7.

⁴⁰⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 223.

had left, so I informed them about that place. Lu was arrested at the Nha Canh Sat. At noon he took a bicycle and fled to Đạo. After Lu was arrested, Đức and Hà escaped to the jungle. Hà was a classmate with Na. Ha was very charming. That group was very idealistic, not like the young people these days who just like to have fun and drink. Now it's different.⁴⁰⁶

The Quốc Học Network Exposed:

Beginning on November 12, 1964, the revolutionary Youth Association network at Quốc Học High School which had been so painstakingly constructed over the past two years under the leadership of Lê Công Cơ and Nguyễn Thúc Lư, came under simultaneous attack by police in Huế and Đà Nẵng and virtually the entire student network of high school students in Huế was compromised. 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.⁴⁰⁷

Within a period of less than one month, the leaders of the student network which had begun in Thanh Lương village two years earlier were identified and snatched up by RVN police one after another. Nguyễn Thúc Lư, Trịnh Túc, Nguyễn Thúc Tần, Phạm Truyền and, one month later, Dương Đình Na, were arrested and brought to police stations around Huế for interrogation.⁴⁰⁸ According to Đạo, one of the few who managed to avoid being caught at 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.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

⁴⁰⁷ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

⁴⁰⁸ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

⁴⁰⁹ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

Other members of the group were less fortunate. Dương Đình Na, President of the Youth Association in Huế had been studying pedagogy at a college near Sài Gòn when many of the arrests in Huế were made, but was tracked down, arrested and flown back to Huế 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 Huế, I was in Long An. At that time, the student movement was crushed from Quảng Nam to Huế. When they brought me to Thừa Phủ prison, Túc and Tàn heard that there was someone arrested near Sài Gòn, and they knew it was me. That evening we went to the prison bathroom and talked there. We told each other what we believed the government already knew about us. I wasn't tortured much... 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 Thừa Phủ prison, I met Phu who was chief of foreign relations in the police department for Huế province, and he said "you are the nephew of Nguyễn Thúc Tuấn, no wonder you are like that."⁴¹⁰

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.⁴¹¹ Two of the student activists arrested at this time, Dương Đình Na and Nguyễn Thúc Tàn, 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 Huế there was me, Tàn, Đạo, Túc and Truyền. Túc and Truyền were only arrested without trial. We were against the authorities at the courthouse. They asked

⁴¹⁰ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

⁴¹¹ Trịnh, Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded.

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 them? I have to be against the American invasion.”⁴¹²

Other activists such as Trịnh Túc and Phạm Truyền 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 in 2013, Túc 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 Tần. Na was a student at Long An University of Pedagogy, and Tần 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.... I was arrested in Huế on November 12, 1964, but Na was arrested after. So, when I was in Thừa Phủ prison in my cell, I heard a banging on the door, and I looked through the window and saw Na in handcuffs being taken out of a car to be put in the next room, and I felt pain throughout my body because I thought that Na was in the south and maybe he could escape. When I saw him, my heart ached because I knew that our organization was in deep trouble and would not be able to function anymore.⁴¹³

For the two years between 1964 and 1966, Na, Túc, Tần and Truyền languished together at Thừa Phủ prison just a few blocks away from where they attended high school in Huế. After Na and Tần were tried and convicted of treason, all four young men were sent together by ship to an infamous, formerly French operated prison on Côn Đảo Island. By then, they had been joined at Thừa Phủ by several other student activists from the same organization who had been arrested in the nearby cities of Đà Nẵng and Tam Kỳ.

Underground Agents of the Youth Association Flight to the Jungle:

⁴¹² Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

⁴¹³ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

For Youth Association members Nguyễn Thúc Lư, Nguyễn Ích Ha and Phạm Văn Đức, their comfortable lives as underground agitators and organizers who worked, studied and attended school during the day had now come to an abrupt end, never to return. As known fugitives, simply traveling from place to place in RVN controlled areas was now extremely dangerous. Although they remained determined to continue the struggle, rapidly escalating political tensions and swarms of RVN soldiers and police scouring Huế city and the surrounding countryside forced them to acknowledge that conditions dictated a new strategy.

Described by his friends and fellow revolutionaries as a capable leader, an elegant man, well-educated, energetic and highly intelligent, Lư was also known for being careful and restrained. Using his position as a middle school teacher as a cover, Lư had been able to network with teachers and students secretly active in the resistance movement from institutions all over Huế. Many of his recruits, however, had little or no experience working with an underground revolutionary movement and were lacking sufficient 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. Once, when members of the group hung the NLF flag on the Thượng Từ [gate of the Citadel], the police had already been observing them, and they arrested Lư.”⁴¹⁴⁴¹⁵

Immediately after being taken into custody, Lư was taken to a temporary prison in Huế 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, Lư 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

⁴¹⁴ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

⁴¹⁵ Nguyễn Thúc Tuân, “Unpublished Letter Written by Nguyễn Thúc Tuân to Aaron Lillie,” Unpublished letter, March 31, 2014.

fellow student activist, Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo). After he explained the situation to Đạo, the two young men rapidly came to the realization that living in Huế was no longer a viable option.⁴¹⁶

Although not a leader in the student movement, Đạo 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 Huế, Đạo was able to ensure Lư was safely guided to a nearby military base. Electing to remain behind for a time, Đạo arranged a meeting with Nguyễn Ích Hà, after which the two of them made preparations to leave Huế together for the jungle. First borrowing a small amount of money from Đạo's sister, Đạo and Ích Hà 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 Nguyễn Thi My Nhan had given me 20 dong and with that money we bought 20 rice cakes.... a woman there hid both of us, Ích Hà and me."⁴¹⁷

In the early hours of the morning, the two young men revolutionary organizers 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 Đạo and Ích Hà, 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 gánh [two baskets held together by a bamboo rod]. On the gánh they attached a chổi [a small broom] as a signal that we should follow them. We followed them across a river and went

⁴¹⁶ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

⁴¹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #3 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo), Recorded, March 20, 2014.

deep into the jungle. We knew we were lost but we kept going. “After some time, Ích Hà saw a pile of ferret excrement and thought it was tiger shit and became very afraid. Ích Hà said “I would rather die than have a tiger eat me! I am going back to Huế 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, Ích Hà overcame his fear of being attacked by tigers, and we continued on our journey. That afternoon, Ích Hà and I saw a small airplane scouting the jungle for communists. So, we laid hiding in the bushes until the airplane flew off. Later 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 é 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 Dương. He said “ok, so you are from the city, who did you know in Hương Trà District?” We mentioned two names he recognized, Ong Tu and Ong Tho [leaders in the local Communist Party]... and he was satisfied with that.⁴¹⁸

Đạo and Hà were fortunate to have stumbled onto the path of an old Việt Minh revolutionary whose job it was to act as a guide for NLF guerillas in the jungle. “Mr. Dương 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 trapils.” Local guides like Mr. Dương, 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.⁴¹⁹

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

Dong and Hai gave Ích Hà and me each one hammock. We stayed in the jungle and slept in hammocks and borrowed fishing poles from Dong and Hai. We fished often 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

⁴¹⁸ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

⁴¹⁹ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

was popular in the jungle. “Walk without a footprint, cook without smoke and speak without a voice....”⁴²⁰

Having grown up in villages near Huế city and spent much of their time as students active in the urban movement, Đạo and Ích Hà were completely unfamiliar with life in the jungle and 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.

As it turned out Lư, Đạo and Hà were not separated for long. Despite the collapse of their organization in Huế, Lư 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 Đạo and Ích Hà at the base, Lư assigned Đạo to cook for the entire unit. Chuckling to himself about his foolishness almost 50 years later, Đạo described his first experience cooking for hungry guerillas in the jungle, “when we were in the jungle, Lư 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.⁴²¹

⁴²⁰ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

⁴²¹ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

During their time together at the base in 1964, the three young activists 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 in the jungle.⁴²²

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 important task was assigned to many of the student activists who fled from Huế 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.¹²¹ For Lư, Đạo and Ích Hà this time marked the beginning of a long and difficult period of living in the shadows. As Đạo 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.”⁴²³

1965, A Year of Escalating Tensions:

While Lư, Đạo and Ích Hà were learning to survive in the jungle, tension between the Sài Gòn government and the Buddhist and student populations in Huế continued to rise nearer the boiling point. Hunger strikes, sit ins and protest marches organized by students and faculty drew increasing amounts of attention to the turmoil within the Buddhist and academic communities. On January 6, 1965, Nguyễn Đắc Xuâן organized demonstration of about 2000 students, cylco drivers and shopkeepers. At the protest marches carried banners with slogans such as “Let the

⁴²² Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013,.

⁴²³ Nguyễn Văn Ninh.

Vietnamese determine Vietnamese affairs and “Our National Sovereignty Must Be Respected.”⁴²⁴⁴²⁵

Meanwhile Lê Công Cơ returned to Huế near the end of 1965 to meet with Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan and Nguyễn Minh Triết. At the meeting the four underground agents decided to organize a student group to go to a flooded area of Quảng Nam in order to provide aid for poor struggling farmers. Local businesspeople and intellectuals from Huế were also invited to accompany them as volunteers. While they were traveling together in the countryside volunteers had the opportunity to speak with the local farmers who had joined the NLF military, they gossiped together and learning about what the National Liberation Front was and why so many of the locals had joined. A strategy they would continue using into the 1970s.⁴²⁶

Conclusion:

Towards the end of 1965, as the tensions generated by the Struggle Movement were reaching new heights, leaders of the Republic and leaders of the Buddhist and Struggle Movements drew progressively closer to a direct confrontation in Huế. Outside of Huế, throughout central Việt Nam, Buddhists and intellectuals were keeping a close eye on developments in the city. During this period Huế was only the center of a much larger movement that was taking shape in smaller cities and towns in the region. As we will see in Chapter 4, the town of Tam Kỳ in the province of Quảng Nam, about 140km south of Huế, similar to many other communities in the area, was also home to a well-entrenched network of the Communist

⁴²⁴ Nguyễn Thi Dịu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67),” 243.

⁴²⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)*, 147.

⁴²⁶ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 231.

Party which, in 1964 and 1965, protected and fostered a rapidly growing branch of Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association.

Chapter 4: Tam Kỳ

Established by the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1906 as an administrative outpost, by 1960, the modest sized town (Thị Xã) of Tam Kỳ had become an important urban center in the principally rural and agricultural central Vietnamese province of Quảng Nam.⁴²⁷⁴²⁸ Situated on the fertile banks of the Tam Kỳ River, 70 kilometers south of Đà Nẵng and roughly 30 kilometers north of the airfields at Chu Lai, Tam Kỳ is also adjoined 7 kilometers to the southwest by the Kỳ Anh Tunnel Complex, the site of a major Việt Minh/NLF underground military base.⁴²⁹ Although relatively modest in size, the town has served for many years as an important administrative hub for a large area of the countryside around it. In comparison with the larger commercial centers in Huế and Đà Nẵng, Tam Kỳ in the 1950s and early 60s was a small and quiet community with an economy dependent largely on agricultural products and fishing.⁴³⁰

Through much of the French colonial occupation, Tam Kỳ was the site of a high school which taught classes in both French and Vietnamese. A number of graduates from this school went on to become prominent nationalists and revolutionary leaders. Residents of the Tam Kỳ have fostered a milieu of radical nationalist politics dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, producing prominent patriotic scholars as well as leaders in the Duy Tân movement, including Phan Châu Trinh, Trần Văn Dư, Dương Đình Thường and Dương Đình Thạch.⁴³¹

⁴²⁷ Bradley Davis, *States of Banditry: The Nguyễn Government, Bandit Rule, and the Culture of Power in the Post-Taiping China-Vietnam Borderlands*, University of Washington Press, 2008.106

⁴²⁸The province of Quảng Nam was divided into two parts in 1962 with Tam Kỳ coming under the administration of Quảng Tín. Communist and Front controlled organizations had their own administrative divisions for each territory, but they often overlapped with the Republic. To my knowledge, changes to the administrative boundaries of Quảng Nam by the Republic were not emulated by the NLF or the Communist Party.

⁴²⁹ After 1968, Tam Kỳ became the site of a major American military army base during the war.

⁴³⁰ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)* (Đà Nẵng: Đỗ Hùng Luân, 2005), 14.

⁴³¹ Linh Nguyễn Vinh, “Lịch Sử Tam Kỳ”, 12

In the 1950s and 60s, such was the level of support among the people of Tam Kỳ for the war of decolonization against the French colonial government, that the RVN government in Tam Kỳ named its schools after famous revolutionary leaders and Vietnamese patriots who resisted the French colonial government.⁴³² Support for the revolution against the French was deeply entrenched at virtually every level of society. While enormously popular in the 1950s, particularly after their defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ, the primary political instrument for bringing about that revolution, the Việt Minh, was significantly less popular than the revolution itself. A number of those who had been active as Việt Minh soldiers and officers during the French War changed sides to the Republic of Vietnam after the hasty departure of Bảo Đại and the French in 1955.

The Việt Minh relied heavily on the networks of the Communist Party in order to build its strength in the south. Beginning in 1930 with the formation of the ICP, the Communist Party in Vietnam had placed a heavy emphasis on the building of political networks in rural areas of central Vietnam regardless of how poor or remote the community. These early Party cells worked within and as an integral part of the larger Việt Minh community and would prove to be a critical element of the Communist Party's political strength in the countryside, providing an experienced cadre of political operatives that would form a solid foundation for the leadership of the Việt Minh during the French War. During this period, local Party officials gained more than a decade of experience nurturing and shepherding the extraordinary growth of the Việt Minh revolutionary movement in the 1940s and 50s, adding greatly to the capabilities and organizational skills of the Party's underground agents. By the time of the Geneva conference in 1954, what had begun in

⁴³² For example, Trần Cao Văn High School, the school attended by most of the leaders of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ was named after a famous scholar and leader in the Duy Tân movement who was admired and supported by Đỗ Hùng Luân's grandparents. See p15 for more details.

the 1940s as a ragtag collection of independently operating underground Việt Minh networks was transformed into a full-fledged Việt Minh government which was openly collecting taxes, building roads and administering its own police departments, schools and hospitals in the liberated areas around Quảng Nam province.⁴³³

At the core of virtually every Việt Minh network was a cadre of local leaders of the Communist Party who were accountable to a separate layer of organizational leadership which was coming directly from the Communist Party in Hà Nội. Most of these communist operatives were public about their support for the revolution but kept their membership in the Communist Party a carefully guarded secret. Thus, by the early 1950s, within the larger Việt Minh network in the town of Tam Kỳ and in the surrounding villages, an extensive underground Communist Party network was already in place. Following an order in 1954 by Zone 5 Party Secretary Trương Quang Giao instructing all publicly known Communist Party members to depart for the north (đi tập kết) or go underground, the remaining Communist Party leaders in Tam Kỳ began rebuilding their membership by discreetly organizing new underground Communist Party cells using the “0-3-0” principle.⁴³⁴⁴³⁵

During the years between 1954 and the creation of the NLF in 1960, Communist agents operating underground in Quảng Nam continued to hone their skills while trying to preserve as much of the old Việt Minh political infrastructure as possible and avoiding capture by RVN police. As a consequence of their clandestine lifestyles, certain top Party officials from this group with an aptitude for it became particularly adept in the tradecrafts of spying, espionage,

⁴³³ A large number of the people I interviewed later, who joined the student movement and the urban movement of the NLF had previously worked at or attended these schools and institutions in “liberated areas” of the countryside.

⁴³⁴ Hồ Duy Lệ, Báo Công an TP Đà Nẵng, “Mười Chớp và Một Thời...,” Báo Công an TP Đà Nẵng: CADN Online-Kết nối niềm tin, accessed February 19, 2019, http://cadn.com.vn/news/65_9002_muoi-chap-va-mot-thoi.aspx.

⁴³⁵ According to the “0-3-0” principle, networks should organize into self-contained groups of three people with only the leader of a particular group knowing the identities of underground agents at a higher level of the command structure. In practice these rules were difficult to follow.

infiltration and subversion. Fake names and forged identity papers, cover stories and disguises became important tools of the trade for these Party officials who, in some cases, would play a deadly game of cat and mouse with RVN police spanning a period of decades. Only the most fortunate and capable could survive this lifestyle for very long. For those Party officials unfortunate enough to be captured and have their position in the Communist Party exposed, they could expect weeks or months of agonizing torture and interrogation followed by secret execution and burial in an unmarked grave. The ability of Communist Party officials to operate effectively and remain undetected in enemy controlled areas around Tam Kỳ played a critical role in the recruitment and training of underground agents and the creation of new revolutionary networks.

Founding of the Youth Association of High School and College Student for the Liberation of the South, Tam Kỳ:

The recruitment of students into the Tam Kỳ branch of Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association began in earnest in August 1963 with the arrival of a communist cadre from Đà Nẵng named Nguyễn Văn Đồng . Đồng was assigned by Co to travel to Tam Kỳ in order to make contact with Party leadership there and begin organizing. Traveling under the fake name, Nguyễn Nhi, Đồng arrived at the home of an underground agent named Mrs. Giáo to meet with local Party leaders and begin recruiting high school students. In order to ensure their loyalty, the first group of students recruited were drawn exclusively from among the children of longtime Party members or former Việt Minh.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)* (Đà Nẵng: Đỗ Hùng Luân, 2005), 12.

The first members brought in by Đồng to form the leadership committee of the new branch of the Youth Association were Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Quang Vinh and Đào Ngọc Diêu and Mrs. Giáo's son, Nguyễn Đình Sơn. Sơn had assembled the small group from among his most trusted friends at Trần Cao Van High School. After their first meeting, Đồng spoke with each student individually to discuss the revolution, the current political situation, and their ideas for organizing more students in the Tam Kỳ area.⁴³⁷ Once they had been officially recruited, a committee of high school students was formed with each student being assigned primary responsibility for a specific task.

While this organization initially operated under the nominal authority of Lê Công Cơ's network in Đà Nẵng, leadership was soon transferred to the control of the Tam Kỳ City Party Committee. By 1964, Cơ had become deeply immersed in the task of building student organizations in Huế and Đà Nẵng and had little time to tend to the smaller groups which were springing up all around (Trung Trung Bộ) Central Vietnam in neighboring communities.⁴³⁸

Following the same basic organizational structure as the Youth Association founded by Cơ, Lư and Na in Huế, at that first official meeting of the Tam Kỳ association, Đỗ Hùng Luân was chosen as Committee Secretary, Nguyễn Đình Sơn was put in charge of communications

⁴³⁷Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)* 12-13.

⁴³⁸ Lê Công Cơ (aka Lê Phương Thảo) Members of the Tam Kỳ group had few opportunities to meet with their charismatic young leader, except when sent to the military base in the jungle for political training. Many years later, Deputy Secretary of the student organization Nguyễn Nhung wrote an essay describing a chance encounter with the wily revolutionary organizer and spy chief while on assignment to recruit and train new members of the youth organization in Hội An. One morning, while walking across the campus of Trần Quý Cáp High School to meet with two new recruits, Nhung noticed a "skinny young man with skin darkened by the sun, wearing an old vest and riding an old bicycle." Nhung immediately recognized him as Lê Phương Thảo (aka Lê Công Cơ), the leader of their organization and an official of the National Liberation Front. Arriving at appointment, Nhung was unable to overcome his curiosity and decided to ask one of his new recruits about the young teacher he had seen. "That is the teacher, Lê Công Cơ, who teaches math!" Cẩm replied.

Because of the distance between Đà Nẵng and Tam Kỳ, it was decided to bring the leadership of the Tam Kỳ branch under the authority of the Tam Kỳ City Party Committee, but many of the underground agents in Lê Công Cơ's organization continued to provide support. (Source: Nhiều Tác Giả, *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*, 121).

and outreach, Nguyễn Quang Vinh was assigned to oversee propaganda, and Đào Ngọc Diêu was tasked with overseeing the production and distribution of revolutionary newspapers.⁴³⁹⁴⁴⁰

The need for discipline and constant vigilance was quickly driven home for the young recruits when their new leader, Nguyễn Văn Đồng, was arrested while in transit from Đà Nẵng to Tam Kỳ after one of the underground agents in his network informed the RVN police of his identity. After Đồng's arrest, Lê Công Cơ assigned his close friend and deputy Sơn Hải to replace Đồng as chief organizer of the Tam Kỳ group. Sơn was a talented organizer, an official of the National Liberation Front and a key member of the Youth Association in Đà Nẵng who had been instrumental in organizing the student movement there. Since he was already known to RVN police in Đà Nẵng, it was decided that Tam Kỳ was a logical place to put his organizing talents to good use.⁴⁴¹

The principal mission of the Youth Association was to spread propaganda to nurture “revolutionary enlightenment and to develop underground agents among all classes of people, especially the youth, high school students, college students, intellectuals and the RVN military. Agents of the Youth Association were also sometimes tasked with surveying and assessing the situation around the various military installations in the area in preparation for combat operations in urban areas, and, when absolutely necessary, could participate directly in combat operations.”⁴⁴²

⁴³⁹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)*. 13

⁴⁴⁰ Responsibilities would often be shared and the primary person tasked with a particular activity would change depending on who was judged best positioned to carry out the necessary duties at that moment. Later it was decided that Nguyễn Nhung would take over this responsibility.

⁴⁴¹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người, Hội Kỳ, Vol. 1* (Đà Nẵng: Đại Học Duy Tân, 2012).?

⁴⁴² Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)*, 14.

Two intrepid underground agents, Mrs. Giáo, the widow of a Communist Party official secretly killed by the Diệm government in 1960, and a primary school teacher from Đà Nẵng named, Cẩm Nhung, were instrumental in founding the Tam Kỳ branch of the Youth Association by connecting the network in Tam Kỳ with the network in Đà Nẵng. It was Cẩm Nhung who, in 1964, first brought Lê Công Cơ's operatives to the home of Mrs. Giáo in Tam Kỳ to make contact with the City Party Committee there. In the 1950s and early 1960s, within the town of Tam Kỳ, the primary headquarters of the Communist Party was at the home of a family of underground agents headed by a Communist official named Giáo Mai. After Giáo Mai's arrest and murder by the Diệm government in 1960, Giáo Mai's wife (Mrs. Giáo) continued many of her husband's activities.⁴⁴³⁴⁴⁴

Until November of 1965, Mrs. Giáo's home served simultaneously as the headquarters for the local Party leadership, a refuge where NLF officials hiding from the RVN police could rest and recuperate and the primary meeting place for leaders of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ. The house was well chosen in part because it was spacious and well-built, being made from brick with a large central pillar supporting two levels, an upstairs with an ancestral altar and a large living room area and a lower level with a kitchen and a dining area where family members and guests would often gather.⁴⁴⁵ The house also had the additional advantage of being surrounded by the homes of other underground agents (Mười Khôi, Ông Bà Nhà, Bác Trung,

⁴⁴³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 12.

⁴⁴⁴ Giáo Mai was arrested, tortured and secretly killed in 1960 after a local Communist Party official named Le Canh Tuan was exposed by an informer and caught by RVN police carrying incriminating documents bearing the names of several underground agents in his network. Tuan was ambushed in the middle of the night and shot to death in front of the home of an underground agent he was visiting. After his death, Tuan's body was left on public display for some time with the intent of dissuading others from supporting the revolution. The news of the killing traveled quickly around the Tam Kỳ area. Đỗ Hùng Luân remembers as a 14 year old boy making the trip to see Tuan's body. Rather than being horrified and frightened by the sight of Tuan's corpse, Luan was inspired, feeling profound admiration for his sacrifice and seeing Tuan's fate as "very beautiful." (interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân)

⁴⁴⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân, Recorded, March 11, 2019.

and Chú Thuận) which facilitated the work of both clandestine organizations by taking advantage of a sympathetic community around their headquarters to assist in controlling and monitoring the area more effectively. This made it easier to keep their most sensitive revolutionary activities out of public view which would become increasingly important as the scale of revolutionary activities of the Communist Party and the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ continued to expand in the years between 1963 and 1965.⁴⁴⁶

The rapidity of the growth in the size of the Youth Association in 1964 was the result of the diligent efforts of the students and their leader Sơn Hải but would have been impossible without the groundswell of resentment against the Diệm government which was pervasive throughout much of the countryside in Quảng Nam province during this period. Within less than a year, the organization would grow to a size of more than 50 underground agents operating in and around Tam Kỳ. To understand how and why this was possible it is important to look first at the family backgrounds and personal stories of the leaders of the group.⁴⁴⁷

Sơn Hải (Nguyễn Văn Sơn)

Born in 1942, in the Thanh Khê district of Đà Nẵng, Nguyễn Văn Sơn was the third child of a poor family of laborers who also sold sweet treats on the streets to supplement their income. Many members of Hải's family were known to be strong supporters of the Việt Minh revolution during the French War, and, as a consequence, his two older sisters decided to go north to avoid persecution by the Diệm government following the peace agreement in 1954.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)*, 11.

⁴⁴⁷ During my research, I was able to interview 5 of the 8 former student leaders of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ. Unfortunately, Nguyễn Đình Sơn passed away in 2004, and two others former student leaders declined interviews probably for political reasons. While I have tried to create as complete a picture as possible of events, due to a lack of available information, I have not included many details about the lives of Đào Ngọc Diêu or Nguyễn Minh Ngọc.

⁴⁴⁸ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dàng Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. 1*, 93–94.

In 1962, Lê Công Cơ was introduced to Sơn Hải by his uncle, Lê Công Phung and the two quickly became close friends. Using propaganda techniques he had learned in the jungle, Cơ persuaded Hải to join his student led revolution. Hải would soon prove to be a valuable asset. Small with handsome features, skin darkened by the sun and an easy smile, Hải was a smooth talker, with a talent for persuasion.⁴⁴⁹ He was also an enthusiastic recruiter who rapidly became one of the chief organizers of Cơ's student network in Đà Nẵng, greatly helping expand the number of underground agents in the area. It was through Sơn Hải that in 1963 Lê Công Cơ was introduced to the underground agent and primary school teacher Cẩm Nhung.⁴⁵⁰

Affiliated Underground Agent: Nguyễn Lương Ý

Nguyễn Lương Ý was born in 1928, the oldest of three brothers in the Phú Ninh district of Quảng Nam. Ý's father was a prominent and vocal supporter of the Việt Minh and Uncle Hồ in Tam Kỳ. As a young man Ý was a talented student who became a highly respected teacher in the Tam Kỳ area in the 1950s. During the French War, Ý taught school in the liberated area of Quảng Nam. Ý was well-known by his students for his lessons on Vietnamese traditions and patriotism. According to Lê Công Cơ, Ý unfailingly used his classroom as a space to promote revolution. Like his father, Ý was a nationalist to the point of being an eccentric and would often pause during his lectures to read the poem "Life and Death" by Phan Bội Châu to his students. "Lương Ý was famous all over Tam Kỳ for his patriotism. Officials in the Tam Kỳ government were vexed by Ý's behavior, wanting to control him but they hesitated. They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid of inciting a protest."⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ *Kỷ Yếu Ảnh: Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên – Học Sinh – Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung – Trung Bộ (1960-1975)* (Đà Nẵng: Đại Học Duy Tân, 2011), 57.

⁴⁵⁰ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. I*, 93-94.

⁴⁵¹ Lê Công Cơ, 233.

Youth Association Committee Secretary Đỗ Hùng Luân remembers escorting Lương Ý in 1964 to a meeting with a communist official at Mrs. Giáo's house about bringing ten new Youth Association recruits to the military base for training. During the meeting Ý was asked if he would accept an invitation to join the Communist Party. Ý's response was an enthusiastic "yes", adding that he would do "whatever work the party assigned for him."⁴⁵²

Underground Agent: Nguyễn Lương Y

Born in 1945 in the Phú Ninh district of Quảng Nam, Nguyễn Lương Y was an exceptional student who graduated from Tam Thái High School in Tam Kỳ during the French War. Lương Y, like his older brother Ý, was greatly influenced by the patriotic and revolutionary views of his notoriously outspoken father.

In his memoirs, Lê Công Cơ, recounts meeting Lương Y once by chance as a young boy, in 1954, while wandering the streets in Đà Nẵng looking for someone to accept him as an apprentice:

I had the opportunity to get to know Nguyễn Lương Y very coincidentally, at the end of 1954. I left my family's house to go to Đà Nẵng to search for someone to teach me a profession. I was wandering down Hùng Vương Street when I met a youth of about 17 or 18 years old, also wandering in search of work. He looked at me and asked "you left your home village, a?" I replied "Yes, I am trying to find a profession to learn, but no one will accept me." At that Lương Y took my hand and pulled me after him down the street, "where is your home village? [he said] Are your mother and father waiting? I live in Tam Kỳ, I am also here looking for work." We were both afraid we would not be accepted because our home villages were too far away. I explained my circumstances to him and he looked at me and reassured me "Sông có khúc, người có lúc, trời có mắt."⁴⁵³

After parting ways, Cơ would not see Lương Y again until the summer of 1960, when, once again by chance, one day while standing on the banks of Bạch Đằng River in Sài Gòn, a young man approached him, "Cơ, phải không?" the young man inquired. Despite the intervening

⁴⁵² Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)* 41.

⁴⁵³ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*, 233.

years between their last meeting Cơ and Y had no trouble recognizing each other. Elated to see each other again, Cơ and Y sat together on some rocks near the river and discussed their plans for attending school in Sài Gòn and what had happened in their lives since they first met in Đà Nẵng 6 years earlier. Cơ told Y of his activities in Sài Gòn as a revolutionary activist and inquired if Y would participate with him and join the revolution, Y responded “the fish is in the water already... I will follow the revolution until the end!” After having dinner together, Y and Cơ went their separate ways, promising to write to each other regularly. Not long after that Cơ was ordered by the Communist Party to relocate to Huế to found the first branch of the Youth Association.⁴⁵⁴

Lương Y entered Thủ Đức military school in Sài Gòn ranking number one on the entrance exam and went on to graduate first in his class. Soon after his graduation, Y was recruited into the RVN military by Lt. General Nguyễn Chánh Thi, who asked to serve as his private secretary in Huế. According to Đỗ Hùng Luân, “Nguyễn Chánh Thi was looking for talented people from Central Vietnam. Therefore, he recruited Y to come work for him.”⁴⁵⁵

Due to the enormous value of the information that he provided, Y was kept insulated from other networks to maintain secrecy and generally only contacted with two other underground agents in Huế. However, his role in the NLF was known to his older brother and a few others within the Youth Association network.

As part of the preparation for NLF surprise attacks on sensitive locations in Đà Nẵng, on several occasions, Y used US Army vehicles to drive an NLF underground agent named Hà Kỳ Ngô on tours of American and RVN military bases and airfields, allowing Ngô to draw very precise maps which were then sent to NLF military bases in the jungle for careful study. Y was a

⁴⁵⁴ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. 1*, 233–34.

⁴⁵⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân, recorded, August 14, 2013.

diligent and cunning underground agent. In the course of over a year working inside the most sensitive areas of Nguyễn Chánh Thi's headquarters, Y's reports yielded a treasure trove of actionable intelligence which was used during several battles in Quảng Nam and Thừa Thiên Huế to punishing effect on Thi's forces.⁴⁵⁶

Underground Agent: Phạm Thị Cẩm Nhung

At 23 years old, Phạm Thị Cẩm Nhung was still a young woman when she first met Lê Công Cơ and joined the Youth Association in Đà Nẵng. Born in 1940, in the Điện Bàn district of Quảng Nam, Cẩm's father was a communist cadre who had relocated to the north after Geneva in 1954.⁴⁵⁷ In the early 1960s, Cẩm was a primary school teacher who was working at a number of different locations around Quảng Nam to support her family. In his memoirs, Cơ describes his first encounter with the eager young underground agent one evening in Đà Nẵng in 1963:

Son Hải brought me to meet a female teacher, Mrs. Phạm Thị Cẩm Nhung, who was teaching at the primary school [Sao Nam] on Hoàng Diệu street in Đà Nẵng. Cẩm Nhung was a tall powerfully built woman, who was about 22 years old. Her father had gone north in 1954, her mother and her older brother and younger sister remained in Đà Nẵng. Cẩm was a pillar of the family. She traveled around to teach at all the schools in the area in order to take care of her brother and sister and help them be able to study. She grew up in extreme poverty, so she was very serious in the way she conducted herself. She knew how to cope with difficulty and survive. She was eagerly waiting for the day her father would return to be with her mother. Upon meeting me, she happily confessed that desire. [When I brought up the subject of organizing] it was not necessary for me to use any propaganda or persuasion with her at all. She told me immediately "I heard Son Hải would bring you here to meet with Ngọc, people in the mountains returning to the city, người ở trên núi về, em mừng lắm, trông mãi. Té ra ở trên núi về rãng giống y chang người ở Đà Nẵng rứa? I just want to go to the mountains, can I do that? I advised her "the revolution surely needs people in Đà Nẵng more. If everyone goes to the mountains, who will do the work of revolution in Đà Nẵng? Your work is here, finding a way to build networks of underground agents at the schools where you teach and in the neighborhoods where you are staying. Làm được rứa là bằng cả chục người trên núi! Cẩm answered me immediately; I will do any work that you assign for me, I believe I can get it done!⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁶ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. 1*, 255.

⁴⁵⁷ Cam's uncle would later become Party Secretary of the Quảng Nam Party Committee back when Quảng Nam still included Đà Nẵng.

⁴⁵⁸ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. 1*, 96.

Cầm dedicated the remaining years of her life to fulfilling that pledge. Through her personal network of friends and colleagues, Cơ was able to enlist the aid of a number of new recruits in the Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam area. It was Cầm who in 1964 first brought Nguyễn Văn Đồng, and then following Đồng's arrest by RVN police, Sơn Hải to the home of Mrs. Giáo, enabling the creation of a new student network in Tam Kỳ.⁴⁵⁹⁴⁶⁰ Cầm had become close with Mrs. Giáo when she was taken in by her a few years earlier after her family had been forced out of her home village by fighting between ARVN and NLF forces.⁴⁶¹ It was also Cầm Nhung who in 1965 brought Lê Công Cơ to a meeting in Đà Nẵng where she reintroduced him to an old friend named Nguyễn Lương Y.⁴⁶²

Affiliated Communist Party Official: Đỗ Thế Cháp

Đỗ Thế Cháp (aka Mười Cháp - Đỗ Thế Cháp) was born in 1922 in the Nui Thanh district of Quảng Nam. Cháp joined the Việt Minh as a teenager and was arrested and imprisoned by the French during WWII. Having been an active participant in the August Revolution, he was appointed as a member of the Party Committee in Tam Kỳ in 1945. After the Geneva Conference in 1954, Cháp became the Party Secretary for the district of Tam Kỳ.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁹ Cầm Nhung and Nguyễn Văn Đồng were a couple who eventually married after Đồng was released from prison. They were both killed in battle around the same time in 1970-71.

⁴⁶⁰ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ 10*.

⁴⁶¹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân, Recorded, March 11, 2019.

⁴⁶² It had been almost 5 years since their last meeting in Sài Gòn and their lives and circumstances had changed drastically in the interim. While Cơ had spent much of the last several years student activist leader building and leading an NLF student movement in Central Vietnam, Y graduated military school at the top of his class in Sài Gòn and was now an ARVN officer who was working in Huế as the personal assistant to the top RVN general, Nguyễn Chánh Thi. Since their last meeting in Sài Gòn, Cơ and Y had exchanged letters regularly for several years, but had lost contact as events began to pull them in dramatically different directions. Both young men were among the most important weapons in the NLF arsenal at that time. Cơ, as the leader of a sprawling network of hundreds of underground agents spread out over a five province area of Central Vietnam, while Y had become, arguably, the most well positioned deep cover infiltration agent of the NLF in the south during that period. (Hồi Ký Lê Công Cơ Page 232

⁴⁶³ Nẵng, “Mười Cháp và Một Thời...”

Over the years, Cháp acquired a reputation among his comrades as a daring, creative and cunning leader with a talent for the trade craft of spying, including the use of disguises, agitprop and techniques for infiltration and subversion. Cháp was also known to sometimes carry a sawed-off shotgun concealed in his coat which he would brandish when cornered as a measure of last resort. Cháp frequently used his talents to travel undetected through RVN controlled areas in order to organize and train different groups of underground agents and communist cells around Quảng Nam and was a skilled recruiter of new Party members, establishing a number of communist cells in the Tam Kỳ area. Near the end of the war, RVN police managed to discover his identity and on several occasions nearly captured him, but through a combination of luck and quick wits Cháp was able to evade his pursuers at the last moment. Placing a bounty on his head also turned out to equally unsuccessful.⁴⁶⁴⁴⁶⁵

Cháp often stayed at Mrs. Giáo's home while conducting Party business in Tam Kỳ. Among the upper echelon leaders of the Communist Party in Quảng Nam, it was Cháp (and another colleague, Đào Đắc Trinh) who took primary responsibility for the training and support of the Youth Association. His particular skill set was especially useful to pass on to members of the Youth Association who learned to apply many of the techniques taught to them by the leaders like Cháp.

Youth Association Committee Secretary: Đỗ Hùng Luân,

Born in 1944, as a young man Luân was tall for a Vietnamese and well built with a broad face and square jaw. A talented young student from a poor family growing up in the countryside of Quảng Nam province, he scored high on the high school placement test and won a spot for

⁴⁶⁴ Nãng.

⁴⁶⁵ Tam Kỳ currently has a street named after him.

himself among a select group of youth from the nearby villages and towns who received scholarships allowing them to go to school in the city. Growing up during the war of French decolonization and its aftermath, amongst a family and rural community seething with anti-colonial outrage, and with the neighboring countryside consumed by revolutionary upheaval, Luân, like many of the youth in Central Vietnam at this time, was deeply inspired by the patriotic fervor of his community. From a very young age, Luân's parents and extended family imbued him with a passionate belief in the necessity and inevitability of a political revolution to bring about a united, independent and free Vietnam.

A tradition of supporting revolution in Luân's family dates back to his grandparents on both sides of his family who had worked together to support the Duy Tân anti-French Vietnamese modernization movement under the leadership of Trần Cao Vân. During a crackdown, Luân's maternal grandfather was arrested by the French and died in prison at the age of 46. During a recent interview Luân recalled, "My father was the sixth child of my paternal grandfather. He participated in overthrowing the French colonialists. He was a Việt Minh. He began participating in the Việt Minh in 1936." For Luân, the arrest and then imprisonment of his brother on Côn Đảo Island in 1964 was an immediate and tangible manifestation of an multi-generational struggle for independence and freedom.⁴⁶⁶

I was very eager to participate in the revolution because Ngô Đình Diệm arrested my friends and relatives and arrested people in the area and 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.⁴⁶⁷

Luân's home village overwhelmingly supported the Việt Minh during the French War of decolonization and was part of an area referred to as a "liberated zone" meaning a region of the

⁴⁶⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁶⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

south which had come under the long term political and military control of the Việt Minh. As a consequence, he spent his early childhood years attending primary school under the tutelage of instructors who either supported the Việt Minh, or were at least willing to work under their authority. In 1954, when the fighting ceased, the school came under the political control of the Ngô Đình Diệm government. During this time, many of teachers at the school who had supported the Việt Minh against the French were replaced. Angered by this, Luân refused to attend, hoping that the general elections, scheduled to take place in 1956, would reunify the country under revolutionary leadership.⁴⁶⁸

After 6 years had passed without nation-wide elections being held, Luân began to fear he might spend too much of his youth waiting and miss his opportunity to receive a decent education. Studying intensely on his own, he managed to pass the examination for entrance into the local high school, placing in the top one percent of students in his area that year. Luân was eager to return to school, but his family was unable to afford the expense of the tuition. “I thought since we were poor we must go to school to escape poverty....Therefore, after six years away from school, I applied to take the entrance exam at Trần Cao Vân High School in Tam Kỳ to see if I could pass. I studied on my own, and I reviewed on my own, and, when I went and took the test, I was ranked number 7 of 200 students granted admission.”^{469,470}

Like so many of the other members of Lê Công Cơ’s Youth Association, Luân maintained strong familial connections to the countryside:

In the first year, I became the number one student in the class and the committee in the school saw that I was admitted into a high grade level, and after one year, I was the highest ranked student, so they gave me an application for a fellowship. From that year

⁴⁶⁸ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁶⁹ According to Luân, about 2000 prospective students took the test that year. The symbolism of attending Trần Cao Vân high school in Tam Kỳ, which was named after the primary leader of the Duy Tân movement, must have been a constant reminder for Luân of his family’s long patriotic tradition.

⁴⁷⁰ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

until when I finished school, each year, I had a scholarship. Although the money was not a lot for a poor family like mine, it was a decent amount. When I couldn't attend school, after people harvested the rice and some hay was left over, the hay would be separated, put in layers and dried so that people could make a roof for their house. I made bundles of hay and dried it. I carried it across from one side to the other of the village to sell to the families there so they could make their roofs. I don't remember what one load of hay was worth, but that fellowship was worth hundreds of loads of hay. So I could go to school with a decent life. During the time when I attended school on Saturday and Sunday, I had to return home to help my mother work in the rice fields.⁴⁷¹

Luân's ambition to get an education took him out of the countryside and into an area of Quảng Nam he considered to be under enemy occupation. While his family members and friends organized revolutionary resistance from the countryside, Luân was forced to either set aside his antipathy for the Diệm government or reach adulthood without ever receiving a high school education. Joining the Youth Association seemed an ideal solution to this dilemma allowing him to combine his pursuit of an education in Tam Kỳ with important work as a revolutionary activist, making it possible for him to simultaneously pursue his ambition and do his patriotic duty by fulfilling his obligations to his country.⁴⁷²

Youth Association Deputy Secretary: Nguyễn Nhung:

Born in 1944 in Thăng Bình commune in Quảng Nam to a family of prosperous farmers in area of Quảng Nam that was liberated during the French War, Nguyễn Nhung remembers as a child watching French planes dropping bombs on his village. Nhung's father joined the Việt Minh during WWII, participated in the August Revolution and was the Party Secretary of the Communist Party in the district in which Nhung grew up. Nhung remembers from a very early age his mother's dedication to helping the Việt Minh fighters living in her area, dispensing food,

⁴⁷¹ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁷² Đỗ Hùng Luân.

housing, medical care and other kindnesses to local guerillas as well as collecting substantial amounts of rice to donate to the war effort.⁴⁷³

Nhung's family was hit hard by the Diệm government's anti-communist campaign, many family members were arrested or killed causing terrible grief for those who remained. In 1957, Nhung's father "vuot bien" traveling north by sea because his network had been exposed and many of its members were being hunted down.⁴⁷⁴ Despite the fact that his father was a Communist Party official, Nhung grew up knowing very little about the ideology of communism. Notwithstanding this, Nhung's upbringing put him in constant contact with revolutionary forces. For Nhung, participation in revolution was a given:

I joined without thinking, was devoted [to revolution] without thinking, sacrificed without thinking, participated with complete devotion to the life of the revolution. We could sacrifice family, wife, children, everything. At that time, I was studying, but I was ready to go out in the street to fight and participate in revolution because the image of the revolutionary at that time was so great. There was no place to criticize. Because of this I followed the revolution without thinking, for the people, for the old man Ho, all of the youth participated because of the old man Ho.⁴⁷⁵

Youth Association Member, Nguyễn Quang Vinh:

Born in 1948, the son of a wealthy landlord in Tam Ngọc district of Tam Kỳ, Nguyễn Quang Vinh's father was community leader and a low level mandarin in Tam Kỳ who supported the Việt Minh during the French war and was appointed head (*Xa truong*) of the Communist Party in his commune in the 1950s. In 1957, Vinh's father, Nguyễn Nha, was arrested and secretly killed by RVN police when his position as an official and a financial backer of the Communist Party in Tam Kỳ was discovered. After his death, Vinh's family was given no

⁴⁷³ Nguyễn Nhung, Interview with Nguyễn Nhung, Recorded, September 21, 2017.

⁴⁷⁴ Đi Tập Kết vs Vuốt biên his organization was uncovered therefore he had to go, but he did not "đi tập kết", he went by sea to the north. In order to guarantee their safety, it was organized for a group of communist officials to be evacuated across the ocean and brought north in 1957, which was after the two-year period of open borders agreed upon at Geneva had already ended.

⁴⁷⁵ Nhung, Interview with Nguyễn Nhung.

explanation by the government regarding what happened or why.⁴⁷⁶ In 1964, the year Vinh joined the Youth Association, he was awarded a scholarship by the RVN government to be trained as an army officer in Đà Lạt. At the time of his arrest, Vinh was preparing to leave, hoping to find a useful position in the RVN military where he could gather intelligence for the NLF.⁴⁷⁷

Youth Association Member Vũ Bá Học:

Vũ Bá Học, was born in 1943 and grew up in the countryside in the Tam Thanh commune of Tam Kỳ in a family of fishermen and farmers who were strong supporters of the revolution. During the French War, Học's two older brothers joined the Việt Minh military in Quảng Nam and decided to regroup to the north (đi tập kết) in 1954 to avoid persecution by the Diệm government. Học's family life in his home village became extremely difficult when his home was burned to the ground in a battle between RVN and NLF forces. Học had 4 brothers and one sister. All four brothers joined the revolution.⁴⁷⁸

Like most of his fellow Youth Association members in Tam Kỳ, Học was an excellent student and was attending Trần Cao Vân High School at the time of his recruitment into the Youth Association. Reluctant to leave his family behind in the countryside during a time of crisis, but not wanting to miss this opportunity, Học decided he had no choice but to go to Tam Kỳ to study to improve his education and obtain work. He hoped that while attending Trần Cao Vân he could continue to find ways to support the revolution. Feeling extremely fortunate to escape the bombing in his village and the terrible losses his community was suffering that year in

⁴⁷⁶ Even today, Vinh still has no idea where or how his father was killed or what prompted his arrest.

⁴⁷⁷ Nguyễn Quang Vinh, Interview with Nguyễn Quang Vinh, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁷⁸ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học, Recorded, September 24, 2017.

1964, Hoc saw recruitment into the Youth Association as an ideal opportunity to serve his country while at the same time pursuing an education.⁴⁷⁹

In the early 1960s, Hoc was principally concerned about the American presence in Vietnam. Resisting what he viewed as a foreign occupation by the Americans was his chief motivation for joining the revolution. For Hoc, Hồ Chí Minh's famous exhortation "nothing is more valuable than freedom and independence" was an inspiration and a call to action for which he would willingly sacrifice everything.⁴⁸⁰

Youth Association Member, Trương Cao Nhã:

Born in 1945, in the An Phú commune of Tam Kỳ, Trương Cao Nhã's family were prosperous rice farmers who supported the Việt Minh war effort against the French. Nhã was a good student and fortunate that his family could afford the tuition fee allowing him to attend high school at Trần Cao Vân. Like so many other young men from the Vietnamese countryside in the 1960s, he was a strong supporter of the Buddhist movement and was outraged by what he viewed as terrible injustices perpetrated against the Buddhist community by the Diệm government. Recruited into the Youth Association in 1964, by that time he had already been working for several years in Tam Kỳ as an underground agent of the NLF.⁴⁸¹

Nhã was looking for new ways to become more actively involved in the revolution while attending school when he was approached one day at Trần Cao Vân by Đỗ Hùng Luân. During a candid conversation about politics and current events, Luân broached the subject of joining the Youth Association by appealing to Nhã's desire to challenge the injustices he saw being perpetrated by the Republic, "you have great ideals, and are committed to fighting injustices and

⁴⁷⁹ Vũ Bá Học.

⁴⁸⁰ Vũ Bá Học.

⁴⁸¹ Trương Cao Nhã, Interview with Trương Cao Nhã, Recorded, October 5, 2017.

the appalling actions of the old [Diệm] regime. You should join our organization that fights against these abuses.” After recruiting him, Luân brought Nhã to a meeting with Sơn Hải.⁴⁸²

Youth Association Member in Charge of Recruitment: Nguyễn Đình Sơn

Born in 1946 in Tam Ngọc district of Tam Kỳ, Nguyễn Đình Sơn was a small and slender youth who was the fifth son of Giáo Mai, a communist official and underground agent in Tam Kỳ who was secretly murdered by the RVN government in 1960. The killing of Sơn’s father was a formative event in his life, instilling him with deep seated hatred for the Republic, which according to Đỗ Hùng Luân, Sơn at times had great difficulty concealing.

Sơn lived with his mother, Mrs. Giáo, a dedicated underground agent who continued to support the Communist Party after her husband’s death, turning her family home into a meeting place for party officials and the headquarters of the Youth Association in 1964-65. Sơn became a very enthusiastic supporter of the revolution. During the time the first recruiting was being done for the organization, he was asked by Nguyễn Văn Đồng to take responsibility for recruiting the core group of leaders at Trần Cao Vân High School, which he did with great eagerness, recruiting Luân and a number of the other student leaders of the Youth Association at Trần Cao Vân High School.⁴⁸³

Recruitment and Vetting:

For Đỗ Hùng Luân participation in the Youth Association began at the age of 17, while he was attending Trần Cao Vân High School in Tam Kỳ. While at school one day Luân overheard a conversation about the formation of a local chapter of the revolutionary organization

⁴⁸² Trương Cao Nhã.

⁴⁸³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời Chống Mỹ)*

the Association of Youth High School Students and College students for Liberation. The prospect of joining a student led revolutionary organization seemed like an ideal opportunity which he joined eagerly, feeling “very happy because [he] could go to the city to study and participate in the revolution, without having to go back to the countryside.”⁴⁸⁴

Luân went on to become a very active organizer in his own right, bringing in a number of new underground agents into the Youth Association:

At Trần Cao Vân, I started to participate in the Revolution in August of 1963. At that time, I was very enthusiastic about participating. I recruited a lot of students into the organization. If I saw a classmate who had family who participated in the revolution and that person had revolutionary consciousness, I would propagandize them, and, in turn, they would recruit others and so on and so forth. Things continued like that and the organization grew and spread. If you wanted to recruit a person, first you would subtly question them. We went to school together and 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 regrouped to the north (đi tập kết). When we felt we could be certain they had revolutionary views we would start to propagandize them and bring them into the organization.⁴⁸⁵

Through the final months of 1964 and into 1965, the Youth Association continued to grow rapidly, and as mentioned previously, by the summer of 1965 the network consisted of more than 50 students and underground agents working and studying in and around the Tam Kỳ area.⁴⁸⁶ After the new recruit’s family histories had been vetted and several meetings with student leaders from the Youth Association had been arranged to prepare and indoctrinate them, they would then be escorted to a clandestine meeting with Sơn Hải. The meeting was deliberately built up in importance in the minds of new members by their recruiters to give them the impression that they were being introduced to a high-level official of the National Liberation

⁴⁸⁴ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁸⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁸⁶ The names and birth places of 51 Youth Association members and affiliated underground agents are recorded in Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Nhung Nam Thang Ay, Hoat Dong Cach Mang Cua Hoi Lien Hiep Thanh Vien-Hoc Sinh-Sinh Vien Giai Phong Quang Nam Tai Tam Kỳ (Thoi Chong My)*, 80.

Front. This was a psychological tactic intended to instill new members with a sense of a direct connection with the revolution. Once they had met with Hải and been accepted, the new recruit was truly part of the organization.⁴⁸⁷

Mâm Non Newspaper

Nguyễn Nhung, Deputy Secretary of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ, took on chief responsibility for the creation of a student newspaper written by local students and tailored specifically for the Tam Kỳ region. In a booklet published by members of the group to preserve the memory of the Tam Kỳ student group, Nhung writes:

After 40 years has passed from the day the newspaper Mam Non came out, the work and the specific circumstances of publishing that newspaper are etched in my memory. In an area controlled by the enemy all the revolutionary organizations received documents and newspapers that were brought from the liberated areas into the city, but the documents were usually not enough [for educational and propaganda purposes]. The Youth Association in Tam Kỳ saw the need for a newspaper written and printed inside the urban area to shine light in a timely way on the cruelty and the falsehoods of the RVN regime and to propagandize and educate the people about revolution, foremost, among the youth, high school students and intellectuals in the Tam Kỳ area. Making a contribution in service of the public and for the liberation of the entire south and unification of the country.⁴⁸⁸

When Nhung agreed to take on the assignment he had no experience whatsoever with writing a newspaper and no one he could safely ask to teach him. These challenges were compounded by the fact that he had to be extremely careful to conceal his illegal activity. The first difficulty that had to be overcome was acquiring a typewriter. Đỗ Hùng Luân assigned this problem to an underground agent named, Nguyễn Nga, who often traveled to Đà Nẵng. Through his contacts in Đà Nẵng, Nga was able to purchase a suitable machine. Having successfully purchased the typewriter, arrangements then had to be made to surreptitiously transport the

⁴⁸⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 16.

⁴⁸⁸ Đỗ Hùng Luân, *Thang Ngay Cua Muoi Nam Ay* (Đà Nẵng: Nha Xuat Ban Đà Nẵng, 2010).

contraption to from Đà Nẵng to Mrs. Giáo's home in Tam Kỳ, which was the safest place within the town spacious enough to accommodate their work.⁴⁸⁹ Now that he had the typewriter in his possession, Nhung realized he had to teach himself how to use it. In order to self-school himself as quickly as possible, Nhung took long walks through to the center of town, finding excuses to linger on the street in front of local print shops to observe carefully each step in the process of using and maintaining the machine.⁴⁹⁰

Typing the newspapers could only be done during hours of peak activity during the day because the noise from the machine carried across the neighborhood at night. In order to prevent discovery, Mrs. Giáo instructed the youthful revolutionaries on the security precautions they would take while preparing the newspapers in her home. "Each time you print in the house, I will bring a heifer out to the gate in front of the garden to graze, if I see any sign of the enemy might be coming, I will yell 'Nu Nu' at the heifer, and you must stop printing immediately. If it looks like something terrible is about to happen, I will shout 'Nu Nu' louder and more impatiently. When that happens, you must quickly bring the typewriter and all the documents to our prearranged location."⁴⁹¹

The content of the first newspaper was modelled after the student paper *Hướng Sóng* published by the Youth Association in Huế but was tailored to the local setting in Tam Kỳ. As in Huế, in addition to disseminating important news to local Front cadres and underground agents, the distribution of revolutionary newspapers played a key role in strengthening the bond between the NLF and local people who were sympathetic to their message, but had not yet fully committed to revolution:

⁴⁸⁹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 74.

⁴⁹⁰ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 75.

⁴⁹¹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 76.

The people who wrote for this newspaper were those who were in the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ. Each person wrote one or two articles.⁴⁹² The content of the newspaper reported the revolutionary news and published articles calling on people to participate in the revolution, calling on the revolutionary spirit of the people, and narrating stories of how people participate in the revolution...Our newspaper was timely and reflected the realities of urban life. The only problem was that not many copies were printed, and it was only distributed to a limited number of people. So one person would read it and pass it on for another person to read.⁴⁹³

Typing each individual newspaper was a laborious process requiring many hours of hard work, but Youth Association members took pride in the final product. Today, Nhung looks back with great fondness on the time members the group spent together preparing the newspaper, sharing ideas and working to overcome each challenge they encountered along the way:

Memories of the newspaper remain imprinted in my mind, alongside the image of Mother Giáo, the devoted, gentle and enthusiastic mother of VNAH, working dutifully with the (Youth Association) LHTN-HS-SVGP. Mrs. Giáo's support knew no fear of the dangers because if and when the enemy discovered she had a typewriter being used to publish our revolutionary newspaper against the regime, her life and all her families property would fall into the brutal hands of the RVN regime!⁴⁹⁴

Propaganda:

Leaders of the student organization were trained in variety of propaganda techniques by Party officials in the jungle. The use of propaganda was an important component of the Youth Association's strategy, used primarily for recruiting purposes, but was also used to sway wavering followers of the Republic towards the revolution whenever possible. Additionally, in situations where this was clearly not possible, propaganda could also be effective in influencing some in supporters of the Republic toward a more neutralist position, or simply convince them to

⁴⁹² Son Hải, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Nhung, Trương Cao Nhã, Đào Ngọc Diêu and Nguyễn Việt Xuân wrote articles for Mam Non.

⁴⁹³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁹⁴ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Nhung Nam Thang Ay, Hoat Dong Cach Mang Cua Hoi Lien Hiep Thanh Vien-Hoc Sinh-Sinh Vien Giai Phong Quang Nam Tai Tam Kỳ (Thoi Chong My)*, 78.

change a particular tyrannical behavior. According to Đỗ Hùng Luân, “there were two methods of propaganda. One was legal propaganda, and the other was illegal propaganda. Legal propaganda consisted of discussions just to understand people’s thoughts, their views and their attitudes about revolution, and they had no reason to suspect that we were communists. We used legal propaganda not just to recruit agents, but we also used it on enemy soldiers.”⁴⁹⁵

Members of the Youth Association were encouraged to find excuses to approach RVN soldiers and strike up conversations intended to influence them in subtle ways. Sometimes it might simply be admonishing careless soldiers to be more thoughtful about how they behaved towards poor farmers in the countryside. Luân recalls as a young man approaching a pair of RVN soldiers driving a tank recklessly across his aunt’s rice fields near Tam Kỳ:

I was going to school and staying at my aunt’s house. There was a man whose name was Nhật who had a sewing machine stored at my aunt’s house. There were two ARVN soldiers whose military post was at the airport close to my aunt’s house. They often went to my aunt’s house where the sewing machine was. At this time my home village was already liberated, and I saw some enemy soldiers rush headlong through my neighbor’s rice field with their tank. Later I approached the two soldiers at the place where the sewing machine was located. I started to use legal propaganda on them. I asked “are you usually deployed to this area?” They said “Yes” So I said “when you are in your tank please don’t rush headlong through the rice fields because the people here are poor peasants and they need rice, you shouldn’t destroy it.” They listened but they didn’t say anything. After that they returned to their military post. That afternoon they brought a military unit to surround my aunt’s house where I was living. They searched my aunt’s house and arrested me, but I had hidden all of my materials, and they couldn’t find anything. When we participated in the revolution, our leaders instructed us in certain principles. One was never store revolutionary materials in your house, and the second was never let others know your revolutionary duties, and the third was don’t know and don’t ask anything you don’t need to know. Therefore, they searched my house, but they couldn’t find anything, but they brought us to a house near their post at the airport and forced me to sit on a chair and surrounded me and pointed guns at me. A sergeant named Vinh questioned me, I just told him the truth. It seemed like I had nothing to do with communists because I was a student who went to school in the city. I didn’t do anything, and the civilians who lived near the post knew me, and they also had revolutionary sympathies, and they told the soldiers, this person only goes to school, he is good natured, he has never done anything. Please release him so that he can go home and go school. Finally, they agreed that I didn’t do anything illegal so they released me. The next

⁴⁹⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

day the two soldiers that I used legal propaganda on came to see and said that they had misunderstood. They thought I was an RVN spy, so they felt they needed to test me. If they didn't inform, they could be arrested. They thought I was working for the RVN military. This type of spy would pretend to use propaganda to test the thought and spirit of the soldiers to see if they were loyal to the RVN, or to the communists. They apologized because they misunderstood.⁴⁹⁶ Luân interview 1

Because of the high rate of conscription among the RVN military, many RVN soldiers were ambivalent or even hostile toward the RVN government. Others were simply trying to survive day to day. Youth Association members often found RVN soldiers to be receptive to subtle criticism of the government, those that were most receptive could then be singled out for a more direct approach. Once they saw that they were achieving some success, Youth Association members could switch to more aggressive tactics, such as encouraging wavering or disgruntled soldiers to desert and attempting to recruit them to join the NLF.⁴⁹⁷

Distributing Leaflets and other tasks:⁴⁹⁸

Distributing leaflets was a useful way of raising awareness of the need for revolution while at the same time conveying to local residents of Tam Kỳ the vitality and close proximity of an underground revolutionary movement. It was also used as a psychological tactic for unnerving American soldiers, undermining their sense of personal safety. Generally, the fliers in Vietnamese intended for soldiers of the Republic called on them to desert and return to their

⁴⁹⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁴⁹⁷ Trương Cao Nhã, Interview with Trương Cao Nhã.

⁴⁹⁸“There were many tasks in the revolution. For example, at that time we recruited some schoolgirls, and there was a directive that schoolgirls should embroider handkerchiefs/headbands? that would be sent the liberation soldiers. On the handkerchiefs, the schoolgirls would embroider the word Xuân Bình Dã, because at that time we had won the battle Bình Đa in the south in early 1960. They embroidered the word Áp Bắc because we defeated the Americans at Áp Bắc in My Tho during the “special war”. The people we recruited wrote letters to send to the liberation soldiers, these letters and the handkerchiefs were packed and sent to Đà Nẵng. These handkerchiefs and letters would be transported to the liberation areas...” Luan interview 1

When the letters and the headbands were finished, Nguyễn Đình Sơn and Nguyễn Vinh were assigned the task of taking them to Cam Nhung in Đà Nẵng where they would then be transported to NLF military bases in the jungle. (Luan et al 17)

Sơn Hải needed fake identity and work papers to travel freely around the Tam Kỳ area. Đào Ngọc Diêu and Nguyễn Vinh got him everything he needed which were all virtually indistinguishable from the genuine government issue documents. P18 Luan Et al) Always a pain trying to move around in the flooding during the rainy season.

villages to fight to defend their homes. According to Luân, the Youth Association “distributed pamphlets all over the city, many in Vietnamese, but also in English. I myself distributed pamphlets in English. I was bicycling on the street, and when I saw the jeep of an American officer, I would secretly put a pamphlet on that jeep.”⁴⁹⁹

Placing a pamphlet inside an American jeep was a courageous act which by this time had been refined by Youth Association members into an art form. Dropping or placing a leaflet had to be done surreptitiously and with as much speed as possible to avoid being seen or captured by the enemy. In the case of American soldiers, this was typically accomplished by waiting for an opportune moment when a jeep carrying American soldiers would pull up along the side of the street in the city center of Tam Kỳ. Once the occupants of the jeep had entered a store, restaurant, or bar, a daring young Youth Association member would swiftly approach the vehicle, placing the flier in a visible position inside the jeep, and then sprint or pedal frantically through a maze of nearby alleyways to a prearranged safe location.⁵⁰⁰ “When the Americans returned to sit in their vehicle they would hesitate after they received this message. When they read it, they would be stunned, unable to ascertain the origin of this gift from the “Việt Cong” in the center of their safe city.”⁵⁰¹

Members of the Youth Association developed a variety of creative techniques to distribute fliers. For example, Vũ Bá Học fitted one of the pedals of his bicycle with a contraption that would release a flier each time he pushed down with his leg on the pedal of the bike while raising his heel. Using this device and riding along the side of the street in the shadows at night just outside the glow of the streetlights, Hoc was able to distribute large

⁴⁹⁹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁵⁰⁰ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

⁵⁰¹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 35–36.

numbers of fliers on high traffic thoroughfares in and around Tam Kỳ without ever being observed by agents of the Republic.⁵⁰²

This was a high stakes game that would certainly have provided a thrill to these young men, most of whom were still in their teens. These were not typical teenagers however. As committed revolutionaries who were engaged in dangerous and covert political struggle while surrounded by a society torn apart by war, violence and death had become an everyday part of life. They had little choice but to quickly internalize the fact that the consequences of making a single mistake could be catastrophic. Planning and preparation were therefore consistently done with professionalism and care. As a result, try as they might, the RVN police were never able to track down the source of any of the leaflets.⁵⁰³

Drawing Maps, Providing Intelligence and Planting Bombs:

Because they were educated and relatively inconspicuous, Youth Association members would periodically be requested to draw maps of sensitive locations around the Tam Kỳ area. Vũ Bá Học, for example, frequently drew maps of areas occupied by American military personnel.⁵⁰⁴ Youth Association members were also able to steal a number of maps of sensitive areas from RVN officials. On several occasions the leaders of the group were ordered to reconnoiter specific targets before an attack. Just before an NLF raid into Tam Kỳ in 1965, all the leaders of the Youth Association were tasked with closely monitoring local military installations, helping assist infiltrators and saboteurs to destroy weapons, and in preparing ambushes. For example, during a July 1965 attack on the Bao An training center in Tam Kỳ, Youth Association members assisted

⁵⁰² Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

⁵⁰³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 36.

⁵⁰⁴ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

NLF military units in infiltrating the military base to ambush artillery positions and destroy some of the big guns just prior an all-out assault.⁵⁰⁵(Citation Luân etc)

As the level of violence in the war continued to escalate into 1965, members of the Youth Association expanded the size and scope of their revolutionary activities, day by day becoming more directly involved in the life and death struggles that were taking place just outside the boundaries of Tam Kỳ. Beyond the borders of this tranquil oasis the shadow of violence and death maintained a constant presence in the surrounding villages in the countryside, serving as a powerful reminder and motivating force impelling Youth Association members towards increasingly violent action.

In the summer of 1965, the underground agent, patriotic high school teacher and respected community leader, Nguyễn Lương Ý began to make plans to strike directly at what he viewed as an invading American army. It seems the American presence in Vietnam and the increasing levels of violence in the countryside around Tam Kỳ was enough to transform this bookish middle aged secondary school teacher, who very likely would otherwise have been content to live out his life as an educator and community leader, into a violent revolutionary.⁵⁰⁶

One of Ý's closest friends and confidants was a 2nd lieutenant in the ARVN named Nguyễn Tinh. In 1964 and 1965, Nguyễn Tinh and Lương Ý would often meet to discuss the news and the latest developments in the war. Tinh was an underground agent who shared Ý's commitment to revolution but had been drafted into the military, and, like Ý's younger brother Y was sent to officer training school in Thu Duc, Sài Gòn. During one meeting in fall 1965, Tinh mentioned to Ý that there were 300 US soldiers and a US Army colonel stationed in Huế. Every

⁵⁰⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*, 29.

⁵⁰⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 30.

Sunday, the colonel and a large number of soldiers from this unit would gather at the Thuan Hoa hotel inside Huế. The presence of this very visible example of American intervention in Vietnam was, from Ý's perspective, an intolerable act of foreign aggression and an intrusion on Vietnamese sovereignty, providing ample justification for the use of deadly force in response.

Not long after his meeting with Tinh, Lương Ý, accompanied by Tinh and his younger brother, Lương Y went to the hotel together to reconnoiter the layout of the hotel and assess the feasibility and effectiveness of planting a bomb. Their privileged positions in RVN society made their work inconspicuous. Once inside, the schoolteacher escorted by the two young army lieutenants, made a careful survey of the situation at the hotel, taking time to observe and note the comings and goings of hotel employees and US and RVN military personnel.⁵⁰⁷

Having made the decision to move forward with the attack, Ý began to formulate a plan. Not wanting to act on his own without permission from the NLF, Ý traveled to Đà Nẵng to visit the home of a high ranking underground agent named Hồ Huyền. Huyen had been the Director of Education in Quảng Nam province under the Việt Minh but was recently assigned to organize networks of underground agents in Đà Nẵng. Ho agreed to help organize the attack, noting however that he would first need to report the plan to his superiors, and then once they had been given permission, the NLF would provide the men and materials needed to carry it out. This seems logical given the great value of the trio, Ý, Y and Tinh as intelligence assets and underground agents.⁵⁰⁸

Political Training:

In the summer of 1965, the province level Communist Party leadership held a meeting at Mrs. Giáo's house. It was rare for Party leaders to gather in large numbers in enemy controlled

⁵⁰⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 30–31.

⁵⁰⁸ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 28–30.

areas, so while the leaders were there, Son Hải (who lived with Mrs. Giáo) took advantage of the opportunity to report on the organizational progress of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ. Impressed with the rapid development of the network, it was decided that the City Party Committee should open up additional classes to provide training for the new recruits.⁵⁰⁹

In August 1965, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Võ Dịch Khai, Trương Cao Nhã and Nguyễn Vinh attended their first political training sessions in Tam Kỳ, which was organized by the province level Communist Party leadership in Quảng Nam. Two Party leaders, Đỗ Thế Cháp and Đào Đắc Trinh, organized the sessions to indoctrinate the student leaders in communist ideology, but more urgently, to address the need to raise the level of professionalism among Youth Association underground agents.⁵¹⁰

Training was broad in scope and intended to prepare the young men for whatever task or challenges they might face in the future: “The first thing was the point of view, revolutionary ideas and the political program of the Peoples Front to Liberate the South. Second was training in the ways to approach people, mainly to mobilize high school and college students. But the most important was to be ready to sacrifice everything....”⁵¹¹

According to Luân, this also included military training:

When we were... given political training we were also given some limited military training. Military training here was not intended to [teach us to] attack the enemy, but was aimed at self-defense. They taught us how to avoid the enemy. For example, we were taught to cover our eyes when we walked at night so that electric lights wouldn't reflect from our eyes. We were taught to walk quietly on the balls of our feet. They taught us how to infiltrate the bases of the enemy unseen. When we walked in a column, if an enemy at a military post was using a search light, we were taught to walk in a pattern so we wouldn't been seen, but military training was not the primary focus. Mostly, we were given political training. They trained us to use TNT, but our main duty was political. Mostly they trained us to build up and develop agents in case the Americans efforts were

⁵⁰⁹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 19.

⁵¹⁰ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

⁵¹¹ Nguyễn Nhung, Interview with Nguyễn Nhung.

unsuccessful in “the local war” *chiến tranh cục bộ*, we would take over the government. After that, our urban agents would administer it.⁵¹²

Additional training sessions were held in liberated areas or at one of many NLF military bases in the jungle. At these sessions, Youth Association members had their first opportunity to meet directly with Youth Association President Lê Công Cơ. Co along with Đỗ Thế Cháp, Đào Đắc Trinh and other highly experienced underground agents taught lesson on how to move through enemy territory undetected, including the use of fake names and occupations, disguises and identity papers.

On November 1st, 1965 Nguyễn Lương Ý intended to organize training sessions for 10 new recruits in the Tam Kỳ organization on the day of the Ngô Đình Diệm government’s collapse in 1963. The occasion of the collapse of the Diệm government had been declared a national holiday called “Kỷ Niệm ngày cách mạng.” This plan for political training was just about to be carried out when the Youth Association was discovered by RVN police.⁵¹³

Joining the Communist Party:

[Regarding the propaganda] concerning the People’s Revolutionary Party, which the Front presented to villagers as the “vanguard” of the movement. Only two or three in the villager actually belonged to the party, but Front messages characterized an invitation to join as a high honor. The party accepted people as members only on the recommendation of one or two long term members, and only after the prospective members has demonstrated dedication to the movement by supporting guerilla activities, proselytizing in the village, or taking other actions to assist the Front. Front messages described the party as receiving the moral encouragement and inspiration from the Labor Party of North Vietnam and presented it as the purest expression of the peoples will—the soul of the Front. Most villagers held the party in high regard because of these messages, though few thought they would ever be permitted to join. But for local Front leaders, it was different: the ideal of party membership served as an extra incentive to work hard. A leader commented, “The cadres were always very proud. They always worked hard, and they knew that the best of them, those who worked hardest for the

⁵¹² Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁵¹³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 40–41.

*revolution, and are the most intelligent, could become party members. It was one of the things that made them struggle so hard. James Trullinger. Village at War*⁵¹⁴

In 1965, City Party Committee in Tam Kỳ made the decision to develop new Communist Party members from within the Youth Association. Admission to the Party required a careful vetting process. Candidates for membership were chosen from the youth group based on their perceived loyalty, receptiveness and aptitude. This was assessed by the Party leadership of Quảng Nam when they were brought to the military base for training.⁵¹⁵⁵¹⁶

After attending several training sessions at military bases in the jungle and a week-long intensive course taught in Tam Kỳ, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Nguyễn Nhung and Vũ Bá Học were selected from among a group of 9 or 10 as the first group of candidates from the Youth Association for admission to the Communist Party. The admission ceremony was held at night in a village called Bích An in the Núi Thanh district of Quảng Nam. Departure from Tam Kỳ by the four candidates and their leader Sơn Hải was carefully choreographed to avoid suspicion. Upon arriving at their destination the four youths noticed an underground agent (who they would later come to know as Nguyễn Đan) holding a large rooster standing in the courtyard in front of a large well-appointed home with several armed guards stationed nearby.⁵¹⁷

The ritual for admission was in many ways similar to that of a secret society. Under cover of darkness Đỗ Hùng Luân and Nguyễn Đình Sơn were led into the front room of the large well-appointed home which had recently been decorated with fresh flowers, banners with revolutionary slogans and a large communist flag hanging on the wall. While Vũ Bá Học and awaited their turn in the courtyard, Dao Dac Trinh and Sơn Hải presided over the ceremony

⁵¹⁴ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 101.

⁵¹⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 36.

⁵¹⁶ A leadership position in the NLF or in the student movement did not guarantee admission to the Party. Many decided not to join, many others were never asked.

⁵¹⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 38.

inside the house. During the ceremony each new recruit swore to dedicate their lives to the Communist Party. Once all four of them had finished taking their turn completing each ritual, the rooster was slaughtered and the new Party members, their mentors, guides and guardians all sat down together to enjoy a feast of chicken soup and savor the atmosphere of solidarity and comradeship.⁵¹⁸⁵¹⁹⁵²⁰

Officials in Tam Kỳ React:

As the various revolutionary activities of the Youth Association continued to expand in scale and scope through much of 1965, the impact the underground organization was having on the community in Tam Kỳ must have been increasingly obvious to local leaders of the Republic. The Youth Association in Tam Kỳ, like its larger cousins in Huế and Đà Nẵng, was as an organization intended from its inception to be secretive and clandestine in nature, and yet simultaneously, very public in its influence. The creation and distribution of a local revolutionary newspaper and thousands of propaganda leaflets around the Tam Kỳ area was an open and direct assault on the authority and credibility of the RVN government. Certainly, by 1965, RVN officials would have found the organization's presence in Tam Kỳ impossible to overlook.

In 1964, RVN security forces in Huế had already gained important intelligence and experience uncovering the Youth Association network led by Nguyễn Thúc Lư. As a result,

⁵¹⁸ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 38–39.

⁵¹⁹ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

⁵²⁰ Six years later in 1971, Nguyễn Nhung had to be readmitted to the party. This was because the military unit he was stationed with (primarily made up of northerners) refused to recognize his membership. They disputed Nhung's claim that he was admitted in 1965. Since they were in a remote area of the jungle, they were unable to contact any members of the City Party Committee in Tam Kỳ to confirm it. According to Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nhung's family background as a wealthy peasant was raised as an issue, and he was asked by a northern political cadre why it was so easy for people to be admitted to the Communist Party in Quảng Nam at that time. This type of harassment was symptomatic of a pattern of behavior established by a powerful group of northern communists who headed south during and just after the war. While Nhung and Luan won't talk about it directly, I am sure Nhung must have greatly resented being questioned in this way considering the enormous sacrifices he and his family made and were making for the revolution in the south, a level of sacrifice not experienced by most northern families at that time. (See Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân)

members of the military and police were becoming increasingly aware of the growing size and strength of NLF led student organizations on university and high school campuses in Central Vietnam. The rapid expansion of the student network in Tam Kỳ did not go unnoticed by local authorities. The precise methods employed by RVN police to uncover the student network remains a matter of speculation among the surviving members of the Youth Association.⁵²¹

Arrest:

On the morning of October 28, 1965, Đỗ Hùng Luân arrived at Trần Cao Vân High School near the city center of Tam Kỳ with a strong suspicion that something might be amiss. Already in attendance were fellow members of the Youth Association Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Vinh and Trương Cao Nhã.⁵²² Earlier that day the school's Rector, Phạm Việt Tịch, had issued a cryptic and highly unusual announcement that "all high school students must be present at school at 3pm in order to hear (the local military commander), Major Nghĩa, speak.... It is crucial that all students from grades 11 and 12 attend." The peculiar format of the Rector's announcement was noteworthy. "Why?" Luân wondered, "had it been issued separately from the other daily announcements? Why did it put special emphasis on students from grades 11 and 12?"

Luân's unease that day was well justified, as an organizer and leader in a rapidly growing underground network, he was constantly aware of the danger of a mistake by an underground agent or a tip from an informer leading to their discovery by RVN police. Luân was watchful for anything out of the ordinary that might indicate an impending crackdown by police.

⁵²¹ Former Youth Association Committee Secretary Đỗ Hùng Luân considers it very likely that they were betrayed by a new recruit brought into the organization by Nguyễn Lương Y. Luân believes this young man's commitment to the cause was never very strong. In the days immediately before the discovery of their organization this individual was extremely nervous about being required to cross over disputed territory in the countryside to travel to a military base in the jungle in order to report for mandatory political training sessions.

⁵²² Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phòng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*, 45.

Consequently, the Rector's oddly worded announcement that morning had provoked him to call for an emergency meeting by members of the network attending school at Trần Cao Vân to discuss its meaning and implications. The impromptu meeting never took place, however, because Luân was the only Youth Association member who arrived at Mrs. Giáo's home in time that day.⁵²³

In 1965, Trần Cao Vân High School was well known as most prestigious educational institution in Quang Tin Province with over 2000 of the regions' most talented students attending. Naturally, the school and its activities garnered a significant amount of attention from local authorities for a variety of reasons. Major Nghĩa's announced intention to speak to the students was, therefore, not automatically deemed by members of the Youth Association to be due to any ominous developments. Unaware at that time that a full-scale manhunt had already begun on the streets of Tam Kỳ, Luân went to school that morning prepared to attend classes as usual.⁵²⁴

Arriving at school, Luân joined his comrades and attended class just like any other day. Just a few minutes before the end of Luân's physics class at 1pm, ARVN Major Nguyễn Ngọc Nghĩa arrived in the courtyard of the school trailed by a large retinue of soldiers, officials and police. The gates leading into the school yard were shut while soldiers and police took up positions sealing off any potential avenues of escape.⁵²⁵ Many of the students filed out of their

⁵²³ Bang Qua Nghiet Nga, 65

⁵²⁴ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phòng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*, 42–43.

⁵²⁵ Little more than a year after forming the Youth Association someone inside the organization informed on the student leaders of the group. Because recruitment and vetting was done with great care, successful infiltration of the group by an enemy agent seems an unlikely explanation to former Committee Secretary Đỗ Hùng Luân. He argues that someone who was not committed enough to the revolution must have "wavered." "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, however, in the process of

classrooms and stood waiting and watching as the scene unfolded in front of them. While Rector Phạm Viết Tích checked role to see which students were in attendance, the major and his retinue stood in front of the growing crowd of students in the courtyard. After a moment Major Nghĩa began to speak:

We have bombed Hiếu Đức and Thượng Đức to eliminate the brain of the Việt Cộng. Around that area the Việt Cộng have been putting pressure on and attacking a number places including the Kỳ Nghĩa airport. There are some students in this school who are aiding and abetting the Việt Cộng, and we have one student (Nguyễn Đình Sơn) who is living in the same house with the head of the province level Communist Party committee (they incorrectly believed this to be Sơn Hải). I must tell you that they cannot hide. Right now, one of my military units is conducting an operation at Nguyễn Dục High School to arrest one teacher and a few more high school students.⁵²⁶

After Nghĩa had finished, an ARVN captain stood in front of the students, removed a sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolded it and began to read from a list containing 5 names: “Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Vinh, Trương Cao Nhã and Đỗ Hùng Luân.” As he called out one by one the names of the leaders of the Youth Association attending Trần Cao Vân, Luân describes in his memoirs how he remembers clearly listening carefully to each name, remaining hopeful until the last moment that somehow his name might through some random stroke of luck have been omitted from the list. With all the exits sealed off it was clear that there would be no chance of escape and all five youths were quickly taken into custody without resistance.⁵²⁷

participating in the revolution, although the enemy could not infiltrate us with any spies, there were people who were anxious and afraid, and they wavered and betrayed the revolution. During the war in the south, not only students but among the people there were many cases like this. In my organization in Tam Kỳ I suspect there was someone like that. This person had a father who went to the north, but when he participated in the revolutionary activities, he was very timid and afraid. This person never went to the jungle for political training. He lived in the center of Tam Kỳ, not 3 kms away like me. I think that this person’s thoughts wavered. He was too timid, and he was about to take the high school graduation exam. This person was the one who informed on me to the enemy, and my organization was broken, and I was arrested.”

⁵²⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 44–45.

⁵²⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, *Bang Qua Nghiet Nga*, 66

In and around Tam Kỳ that day, Major Nghia's men hunted down members of the Youth Association, arresting 10 underground agents in total.⁵²⁸ The capture of Sơn Hải was given the highest priority. Hải was caught completely off guard while on his way to a meeting just as he was turning from an alleyway to enter the home of an underground agent. Lying in wait for him, one overzealous police officer fired a warning shot into the air immediately upon seeing his face. Hải was then surrounded and taken into custody. With the arrest of Sơn Hải RVN officials believed that they achieved a significant victory by capturing a high-level Communist Party official, perhaps even the head of the Communist Party in Quảng Nam. The “Tinh Uy” as Major Nghĩa had claimed while speaking to the students at Trần Cao Vân.⁵²⁹

Obviously, this was not the case. In 1965, Sơn Hải was only 23 years old and by that time had already been admitted to the Communist Party. This rapid advancement was due to the fact that Hải was a talented and respected underground agent and Youth Association organizer but still far from being a high-level Communist Party official. The focus on Sơn Hải as an important leader was a clear indication that the informant who set off the investigation leading to the arrest of 10 Youth Association members was a low-level recruit, someone who had been impressed by the way Sơn Hải was characterized by their student recruiter as an important leader in the NLF. This minor misrepresentation of reality was a psychological tactic, mentioned previously which was used to help instill a consciousness of the importance of their work and make them feel as if they were tangibly involved in the work of revolution.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁸ Nguyễn Văn Sơn (Sơn Hải), Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Nguyễn Quang Vinh, Trương Cao Nhã, Đào Ngọc Diêu, Nguyễn Việt Xuân, an elementary school teacher named Nguyễn Bích, and Nguyễn Lương Ý.

⁵²⁹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phòng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*, 44.

⁵³⁰ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 16.

Upon arriving at the police station, the prisoners were brought into separate rooms to be interrogated. It seems Sơn Hải's dedication to the revolution and ability as an underground agent had not prepared him for the panic he felt when anticipating the pain and indignity of torture and the very real possibility of imminent death he was now facing. He certainly would have known that if he failed to quickly convince his interrogators that he was not a high-level communist official, he would be tortured mercilessly for weeks or months and then secretly killed and buried in an unmarked grave. According to Luân, Hai was badly shaken up by the experience of being pressed and very quickly cracked under the physical pressure and intimidation tactics of his interrogators.⁵³¹

Meanwhile, having been taken to another room nearby, Đỗ Hùng Luân was stubbornly refusing to concede defeat. At one point early on in his interrogation it seemed to Luân that he had successfully navigated all traps and ploys used by his interrogators to induce him to incriminate himself and other members of the Youth Association. His hopes were soon dashed, however, when Sơn Hải was brought in from a room nearby to identify him. Hai looked Luân directly in the face before informing his captors that he was 100% certain that Luân was the (one of the?) Youth Association leader(s) he had described. Luân was infuriated and appalled by Sơn Hải's spinelessness and lack of professionalism. Why Sơn Hải had felt it necessary to divulge his relationship with Luân was incomprehensible to him. After being brought in to identify Luân, Hai could have easily said that this was not the person he had been referring to.⁵³²

Seeing that he could no longer plausibly continue to deny any knowledge of Hải, Luân decided instead to try a different tactic, making a show of moving up close to study Sơn Hải's features carefully. "Oh yes, I recognize him now" Luân told his interrogators, "he tried to recruit

⁵³¹ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #2 with Đỗ Hùng Luân, recorded, September 18, 2014.

⁵³² Đỗ Hùng Luân.

me into a communist organization with propaganda and when I refused he threatened to tell the police I worked with him if he was ever caught.”⁵³³ This fairly plausible explanation might have worked under other circumstances, but in the end made little difference. By this time, too many people had already been caught and the combination of Sơn Hải’s willingness to identify some of the student leaders and the inconsistencies in the stories of the other prisoners was enough evidence to convince them of their guilt. RVN interrogators then embarked on an extended program of torture and interrogation of all ten prisoners lasting a period of several weeks.⁵³⁴

Major Nghĩa’s alarming discovery of the Tam Kỳ network of student activists soon attracted the attention of his superiors. The existence of such a large network of revolutionary underground agents embedded within the new generation of local leadership and attending Quảng Tín’s most prestigious educational institution was both shocking and embarrassing to Republican leaders who had for years consistently downplayed the strength of the opposition.

The issue of the Lương brothers was a particularly sensitive one politically for local officials. Both brothers were prominent members of the community, admired and respected by many in the Tam Kỳ area. The younger brother’s recruitment as the personal secretary to Commander of 1st Corp, General Nguyễn Chánh Thi, was well known. The discovery of Y’s betrayal must have been particularly humiliating to General Thi, who had personally recruited him directly out of military school. Y had been tasked with handling all of Thi’s public appearances.⁵³⁵

Because of the importance and sensitivity of the discovery of the network to ARVN officials, Deputy Commander of 1st Corp, Brigadier General Hoàng Xuân Lãm took charge of

⁵³³ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁵³⁴ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 52.

⁵³⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

the interrogations not long after the arrests were made.⁵³⁶ Held together as a group, the members of the Youth Association were moved to three different prisons for questioning over a period of approximately one month. Finally, in early December, all 10 prisoners were brought together to an office lobby to be personally interrogated by Major General Nguyễn Chánh Thi.⁵³⁷

While Đỗ Hùng Luân and the other high school students remained waiting outside, the elder members of the group, Nguyễn Lương Ý, Sơn Hải, Nguyễn Bích and Nguyễn Viết Xuân were escorted in one by one to meet with General Thi.

General Nguyễn Chánh Thi:

Born in 1923, Nguyễn Chánh Thi grew up in Huế the son of a low-ranking military mandarin who served in the French armed forces during World War I. Following in his father's footsteps, Thi joined the French military in 1940 at the age of 17 and was imprisoned by the Japanese and later by the Việt Minh near the end of WWII. Thi remained in the military through the transition from the French controlled ASVN to the American backed Republic of Vietnam in 1954, becoming a favorite of the South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm when, in 1955, during the Battle of Sài Gòn, as a young paratroop officer, he was instrumental in crushing the Bình Xuyên gangsters that were dominating the criminal underground and controlling the local police.⁵³⁸⁵³⁹

Rising rapidly through the ranks, by 1960, Thi had become an important player in the politics of the RVN military. Growing disaffection among many of the highest-ranking officers

⁵³⁶ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁵³⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân.

⁵³⁸ Douglas Martin, "Gen. Nguyễn Chánh Thi, 84, Seen as Hero in Vietnam, Dies," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2007, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/26/world/asia/26thi.html>.

⁵³⁹ Patricia Sullivan, "S. Vietnamese Gen. Nguyễn Chánh Thi," June 27, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/26/AR2007062602195.html>.

with what they perceived as Diệm's favoritism towards Catholics and a sense that Diệm was moving more and more towards a dictatorship that monopolized all the power in the hands of a few loyalists pushed a powerful faction of leaders in the top echelons of the RVN military to a tipping point. On November 11, 1960, Thi along with fellow airborne officer, Lieutenant Colonel Vương Văn Đông, led a group of disaffected officers in a coup attempt against Diệm.⁵⁴⁰

The initial success of Thi's forces put Diệm on the defensive. At the final moment of victory, however, Thi flinched, unwilling to fully commit to toppling Diệm's government, believing that, at that time, there was no viable alternative available to replace him as president. It seems likely in retrospect that Thi was committed to trying to find the best solution for the country, rather than going forward with an act that might benefit him personally but would likely lead to increased political instability. Instead of killing Diệm and seizing control of the government, Thi allowed Diệm to retake full control of the government in exchange for some dubious promises of major political reforms.⁵⁴¹ Shortly thereafter Thi was on a plane to Cambodia with a number of other plotters of the failed coup attempt.

Thi returned to Vietnam and his powerful position in the RVN military in 1963, not long after the assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm and his younger brother Nhu. In November 1964, Thi was promoted from head of the 1st division based in Huế to the commanding general in charge of 1st Corp tasked with defending and expanding the RVN controlled areas in the 5 provinces of Central Vietnam known as Trung Trung Bộ.⁵⁴²⁵⁴³

⁵⁴⁰ Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam 1950-1963* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2006). 117,188.

⁵⁴¹ Jacobs, 118.

⁵⁴² Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên-Huế, Quảng Nam, Quảng Tín, and Quảng Ngãi

⁵⁴³ Coincidentally, these were also the same five provinces from which Lê Công Cơ was organizing a student led revolution in the urban areas.

In Central Vietnam, between 1964 and 1966, Thi was navigating a minefield of explosive political and religious upheaval with the proven potential to bring down the government in Sài Gòn. Unlike the Americans, who backed his rival Ky, Thi was a local, accountable to his friends and family in Huế, and cognizant of the political idiosyncrasies that were unique to the region at that historical moment. Thi would certainly have been well aware that as the dominant military and political leader in Huế, he was fighting a losing political war for the loyalty of an extremely important segment of the country's political, educational and religious leadership. Unfortunately for Thi, his attempts to navigate these treacherous waters were seen by unsympathetic US observers alternatively as wishy washy, too sympathetic to the Buddhists, pandering, and potentially soft on communism.

US officials' exasperation with Thi was evident to members of the American press corps in Vietnam. As a result, Thi's goals and motivations were roundly criticized by reporters working for US publications like the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Time Magazine*. The excerpt below from an article in *Time Magazine* published in 1966 was typical of US media coverage of Thi around this time period, employing numerous oft recycled colonial stereotypes such as the "vain" and "mercurial" Asiatic "warlord" and the "inveterate intriguer" whose pursuit of overweening ambition led him to manipulate and exploit the student protests and the Buddhist movement in Huế for political advantage:

Ever since the ten-man military Directory of Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (pronounced key) took power in South Viet Nam nine months ago, the greatest threat to the fragile stability of the Saigon government has been mustached, mercurial Lieut. General Nguyễn Chánh Thi (pronounced tea). Vain, ambitious, an inveterate intriguer, Thi carefully cultivated the political Buddhists, [and] got his own man installed as head of the national police. As field commander of the northernmost I Corps, he ran it like a warlord of yore, obeying those edicts of the central government that suited him and blithely disregarding the rest. *Time Magazine*, 1966.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴⁴ "World: The Saigon Thi Party," *Time*, accessed February 20, 2019, March 18, 1966. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941937,00.html>.

The “mercurial” Thi “cultivates” the Buddhists and “blithely” disregards the orders of the central government in Sài Gòn. In this view, by listening to and trying not to offend Buddhist leaders in Huế, Thi was brazenly manipulating and exploiting the political climate in Huế, presumably to open a path to seize power for himself. That same year, the *New York Times* was only slightly more nuanced (and less racist) in their assessment, also labelling Thi a warlord, but at least acknowledging his precarious position, and that he was making an effort to create a space for those critical of the government to be allowed to voice their grievances. This, however, while managing at the same time to imply that his willingness to allow criticism of the government in newspapers and journals in Huế was simply a political ploy to curry favor with the public in Huế. “General Thi”, wrote one NY times reporter in 1966, “performed a balancing act...He was an officer on the governing directorate but strove to have dissidents think of him as a friend. He let students publish a magazine that was strongly critical of the government.”⁵⁴⁵ In fact, during his short tenure as Commander of 1st Corp, Thi did little to prevent the publication of a number of different publications that were consistently critical of the Republic.

The publication of magazines and journals in Huế to further public discourse on issues of the day was already a tradition in the city where enthusiasm for education and self-betterment were an ethos for many. Since the 1920s, the academic community in Huế had embraced a tradition of the journalistic publication of a diverse collection of journals and newspapers covering a wide cross section of political, intellectual and philosophical discourses. Thi’s unwillingness to attempt to control and censor these dialogues was certainly a political

⁵⁴⁵ Unlike many of the other high-ranking generals in the RVN military, Thi, never used his position to enrich himself. Nor would he allow himself to be silenced by his chief political rival who defeated him, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Thi’s outspokenness cost him most of his pension when Kỳ reduced it from \$600 to \$170 a month because Thi refused to stop publicly criticizing Kỳ and the RVN government. Among other jobs, Thi spent years working as a custodian in a Los Angeles hotel, dying at the age of 84 in 2007.

calculation, but it also very likely stemmed from a heartfelt respect and sympathy for the academic and religious communities in Huế and a desire to preserve a space for open exchange of political ideas, a key ingredient necessary for the creation of a genuine republic.

Republic Justice:

Thi's willingness to grant space for the free speech rights of the intellectual and religious communities in Huế did not make him any less violent in his opposition to communism or the NLF. Apart from the embarrassment and humiliation Thi must have felt, the successful infiltration of Thi's personal retinue by an underground agent of the NLF would undoubtedly have been regarded an unprecedented breach of security.⁵⁴⁶

Thi, therefore, decided to deal with the matter personally, arranging to meet directly with the leaders of the Youth Association. About one month after they had been arrested, with all ten underground agents having been brought to an office lobby, they waited nervously as General Thi called the four eldest members of the group to meet with him one by one. During Thi's meeting that day with Nguyễn Việt Xuân, who was receiving a salary from the RVN government, the general accused Xuân of "following the ghost of the communists while eating the rice of the Republic" and ordered that Xuân be shot that evening at midnight. Xuân was extremely fortunate that an ARVN captain who was among Thi's retinue strongly objected to Thi's order, eventually convincing him to rescind it, allowing Xuân to return to his prison cell with his comrades.⁵⁴⁷

According to Lê Công Cơ, Thi and his subordinates were particularly infuriated by the younger Lương Y's betrayal. Soon after the older brother Ý's meeting with Thi while Luân and

⁵⁴⁶ At least in terms of what officials of the Republic were aware of at that time. After the war was over it would become known that at least three other deep cover underground agents were in place around that time of similar or possibly even greater value to the NLF. (Phạm Xuân Ân, Phạm Ngọc Thảo who died in 1965 and Ba Quốc.)

⁵⁴⁷ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

Ý were sharing a prison cell, Ý told Luân that during their meeting Thi slapped him, but he was not tortured that day. Instead, Thi took his wrath out on the two brothers by having them brutally beaten and tortured by interrogators for several weeks after their meeting. It is widely believed among members of the NLF with whom I spoke that rather than allow for a public trial calling further attention to the matter, Thi order the two brothers to be secretly executed in January 1966.⁵⁴⁸

After about one month of continuous interrogation, the executions were carried out while the pair were being transported from Đà Nẵng to Huế for trial. RVN officials later claimed the jeep carrying the two brothers had been blown up by a mine placed by the NLF. Not long after the killings occurred, an old man local to the area who had witnessed the burial informed the NLF of the location of their grave site. The bodies of the high school teacher and the young lieutenant were exhumed and recovered by the Lương family where they had been buried 2 meters deep in the sand and wrapped together with wire, not far from a beach on road from Đà Nẵng to Huế.⁵⁴⁹⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ According to Đỗ Hùng Luân, when asked many years later about the it by a member of the Lương family, Nguyễn Chánh Thi denied any responsibility for the killings. More information available on YouTube at: [\(19\) Số Phận Điệp Báo Nguyễn Lương Ý – Người Cận Vệ Thân Thiết Của Tướng VNCH Nguyễn Chánh Thi - YouTube](#)

⁵⁴⁹ Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dâng Người, Hồi Ký, Vol. 1*, 255–56.

⁵⁵⁰ Nguyễn Việt Xuân, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Trương Cao Nhã, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Văn Sơn (Son Hải), Đào Ngọc Diêu and Nguyễn Vinh were loaded on to helicopters and flown from Đà Nẵng to Huế. Trials for the Youth Association members believed to be the chief organizers of the group were held in a courtroom in Huế. In November 1966, Nguyễn Việt Xuân, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Đình Sơn and Trương Cao Nhã were sentenced, Xuan received 12 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest, Luan 10 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest, Nguyễn Đình Sơn 10 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest and Trương Cao Nhã, 3 years in prison and 2 years house arrest. (P58 Luan et al) The remaining members of the group continued to be held in Thua Phu until they were freed by their comrades during the Tết Offensive in 1968 and were each sentenced to 5 years hard labor to be followed by 3 years of house arrest. (Luan et al 58 Nguyễn Việt Xuân died in Con Dao prison in 1974, his health destroyed by years of brutal mistreatment. Vũ Bá Học and Nguyễn Minh Ngọc escaped to the jungle, joined the armed forces in 1965 and survived the war. (Luan et al)

Conclusion:

After the arrest and imprisonment of most of their leaders, members of the Youth Association who had not already been arrested quickly fled the Tam Kỳ area. Vũ Bá Học and Nguyễn Minh Ngọc were fortunate to evade capture and escape to the jungle at this time, joining the armed forces in 1965 and surviving the war.⁵⁵¹

Nguyễn Việt Xuân, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Đình Sơn, Trương Cao Nhã, Nguyễn Nhung, Nguyễn Văn Sơn (Sơn Hải), Đào Ngọc Diêu and Nguyễn Vinh were loaded on to helicopters and flown from Đà Nẵng to Huế. Trials for the Youth Association members believed to be the chief organizers of the group were held in a courtroom in Huế. During the trials, which were conducted in November of 1967, Đỗ Hùng Luân, Nguyễn Việt Xuân and Nguyễn Đình Sơn were given the most severe sentences and sent to the island prison at Con Đảo where they were beaten tortured and starved until the end of the war. Xuân received 12 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest, Luan was sentenced to 10 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest, Nguyễn Đình Sơn 10 years hard labor and 5 years house arrest and Trương Cao Nhã, 3 years in prison and 2 years house arrest. The remaining members of the group continued to be held in Thừa Phủ until 1968 and were each sentenced to 5 years hard labor to be followed by 3 years of house arrest. This group was eventually freed by NLF forces under the command of Bảy Khiêm during the Tết Offensive.⁵⁵²

At great cost, members of the Youth Association felt they had accomplished an important goal. The primary influence of the Youth Association in Tam Kỳ was not on the military situation, but rather, the organization functioned as a catalyst for instilling a heightened awareness among the people in the city of the war going on in the countryside and as a demonstration of the breadth of popular support for the revolution among all classes of people.

⁵⁵¹ Vũ Bá Học, Interview with Vũ Bá Học.

⁵⁵² Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*, 58.

According to Luan, this show of political strength had a lasting impact on how the people of Tam Kỳ perceived revolutionaries and the revolution:

People in the area controlled by the enemy had witnessed a revolutionary organization that was everywhere, not only in the high mountain areas, right in the middle of the city, and not only drawn from the poor laboring class or from among the people who had escaped to the revolutionary areas long ago. These were intellectuals, high school students, educators and officials living right in the city center. Most of these revolutionaries were arrested very young, while they were studying in high school and had a reputation for being good students. They were gentle people and virtuous. These “Việt Cộng” were active for independence, the freedom of the people and for the unification of the nation.⁵⁵³

In the aftermath of the destruction of the network in Tam Kỳ, it took several years for a new organization of student activists to emerge under new local leadership. Following the Tết Offensive in 1968, new cells of the Youth Association were formed and the game of cat and mouse between students and RVN officials resumed once again.

⁵⁵³ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung, 62.

Chapter 5: The Suppression of the Struggle Movement, Leaders of the Urban Movement Flee to the Jungle, and the Tết Offensive and its Aftermath, 1966-1968

Traditionally, in Vietnamese society scholar officials have stood at the top of the social hierarchy with military people below. Over the past two centuries, a deep respect for education and knowledge production within the Nguyễn Dynasty has resulted in many members of the royal family in Huế becoming notable scholars. Ngô Đình Diệm himself began his political career as a mandarin in Bảo Đại's court, and thus, his government was in some sense a continuation of this tradition. Following the collapse of General Nguyễn Khánh's government in 1965, a new civilian government briefly came to power under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr Phan Huy Quát, giving rise to a glimmer of hope among some of the leaders of the Struggle Movement that the move away from military leadership might offer a genuine opportunity for peace. Quát's flirtation with the idea of a negotiated settlement with the NLF, however, was deemed a bridge too far from the perspective of the most powerful generals in Sài Gòn, leading them to dissolve his government in the summer of 1965.⁵⁵⁴

During this period, the Buddhist community in south Vietnam was increasingly divided over politics. While two of Vietnam's leading monks, Thích Trí Quang and Thích Tâm Châu, battled for control of the UBC (United Buddhist Church), within the US media coverage of the monks and students in Huế was becoming increasingly hostile. Most American journalists at this time were unable or unwilling to accept the idea that large numbers of people in the Buddhist and intellectual communities in Huế were stridently opposed to US military intervention in Vietnam.⁵⁵⁵ Conditions within the city were becoming more volatile by the day. According to

⁵⁵⁴ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 28.

⁵⁵⁵ Topmiller, 11.

Huong Thi Diu Nguyen, a historian who recently published her dissertation on the social history of Huế in the 1960s, such was the strength of the support for the Struggle Movement in 1966 that it began to approach levels in the city in which “outsiders or hesitators quickly became alien and the subject of suspicious and cautious looks and conversations. In such a small city, where everybody knew each other via one relation or another, many people got carried away and involved in the Struggle Movement to become “normal” as everyone else.”⁵⁵⁶

Outside the city limits, where the government’s influence dropped off steeply, (particularly in the rural areas), the situation for the Republic was even more dire. From the time of the initial declaration of the National Liberation Front in the 1960s up until the Tết Offensive in 1968, popular support for the NLF and the revolution continued to increase in the countryside around Huế, eventually reaching levels even higher than those achieved by the Việt Minh during the French War. According to the political scientist James Walker Trullinger, “By 1964-65, about 80 to 85 percent of the local populace [around Huế] supported the Front, and about 5% remained uncommitted, in many cases experiencing intense pressure from both sides. And about 60 percent of the Front supporters regularly helped Front leaders and guerillas. The others were passive supporters of the revolution. In other words, most villagers were at least as deeply committed to the Front during 1964-1967 as they had earlier been to the Viet Minh.”⁵⁵⁷ During this same time period, inside the city leaders of the Buddhists and Struggle Movements were gaining the support of local government officials and members of the military in increasing numbers, many of whom were alarmed by the rapidly growing American presence in the country.

⁵⁵⁶ Nguyễn Thị Diệu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67),” 257.

⁵⁵⁷ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 113.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, in the early 1960s at the University of Huế, a core group of Struggle Movement leaders coalesced around a small circle of friends who were prominent scholars and artists known as the *Thế Hệ Vàng*. During an interview in 2018 with a “younger uncle” of the former Emperor Bảo Đại named Bửu Ý, who was well known professor in Huế at the time, Ý shared some his memories of the tightly knit clique:

At that time, in the 1960s... there was a group of young people who were close friends... and cared greatly for each other called the “Golden Generation.” In that group there was me... Trịnh Công Sơn, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, the poet Ngô Kha and the painter Đinh Cường. This was considered the core group of the so-called Golden Generation... because these people were close to each other and the top people at Huế University, each with a different field, some were more or less famous, like Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was not very famous[yet], but Ngô Kha was very famous as a poet, Mr. Đinh Cường was famous for his painting and Trịnh Công Sơn became famous for music... (Buu Ý interview) In the student movement, Ngô Kha was the most prominent [member of the *Thế Hệ Vàng*], because Mr. Ngô Kha was very special. He was an admirer of Che Guevara. He liked to wear a beret in the same style, and his appearance was similar to him. His poetry is very special. Few people understand it. It is surreal. This poetry in the 1960s was not understood by many people, but people read his poetry with respect. His words were well chosen and appealing. Besides that, he taught at public schools and private schools as well. Wherever he taught, he became famous there. He taught very well, including the subjects that he hated but his students fell in love with. Like civic education, this subject is too boring, but when Ngô Kha taught it, the subject blossomed immediately.... His teaching was skillful, and he was very eloquent because he went to law school. He had the voice of a lawyer. A good voice for recitation, a good voice for lecturing. It is a fact that he was a bright star which the students loved and imitated. At that time, there were two very popular young men among the students [in Huế], Ngô Kha and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường... and the students admired them.⁵⁵⁸

Within in the group political differences among the four young men often led to debates.

“There were many political arguments between Ngô Kha, [Hoàng Phủ Ngọc] Tường and [Trịnh Công] Sơn, but in their hearts this group of people supported peace, certainly not war....”⁵⁵⁹

Unlike his younger brother Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, who was not a member of their small clique and according to Bửu Ý was “very combative in the war,” Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường “did not like

⁵⁵⁸ Bửu Ý, Interview with Bửu Ý.

⁵⁵⁹ Bửu Ý.

the war. Tường was an amiable person who wanted peace. Therefore, he became close friends with Trịnh Công Sơn. Deep in his heart he wanted peace.... They all [referring to the Thế Hệ Vàng] wanted to speak out and sing for peace, they definitely did not want to urge people into a bloody fight.”⁵⁶⁰

According to Bửu Ý, during the height of the Struggle Movement, Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn, both of whom declined invitations to join the NLF, nevertheless, played a critical role in attracting students to the anti-war and anti-American intervention elements of the growing movement:

[Trịnh Công Sơn] had the magnetism to attract people. Some people are born with this magnetism that makes people appear. Wherever they go, people pop up. With Trịnh Công Sơn, people would flock to him, run to him... Therefore, Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn strongly influenced students and the student movement. Sometimes it is possible not to act directly... if only a few student leaders came to see Trịnh Công Sơn, [they would] speak with him and then disseminate what everyone followed. That is not to mention his singing, just saying the man attracted everyone, let alone when the man sang, the inspiration was immeasurable.⁵⁶¹



Trịnh Công Sơn singing in Huế in the 1960s. Source:
<http://to-quoc01.blogspot.com/2014/10/trinh-cong-son-ben-nao-ben-nay-hay-ben.html>

Between 1964 and 1966 the growing popularity and intensity of the Struggle Movement was continually strengthened and given direction through leadership provided by prominent members of the Buddhist religious, intellectual and artistic communities such as those in the Thế

⁵⁶⁰ Bửu Ý.

⁵⁶¹ Bửu Ý.

Hè Vàng. According to, Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, who was a student activist attending Quốc Học at the time:

Those were the most exciting years in Huế. It can be said throughout the whole city every day the city was overtaken by very strong upheaval. The reason was that this was a city of students, a city where professors and students live. These residents count for a lot because there was only one university in the whole central region. The good students from other provinces all went to Quốc Học to study. So, the proportion of students [in the city] was high and the students were aware of Huế's artists and literature. Second, the influence of Buddhism in Huế was very strong. They [the students] were Buddhists or they were not Buddhists, but they [all] had a family tradition associated with the home temple.... In terms of Thích Trí Quang's role in Huế, he dominated not only the Buddhists but also civil servants and public employees working in the Sài Gòn apparatus, who were sympathetic with Buddhism. Xích lô driving Buddhist convoys, Buddhist civil servants, and young Buddhists.... The second group was the students and artists. They were sharp teachers politically and there were many among this class who aspired to national independence, peace and [national] unity. They were especially strong in their antagonistic attitude towards Americans. This was the period when the Americans began to pour troops into Vietnam. In the context of such fierce civil war, with the US military's street presence, and the American soldiers in the bars and pedicabs created the impression of an invading army. That mentality was very strong, even among the Sài Gòn army, although they were on the same side with the American anti-communists, they were still Buddhists. The two dominant forces of Buddhism and the student movement were linked together creating upheaval. There were times when they would take over the radio station...⁵⁶²

In 1966, two young ARVN lieutenants from Huế, Ngô Kha and Chu Sơn, were becoming increasingly disaffected with the government they were being forced to serve. By this time, both officers were already published poets who were well known to hold strong anti-war views. Despite having been arrested two years prior for organizing anti-government demonstrations, Kha was remobilized that year into the military.⁵⁶³

Chu Sơn had been a student of Ngô Kha's at Quốc Học beginning in 1962, and the two had remained close friends ever since. By 1964, Sơn had just recently graduated high school and was working as a teacher in Quảng Nam before he begun studying history and literature at the

⁵⁶² Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #1 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

⁵⁶³ "Ngô Kha - Ngụ Ngôn Một Thế Hệ," *Nhân Dân*, December 16, 2005, <https://nhandan.com.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/ngo-kha-ngu-ngon-mot-the-he-431155/>.

university. According to Son, he was the first anti-war poet to be published in the south. “In 1964, my first book of poetry was published. Even though I was very young at the time, the book had no romantic poems love poems. The entire book was composed of poems against the war.”⁵⁶⁴

In 1964, Son fled Huế for a while for fear of being harassed by police or conscripted into the military, but he soon returned. He was unable to make a living by teaching at this time, however, for fear of being caught. This was the beginning of an extremely difficult period in Son’s life in which he had little food to eat. Having already lost a great deal of weight, Son decided he could only hide out so long without food or money, eventually agreeing to surrender and attend officer training school. Granted amnesty for “voluntarily” turning himself in to the authorities, upon arrival at Thủ Đức military school in Sài Gòn Son weighed less than 48 kilos. At his graduation in 1967, Son ranked near the top of his class, placing 15th out 2000 graduating students, and now with regular meals being provided by the school weighing more than 54 kilos.⁵⁶⁵

During an interview in 2019, Chu Son recalled the agonizing choice he and his friend and mentor Ngô Kha were confronted with at this time:

At first, I just went to teach, I was a teacher in the Republic until I went into the army. I was pushed in to joining the army. I became an officer, I was a 2nd lieutenant before I deserted, then I joined in the Buddhist movement some, but I was not a Buddhist. Before the Tết Offensive, Kha and I discussed about how we had to choose a side and we had to stop the war. To speak like that is to make it sound important, but that was just a matter of my own conscience... Whether Kha or I supported one side or another, history will still happen this way... In this situation we must stop the war, but if we wanted the war to end that meant that one side had to win and another had to lose. I am a Vietnamese, so I stood on the side of the communists, although I did not like the communist regime.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Trần Huệ (aka Chu Son), Chu Son Interview 3, December 2017.

⁵⁶⁵ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

⁵⁶⁶ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

Ngô Kha in particular had already attracted the ire of local police in Huế through his involvement in organizing student and Buddhist demonstrations. Kha was a native of Huế, born in 1935 and had studied at Quốc Học High School from 1954 to 1957. After graduation he went on to study at the school of Pedagogy, where he specialized in Vietnamese literature and culture. An exceptional student, Kha graduated first in his class. In 1962, he received a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Huế and then returned to Quốc Học High School around this time to begin working as a teacher.⁵⁶⁷

Kha quickly gained a reputation as a militant political activist with a flair for the dramatic. According to John Schafer, who recently published an article discussing Kha's turbulent relationship with the RVN police chief Liên Thành, Kha, while organizing street demonstrations, "encouraged students to burn American vehicles and filled his pockets with stones to throw at policemen."⁵⁶⁸

Like his friends Bửu Ý and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Ngô Kha was a popular teacher at Quốc Học High School through much of the 1960s. In 1962, Kha was conscripted into officer candidate school at Thủ Đức in Sài Gòn. He was fortunate to be well connected. According to Chu Sơn, Kha's uncle the ARVN general Ngô Du was able to secure him a safe job working as a press officer in Đà Nẵng. After several years of working in this position, Kha was eventually released from his duties and allowed to return to teaching in Huế. According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, during his time as a press officer and even to some extent after his return to teaching in Huế, Kha continuously supplied intelligence and information to Xuân and Ngọc Tường and other comrades in the Struggle Movement about the activities of the RVN military. It was this

⁵⁶⁷ Teaching at Quốc Học was a prestigious position. Prominent teachers there are often referred to as Giáo sư (professor).

⁵⁶⁸ John C. Schafer, "Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 13, no. 1 (February 2018): 29–30, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2018.13.1.1>.

intelligence that would later enable Tường, Xuân and a number of others to escape to the jungle before they could be arrested by the new police deputy police chief in Huế, Liên Thành.⁵⁶⁹⁵⁷⁰

As a close friend of the famous singer/song writer Trịnh Công Sơn and a popular poet and teacher at Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh High Schools, Kha maintained a high profile in a small community of artists and scholars. Throughout his time teaching in Huế, Kha's stubbornness and popularity combined with his militant style of activism, his skill as an organizer and his resolutely anti-American intervention political stance made him a conspicuous target for RVN police. Above all else, however, what attracted the ire of RVN authorities was his collaboration as a Buddhist activist during the Struggle Movement with Liên Thành's hated enemies Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan.

During an interview in 2019, Chu Sơn recalled how, in 1965, while he was living in Hội An and working as a teacher, he was recruited to work on behalf of the Struggle force in Quảng Nam. One day while Sơn was in his apartment an army officer named (Captain) Tôn Thất Trục arrived outside driving a jeep. Trục had come to see Sơn to deliver a request by a group of Buddhist officers in the RVN military that Sơn accept the job of giving speeches and writing propaganda on behalf of the Buddhist movement in the area. "By March of 1965, the US had landed in Vietnam. I was living in a small apartment in an attic in Hội An when he [Captain Tôn Thất Trục] came to my apartment in a small jeep, making a lot of noise on my block. I was upstairs in my room and the people downstairs were afraid because this person was so terrible." Prior to this Trục had acquired a bad reputation in Hội An for wearing a necklace made from the ears of communists he had killed. Nevertheless, Sơn decided to accept his offer "I agreed to do

⁵⁶⁹ Liên Thành was just recently appointed to his position as police chief in Huế, by Nguyễn Ngọc Loan in 1966. Liên Thành had just recently been a student at Quốc Học and was the same age as many of the student activists. (Nguyễn Đắc Xuân interview 2)

⁵⁷⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

it.... I accepted because I don't like the US, not because I supported communism.... That RVN officer hated the communists, but when the American military arrived, he started to resist the Americans and follow the Buddhist point of view...."⁵⁷¹

Not long after he received the invitation, Son was asked to deliver a speech that he had written for the movement. Son recalls attending a massive rally where "standing on a podium in front of a crowd of thousands" he delivered "a fiercely anti-American speech." Son warned the crowd of the dangers of an American occupation of the south by saying, "when the Americans come here our women will become whores and our men will become pimps."⁵⁷²

Son's recruitment by a notorious RVN officer to write propaganda for the Buddhist movement was symptomatic of a bitter divide that was forming within the Army of the Republic and within the civil administration in Central Vietnam. A divide that presented an important opportunity for the communists and the National Liberation Front in the region which was quickly exploited:

From the Buddhist movement, the communists came to rely on the Buddhist flag, and without the explosion of the student movement, they certainly would not have been able to launch this movement by themselves. The mantra of the Front was now that of the Buddhist movement, and the exploding student movement. Communist officials like Lê Công Cơ had to follow that mantra and bring their people into all levels of Buddhist organizations. All the Buddhist organizations in the province had communists already inside them and these communists pushed the movement to follow their point of view.⁵⁷³

Perhaps more than anyone else in Huế the two brothers, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan were responsible for spearheading the shift towards anti-Americanism among the students and faculty at Huế's elite educational institutions. According to Chu Son, under NLF guidance, Tường and Phan worked together to influence the Buddhist community

⁵⁷¹ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Son (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

⁵⁷² Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

⁵⁷³ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

“Tuồng and Phan made plans... Mr. Tuồng and Mr. Phan wanted to push the Buddhists to the point where they were completely opposed to the Americans... They wanted to be completely Buddhist to the very end, and in sharp opposition to the US. But the Buddhists wanted to go their own way on a path between communism and the US.”⁵⁷⁴

According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, among the brother’s circle of friends it was Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan who first took a leading role in promoting a revolutionary agenda:

Phan was the same generation as me but in different classes, Phan is a very intelligent person. He was one of Lê Công Cơ’s earliest underground agents. I was only a Buddhist, so when the fighting occurred in 1966, Mr. Tuồng and Mr. Phan were revolutionary underground agents, and I was just a Buddhist... Actually, together we organized activities for the Liberation Front, but at that time they saw me as a Buddhist, and they did not arrange for me to join the Front then. I saw all of them participating [in the Front], therefore, when I was being pursued too much [by RVN police], Mr. Tuồng wrote me a letter [inviting me] me to go [to the jungle].⁵⁷⁵

Early in 1966, a group of prominent activists from the Struggle Movement created what would become the best-known anti-American publication of its time in Huế. Called *Vietnam Vietnam!*, the journal’s name, according to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, was taken from a song written by the musician Phạm Duy.⁵⁷⁶ The cover art was drawn by the underground agent and well-known painter Đinh Cường. Among the group of activists and scholars contributing articles for publication were Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Lê Thanh Xuân. Shortly after the journal’s inception the group recruited Professor Lê Văn Hảo who agreed to host the dissident paper in his private residence on campus. Hảo was the son of Lê Văn Tập, who according to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, was at that time the wealthiest man in Đà Nẵng. Having graduated from the Sorbonne with a PhD in 1961, Hảo had recently given up his position as a researcher in France to return to central Việt Nam to teach literature and the pedagogy of

⁵⁷⁴ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ).

⁵⁷⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

⁵⁷⁶ Xuân had gotten to know Duy when Duy contacted him about a poem he had written that Duy had set to music.

ethnology at Huế University. A dedicated nationalist, Hào was deeply sympathetic to the Buddhist movement and opposed to American involvement in the war.⁵⁷⁷⁵⁷⁸

In an article posted on his website remembering his experiences with Lê Văn Hào during the war, Xuân writes that Hào sought him out after arriving in Huế in 1965 to speak with him about a nationalist poem that Xuân had written which the musician Pham Duy had set to music. Brought together by their shared love of Vietnamese poetry, literature and history, Hào and Xuân quickly became friends. According to Xuân, Hào had brought with him to Huế over 200 kilograms of banned books published in Hà Nội and purchased in Paris which Xuân used to teach classes of high school students in Huế. Hào was able to sneak them into the country by tearing off the original covers and rebinding them with covers from books published in the south.⁵⁷⁹

For a time during 1966, Xuân lived in Lê Văn Hào's home on the university campus, which seems to have become an important base of operations for leaders in the Struggle Movement and underground agents of the NLF. In 1966, after Hào and Xuân began collaborating on the short-lived dissident journal with Ngọc Tường and Ngọc Phan, Xuân carefully studied the articles written by his fellow contributors in order to try and understand their intensely anti-American point of view and remembers being somewhat surprised and alarmed at the time by the fearful reaction of the people he encountered who read it, his girlfriend's father being one of them. In his memoir, Xuân recalls a conversation he had while visiting her family in Đông Hà in 1966. According to Xuân, her father was very upset after reading the journal, declaring that "the

⁵⁷⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*, 218.

⁵⁷⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, "Nhớ Tiên Sĩ Lê Văn Hào Thời ở Huế," January 19, 2015, <http://www.gactholoc.com/c31/t31-552/nho-tien-si-le-van-hao-thoi-o-hue.html>.

⁵⁷⁹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

anti-American stance in *Vietnam Vietnam* is the position of the National Liberations Front, not of your Buddhism.” Xuân was shocked by this reaction.⁵⁸⁰

After returning to Huế, Xuân told the story of what happened to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường. Tường quickly confessed to Xuân that “the group that which created *Vietnam Vietnam!* in 1966 went to the Zone 5 military base to study politics.... [telling him], you [Xuân] have published *Vietnam Vietnam* under the direction of a Liberation Front cadre.” That political officer, Xuân would soon discover, was already known to them as Lê Phương Thảo (aka Ngọc, aka Lê Công Cơ).⁵⁸¹

The Confrontation and Flight to the Jungle:

According to James R. Bullington, who was working as a Vice-consul at the US Consulate in Huế at the time: “by the end of March 1966, the Viet Cong had infiltrated the Struggle [actually many of them had been there from the beginning, others were recruited later, a very small number were “infiltrators”], and it became increasingly anti-American. Ominously, large numbers of soldiers, policemen, and civil servants were joining anti-government demonstrations in Huế and Danang.... On April 6, the Embassy decided to evacuate all “non-essential” U.S. Government civilians from I Corps and advised all private citizens to leave.”⁵⁸²

With the airlift of 1500 hundred elite paratroopers from Sài Gòn into Đà Nẵng a direct military confrontation between the two sides began. The rapid and brutal suppression of Struggle forces in Đà Nẵng further inflamed political tensions in Huế. In April of 1966, Kỳ appointed the former air force pilot and security chief in Sài Gòn Nguyễn Ngọc Loan head of the National

⁵⁸⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)*, 202–7.

⁵⁸¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 202–7.

⁵⁸² James R. Bullington, *The Impolite American Consul: A Memoir of the 1966 Buddhist Struggle Movement in Huế* (blog), n.d., <https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2020/08/the-impolite-american-consul-a-memoir-of-the-1966-buddhist-struggle-movement-in-hue/>.

Police. Loan was a native of Huế and a graduate of Huế University. According to Stanley Karnow, Loan's promotion came as a reward for his success at crushing Struggle Movement forces in Đà Nẵng "by deploying tanks and armored cars, Loan systematically combed Đà Nẵng street by street, slaying hundreds of rebel troops and more than a hundred civilians, most of whom had taken refuge in Buddhist temples."⁵⁸³

After the rebel forces in Đà Nẵng were defeated and had completely surrendered in May of 1966, Loan turned his forces north to Huế. Around this same time, he appointed a new police chief in Huế named Liên Thành. The new police commander was a young graduate of Quốc Học high school, who, because he had studied under them or alongside most of them for years, knew the leaders of the Struggle Movement well. For a period spanning the 9 years between 1966 and 1975, Liên Thành would make it one of his highest priorities to arrest these leaders and crush the movement they built.

Provoked by the removal of General Nguyễn Chanh Thi as commander of the 1st Army Corp by the Nguyễn Cao Kỳ government on March 10, a growing number of army officers and government officials sympathetic to the Buddhist and Struggle Movements were prepared to openly resist the authority of the Sài Gòn government. Kỳ's order ousting Thi was an attempt to consolidate his tenuous authority in the central region and to thwart a powerful political alliance being formed between the popular general and leaders of the Struggle Movement in Huế under the leadership of Thích Trí Quang.⁵⁸⁴

According to Nguyễn Xuân Hoa:

General Thi was someone with a strong personality. When he was a colonel, he was part of a group of officers who attempted a coup against Diệm in 1963 without success. This

⁵⁸³ Bart Barnes, "NGUYEN NGOC LOAN DIES AT 67," *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1998/07/16/nguyen-ngoc-loan-dies-at-67/6d360dcf-b95b-451d-ae82-1ecff1607151/>.

⁵⁸⁴ Schafer, "Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness," 8.

group stole an airplane and flew to Cambodia. Later in 1963 when the Diệm government collapsed Thi returned. Thi was a man with political ambitions.... Thi was a Huế person and a Buddhist, therefore, his support for the Buddhists was very clear. But he did not have political experience or the capacity for political trickery. He relied solely on the Buddhists and his forces and there was very little contact between the different groups. So, when the conflict took place between Nguyễn Chanh Thi and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, it was easy for Thiệu and Kỳ to dismiss Mr. Thi and force Mr. Thi into exile to the US. However, if Mr. Thi had built relationships with other generals which were not easily destroyed [it may not have been so easy]. His personal responses were very fierce, but his political capacity was not good.⁵⁸⁵

The former student activist Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, recalled how as a young man he was swept up the turmoil that engulfed the city during this time:

In 1966, the entire vibrant city of Huế was drawn into the political struggles with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. At that time, the movement was influenced by the Buddhist Struggle Movement, and Thích Trí Quang who was currently in Huế. Because of the presence of Thích Trí Quang, the movement in Huế was very strong, and not only developed among the working class but also spread to the University and the civil servants of the Sài Gòn government. They formed organizations of Buddhist civil servants, Buddhist students, and a Buddhist pedicab union. These organizations published a lot. The Huế people didn't read the Sài Gòn newspapers anymore. They read these newspapers [instead], and the Struggle Movement in Huế spread to Đà Nẵng. The Huế students formed a suicide squad and they went to Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam and launched the movement there.... First, they [the movement] broke out in Đà Nẵng. However, after the movement exploded to the point that the Đà Nẵng province chief Colonel Đàm Quan Yêu supported it, the movement in Đà Nẵng was easily crushed because of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. The soldiers arrested Mr. Đàm Quan Yêu, but in Huế, Kỳ was not able to repeat this. Because Huế was held by a separatist organization.... At that time, the Sài Gòn government sent a general here to negotiate with Mr. Thi and to put down the uprising. They failed twice. The first time, they sent Lieutenant General Phạm Xuân Chiêu, he had a very powerful position as Chairman of the National Leadership Committee. Then when he was at the government complex at No. 5 Lê Lợi, [a group of] student protesters demanded to meet with this man. [A mob grabbed a hold of him], forcing him to go to the radio station near the Trang Tiền Bridge.... [he was threatened with arrest if he did not] announce on the radio that the struggles of the press in Huế were a worthy cause. After that, he returned to Sài Gòn and was dismissed by Mr. Thiệu.⁵⁸⁶

The slaying of the Buddhist officer Lieutenant Nguyễn Đại Thúc, on May 17th by an American soldier during an assassination attempt by Thúc on an RVN general was the spark that

⁵⁸⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

⁵⁸⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

set off an open rebellion by military units in Huế sympathetic to the Buddhist and Struggle Movements. Ten days after Thúc's death, a funeral was held in the streets of Huế with hundreds of Buddhist monks and tens of thousands of mourners in attendance. Not long after the funeral ended hundreds of angry RVN military and police led by Lieutenant Ngô Kha and other leaders of the Struggle Movement declared the formation of a rogue RVN military unit known as Nguyễn Đại Thúc Brigade to resist the Sài Gòn government. Soldiers of the Thúc Brigade donned purple scarfs to distinguish themselves from military personnel loyal to Sài Gòn.⁵⁸⁷⁵⁸⁸

According to Nguyễn Xuân Hoa:

The second time they sent General Huỳnh Văn Cao. He took a helicopter to Huế and flew in to Mang Cá military base, the headquarters of the Sài Gòn army based in Huế. I don't know what he negotiated with Mr. Thi, but when he got on the helicopter there was an officer from the Sài Gòn army who shot at him. Cao's bodyguard was an American soldier, who shot back [at the would-be assassin] killing him. From that that event, they took the name of the officer [who attempted to assassinate the general], Mr. Nguyễn Đại Thúc. When Nguyễn Đại Thúc brigade was established.... it brought together high school and college students and soldiers from the Sài Gòn government. Like us at the time, we were students who were sent into the military to learn, and a group of students [led by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân] created the suicide squad.... For us to be able to keep the city for 26 days before Ky sent in the marines who fired their big guns in Huế. This elite force of marines was very extreme. At that time, it was difficult to oppose them, and the people put out their altars [to block the passage of military vehicles]... They thought the marines would not destroy the altars, but in the end, they did destroy them and arrested the leaders of the movement and those involved in the Liberation Front. At that time, among those escaping to the jungle there was Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường. Some other Buddhists had to withdraw into secret vault, Buddhism had secret radio and Buddhist rescue station.... However, with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's fierce repression, the movement failed, and they arrested Mr. Nguyễn Chanh Thi and forced him to go to America in 1966...⁵⁸⁹

According to John Schafer, Ngô Kha was a "core member" of the newly formed brigade.

Following the example set by the soldiers, a group made up of students from the university and, organized by Nguyễn Đắc Xuân became known as the Student Suicide Squad Armed Self

⁵⁸⁷ Schafer, "Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness," 8.

⁵⁸⁸ Nguyễn Thị Dịu Hương, "Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam's Royal City (1957-67)," 257.

⁵⁸⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

Defense Force (Đoàn quyết tử Huế, vũ trang tự vệ) and was given military training by a group of RVN soldiers led by Ngô Kha. This group was issued rifles and donned orange scarfs.⁵⁹⁰

According to the Vice-consul Bullington, who was still in Huế negotiating with Trí Quang at the time, “these developments made the Strugglers in Huế even more hostile to the government and its American backers. Security deteriorated further, and large groups of students alternated with Buddhist monks and nuns in conducting daily demonstrations in front of the Consulate. At first these demonstrations were peaceful, but they progressed to making threats and throwing stones.”⁵⁹¹ On May 26, a group of students attacked and set fire to the USIA cultural center and library. By the end of May, Bullington reports that “with most of the First Division on their side, the Strugglers began preparations to defend Huế militarily.”⁵⁹²

As tensions continued to escalate, local support for the Struggle Movement reached new heights. On June 1st, an angry crowd of demonstrators referred to in the Associated Press as a “mob of about 1000 screaming students” stormed and set fire to the American Consulate. The growing intensity of the demonstrations and their increasingly strong anti-American focus had already by this time led to almost all the remaining Americans evacuating the city.⁵⁹³ Around this same time, another group burned down the homes of several other government officials and seized control of an armory from which they took hundreds of firearms, ammunition and other weapons. Government reports written at the time state that the daily activities of government ceased, and that most local officials refused to leave their homes.⁵⁹⁴

According to the recently appointed police chief Liên Thành:

⁵⁹⁰ Nguyễn Thị Dịu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67),” 257.

⁵⁹¹ James R. Bullington.

⁵⁹² James R. Bullington.

⁵⁹³ Trullinger, *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*, 125.

⁵⁹⁴ Nguyễn Thị Dịu Hương, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67),” 261.

The upheaval which occurred beginning in March 1966 lasted for 100 days. The situation was more chaotic hour by hour. Every day, government offices were occupied by rebels. Diplomatic offices were burned down.... The city had no government, no national law, and the fighters [participants in the Struggle Movement] would slander, beat and arrest anyone they pleased. The people of Huế were horrified... Their daily lives were in a dire condition. They lived in despair, woefully looking at their uncertain future...⁵⁹⁵ The central government sent four generals with the rank of Corps Commander to stabilize... the central region, but the situation continued to become more chaotic every day, and they helplessly gave up. From General Nguyễn Chanh Thi who followed Mr. Thich Trí Quang against the Central Government, to General Nguyễn Văn Chuân, to Lieutenant General Tôn Thất Đính who was frightened by Mr. Trí Quang... and then Major General Huỳnh Văn Cao. Major General Cao who was shot at by the separatist 1st Infantry Division Lieutenant Nguyễn Đại Thúc, but fortunately he was not hit by the bullets...⁵⁹⁶

During this period, all over the city underground agents of the NLF were working quietly usually as part of small clandestine cells to prepare for the coming military confrontation they knew was inevitable. As a skilled speaker of both French and English, in 1966, the longtime underground agent of Lê Minh, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân was teaching at Đồng Khánh High School and through his activities as a Boy Scout leader, doing his best to ingratiate himself with Americans living in the city in order to gather intelligence. Tuân and his wife, who was also an underground agent, frequently invited American guests to their home for dinner and Vietnamese cooking classes. Around this same time, the underground agent Nguyễn Hữu Đính had recently finished completely remodeling his sizable residence with 2 new hidden bunkers being added, one of them large enough to hold more than two dozen men including weapons and equipment.⁵⁹⁷

Another underground agent named Nguyễn Văn Quang was quietly building up a large underground paramilitary organization among the high school and university students. This organization operated side by side but independently from Lê Công Cơ's network. The group,

⁵⁹⁵ Liên Thành, *Biển Đông Miên Trung* available at <http://batkhuat.net/tl-biendong-mienTrung-01.htm>

⁵⁹⁶ Liên Thành, "Thiếu Tướng Nguyễn Ngọc Loan," n.d., <http://amigalink.com/bdmt/bailienquan/tuongloan.html>.

⁵⁹⁷ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), "Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 1."

which started out in 1965 with little more than 10 people, soon began printing a newspaper called *Học Sinh*. The newspaper operated on the borderline of legality, avoiding directly challenging the authority of the Republic while emphasizing the violence brought by the American occupation. With the help of the newspaper, Quang was able to attract a steady stream of new recruits and, by 1966, Quang's network had grown to more than 30 members.⁵⁹⁸

According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Kha's and the Nguyễn Đại Thúc battle group fought courageously against the forces of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ slowing their advance as they moved from Đà Nẵng to Huế. At the time, according to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Kha told him that he would do his best to delay the movement of Kỳ's forces into Huế in order to allow Tường and his brother time to escape capture, warning him that as soon as Loan and his men arrived in the city they would undoubtedly seek him out and arrest him immediately. At this point, Tường and Phan quickly decided to depart for the jungle, relying on their contacts in the movement to lead them safely to the military base.

The successful suppression of the Struggle Movement forces in Huế, in June 1966, along with the flight of much of the Struggle Movement's leadership to the jungle, largely brought an end to the Buddhist community's political influence within the Republic. The people of Huế, having seen their movement utterly crushed by the Sài Gòn government, were now left with little choice but to support one of the two opposing sides in the ongoing and increasingly bitter civil war.⁵⁹⁹

For those like the local elected official and university lecturer, Hoàng Văn Giàu, who were caught between the opposing sides and desperate to find an alternative, the suppression of the Struggle Movement by Kỳ and Thiệu ended any hopes they had of forcing the

⁵⁹⁸ Bowden, *Huế 1968, A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*, 48–51.

⁵⁹⁹ Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*, 148.

implementation of democratic reforms within the Republic. Because Giàu had worked closely with Trí Quang as an organizer since the beginning of the Buddhist movement, he became a high-profile target for RVN police. After the arrival of the Sài Gòn military in Huế, in June 1966, under the command of Colonel Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, Giàu was stripped of all of his official positions and forced to go in to hiding for several months. In 1967, he was able to return to public life and was allowed to accept a position teaching at Vạn Hạnh University, a Buddhist school under the direction of Thích Tâm Châu in Sài Gòn.⁶⁰⁰

Like Chu Sơn and Ngô Kha, Giàu was eventually drafted as an officer into the RVN military. Unlike Sơn or Kha, Giàu supported the Republic over the Hà Nội government and served loyally for several years as a lieutenant working in counterintelligence. Despite his years of faithful military service, because he was an influential dissident leader in the Struggle Movement, Giàu has been nonsensically accused of participating in murders in Huế during the Tết Offensive in Huế in 1968. There seems to be no evidence to support this, as the former NLF cadre Chu Sơn has pointed out “the fact is that Hoàng Văn Giàu was not a Communist and was not present in Huế at the time [of the massacre].” The presence of Giàu’s name among the lists of the accused is a good illustration of loose standards of evidence applied more generally to the charges leveled against intellectuals in Huế who were known to be strong supporters of the Struggle Movement. After the war ended in 1975, Giàu was arrested by the Hà Nội government and spent 2 years in a reeducation camp, finally successfully fleeing to Australia in a boat in 1980.⁶⁰¹

⁶⁰⁰ “Nhìn Lại Lịch Sử Từ Một Nạn Nhân Của Di Sản Cường Quyền Trên Bước Đường Tị Nạn,” n.d., https://www.giaodiemonline.com/thuvien/mluc/mluc_II06/606_khaiiphong-hvg.htm.

⁶⁰¹ Quán Như, “HOÀNG NGUYỄN NHUẬN (Pen Name Hoàng Văn Giàu) (1938 – 24.07.2016) Mỗi Tình Đoàn Hữu Hơn Ba Mươi Năm,” *Nam Giao* (blog), July 29, 2016, <http://hoangnamgiao.blogspot.com/2016/07/hoang-nguyen-nhuan-1938-24.html>.

Lê Công Cơ's Student Youth Association and the Struggle Movement:

By the end of 1965, with RVN police ratcheting up the pressure on his youth organizations all over Central Vietnam, Lê Công Cơ was no longer able to return to Huế under any of his old aliases. So, in order to deflect attention from himself during the dangerous journey through RVN check points on the way into the city, Cơ brought a young woman with him and the two made a show of behaving like a young couple until Cơ arrived safely at his destination. Around this time, Cơ paid a visit to the family home of Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan and met with their father. Cơ recalls that he was very concerned about the safety of his two sons and told Cơ that he was worried that too many people already knew about their revolutionary activities.⁶⁰²

During the visit, Phan told Cơ that he had recently organized a meeting of artists, intellectuals and professors in Huế, including Trịnh Công Sơn and Đinh Cường, in order to create a new newspaper. This newspaper which was called *Việt Nam Việt Nam* would go on to print a number of articles which were strongly opposed to American intervention and sympathetic to the revolution. Copies of the newspaper were taken to military bases around Huế. However, at the time, the members of the group were unaware that RVN spies and police were observing everyone involved.⁶⁰³

During this period, Lê Công Cơ was living in desperate circumstances. Not wanting to risk capture of any of the many underground agents he knew in the city by his presence as a wanted man, for a time he slept in a discreet patch of jungle located in an undeveloped area inside the citadel. Miserable and uncertain how much longer his health could hold out under such conditions, Cơ met Phan for coffee at the Gia Hội bridge several days later. At the meeting, Cơ

⁶⁰² Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 284.

⁶⁰³ Lê Công Cơ, 285.

recalls Phan telling him that Thích Trí Quang had just recently met with the leaders of the Buddhist movement and that he suspected tensions in Huế would soon erupt.⁶⁰⁴

Seemingly oblivious to the true plight of his friend, Phan told Cơ that if he could endure sleeping outside one more night, he would soon find a place for him. That night, Cơ returned to sleep in the hidden patch of jungle in the Citadel one last time. In all, he had slept on the ground in his improvised hideout inside Citadel for five nights. Each day when he awoke morning dew had completely soaked through his clothes. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, at their next meeting Cơ confessed to Phan that he was afraid he might die if he had to sleep one more night in the jungle. Phan was shocked, apparently not realizing the gravity of his situation. Phan had assumed Cơ at least had some place to take shelter.⁶⁰⁵ Phan then decided it was worth the risk to take Cơ to stay on the university campus where a group of underground agents and leaders in the Struggle Movement were at that time using a house owned by Professor Lê Văn Hảo for a variety of purposes. Hảo was away visiting Sài Gòn when Phan brought Cơ to stay at his home. Lê Văn Hảo, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân were, at that time, collaborating on the publication of the journal *Việt Nam! Việt Nam!* Together they had moved the offices of the publication into Lê Văn Hảo's home on campus with the intent of giving it further protection from harassment by police by adding to its public visibility and making its continued publication an issue of academic freedom.⁶⁰⁶

In his memoir, Lê Công Cơ recalls the eruption of the Struggle Movement in Huế in 1966. During the period up until the suppression of the movement in August, students from almost every school in Huế went on strike. Around this same time, the Tội Hội Sinh Viên

⁶⁰⁴ Lê Công Cơ, 286.

⁶⁰⁵ Lê Công Cơ, 286.

⁶⁰⁶ Lê Công Cơ, 287.

(Student Union at Huế University) organized a workshop for students and academics. The Committee Secretary at the time was Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường. After a two-hour debate within the Union, the members voted to declare their opposition to US intervention in Việt Nam and the new government of Thiệu and Kỳ. Cơ recalls that at the meeting, a vocal minority of students who were supporters of the Đại Việt Party stridently demanded that the declaration of the Student Union also include a condemnation of the north as invaders of the south. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường moved quickly to shut them down. Taking the microphone Tường stood atop a wooden platform and spoke telling the crowd, “we are here to oppose the Thiệu and Kỳ, fighting the communists is the job of the government, not the students.” According to Cơ, this statement met with loud applause. Holding up a copy of the American magazine *Newsweek*, Tường showed the students a picture of an American soldier just as he was about to execute a Vietnamese farmer whose hand they have already chopped off. The crowd was moved and angry. Shortly thereafter they walked to the radio station to take control of it and went on the air to announce their opposition to American military intervention.⁶⁰⁷

Around this time, Cơ recalls Nguyễn Đắc Xuân organizing a group of students into a unit which referred to themselves the “Suicide Squad” (sinh viên quyết tử). The unit, which had elected Xuân their leader, consisted of over 500 students who signed up for service.⁶⁰⁸ Some days later people in Huế got news of the fighting in Đà Nẵng. Eventually, Cơ recalls the students started to become tired after several months of fighting. The Sài Gòn military used bulldozers to destroy Buddhists alters blocking the streets of Huế. Trí Quang, who had declared a hunger strike, sat in front of the governor’s office (đình Tỉnh trưởng) surrounded by hundreds of monks and Buddhist followers. Not long after that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân’s Suicide Squad attacked and

⁶⁰⁷ Lê Công Cơ, 289-290.

⁶⁰⁸ Lê Công Cơ, 290.

destroyed the American consulate. This action, instigated by underground agents of the NLF, was not supported by many in the Buddhist community in Huế and proved to be the high-water mark for in terms of the political strength of Struggle Movement in Huế.⁶⁰⁹

In June of 1966, the Sài Gòn military retook the radio station and issued an announcement claiming that the Struggle Movement was incited by the Việt Cộng. Orders were issued to arrest a number of the top leaders of the movement including, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Trần Quang Long and Le Phước A. Cơ returned to Huế and stayed at Le Phước A's parent's home. After his release, Le Phước A, who was a local high school teacher, returned to Huế to continue his activities as an underground agent.⁶¹⁰

Late in 1966, Cơ traveled to a nearby military base where he met up with Nguyễn Thúc Lư whom he had not seen since Lư and Đạo and Hà had escaped arrest by fleeing to the jungle in 1964. At the meeting, Cơ recalls that Lư told him he had given the RVN police some information when he was arrested, telling his police interrogators that he had worked with Cơ at a house in Đà Nẵng.⁶¹¹ After his meeting with Lư, Cơ stayed on at the military base for about a month until the Party official Phan Thanh Pha asked him to return to Huế on assignment. While at the base, Cơ met Lê Tư Minh for the first time, just after Minh had been elected (for the second time) to the office of Party Secretary of Thừa Thiên Huế. In his memoir, Cơ recalls being impressed with his leadership qualities, referring to him as “thoughtful and sharp.” Returning to Huế, Cơ continued to stay at the home of Le Phước A.⁶¹² According to Cơ,

During this time, there were not many people in the jungle, so they assigned them each one task. Lư went to Hương Trà district and stayed in that area where he recruited and

⁶⁰⁹ Lê Công Cơ, 295.

⁶¹⁰ Lê Công Cơ, 296.

⁶¹¹ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

⁶¹² Lê Công Cơ, *Năm Tháng Dân Người*, 300.

organized underground agents, and then he returned to the jungle. In 1968, during the Huế uprising, I wasn't with Lư, but we met in Huế.⁶¹³

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's Escape to the Jungle, 1966:

The sudden arrival of Nguyễn Ngọc Loan's forces in Huế and the warrant that had been issued for his arrest forced Nguyễn Đắc Xuân to go into hiding in several different locations around Huế with local police and military often not far behind him. During an interview in 2017, Xuân recalled his efforts to evade capture:

As for me because I was being hunted... I had to remove the uniform of Student "Suicide Squad..." Teacher Trí Quang sent people to Diêu Đệ to tell me to go to Từ Đàm Pagoda immediately, otherwise I would be arrested and it would be difficult to escape. Two students Cao Hữu Điền và Phạm Văn Rơ rode bicycles to "escort" me from Diêu Đệ Pagoda to Từ Đàm Pagoda. At Từ Đàm a few days later, Governor Phan Văn Khoa (under the authority of the Thiệu Kỳ faction) stormed the pagoda to arrest me. Thanks to Mr. Trí Quang's intervention, I escaped. He sent me to the Kim Tiên Pagoda of Master Chánh Trực.⁶¹⁴

Xuân could not stay in the pagoda for long. By mid-June in 1966 he was running out of options. As one of the most strident and vocal leaders of the student activists during the Struggle Movement, he had become a priority target for Liên Thành. At this point, beyond the personal network of sympathetic friends he had made in the city, Xuân was acting completely on his own, having no direct connections to the NLF other than the friendships he had made with the Ngọc Tường brothers while working on the publication of *Việt Nam Việt Nam!*

For a time, Xuân hid in a secret room in the home of a local teacher named Chon Cac, staying there until near the end of June. While he waited not knowing what to do or where to go next, Xuân vainly hoped for things to cool down in the city. After several weeks in hiding, Xuân

⁶¹³ Lê Công Cơ, Interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ.

⁶¹⁴ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, "Hồi Ký 'Năm Tháng Dâng Người' Của Ông Lê Công Cơ Cần Phải Viết Lại Với Một Tâm Thế Khác Hoặc..." *Hồi Ký "Năm Tháng Dâng Người" Của Ông Lê Công Cơ Cần Phải Viết Lại Với Một Tâm Thế Khác Hoặc...* (blog), August 31, 2012, <http://www.gactholoc.com/printer.php?id=212&tbl=contents>.

received a letter from Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường inviting him to join him in the jungle for a tour of the military base. Weighing his options, it must have seen to Xuân that he had little choice but to accept Tường's offer. In order to prepare him for his journey in the jungle his friends brought him a pair of sandals, a hammock and some medication for his stomach and for his headaches.⁶¹⁵

Before Xuân departed a local family of underground agents whom he had befriended prepared him a lavish meal for him to say farewell. At this time, Xuân still hadn't fully reconciled himself with the idea that he could not return to Huế. According to Xuân, up to this point he had still naively believed he would be visiting the military base in the jungle for one week in order to meet with his friend Tường, but after seeing the meal his friends had prepared for him, he suddenly realized that this was no casual journey he was embarking on. The real intentions of the Front were not being made known to him at this time. He began to understand that he was being pulled out of the city permanently by revolutionary forces.⁶¹⁶

After waiting until dark, an underground agent led him to a nearby graveyard. At 11pm a group of heavily armed Đặc Công (special forces) commandos arrived to meet them. From there, Xuân was escorted into the jungle "like a prisoner."⁶¹⁷ The road to the military base was not at all as Xuan had imagined it would be. The group of soldiers escorting him cautioned him to walk through the bushes around the trails to avoid land mines and any possible ambushes that might lie ahead. Along their journey they stopped off at a small village where the City Party Committee official, Hoàng Kim Loan, was waiting for them. Loan and Xuân journeyed together the rest of the way.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 3)*, 11.

⁶¹⁶ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 12.

⁶¹⁷ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 16.

⁶¹⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 16–18.

Upon arriving at the military base in the jungle, Xuân was greeted immediately by two communist officials, one of whom was a very small man who was even skinnier than Xuân. This, Xuân discovered later on, was a high-ranking local Party official named Nguyễn Trung Chính. Chính was the younger cousin of Nguyễn Chí Thành, the commanding general in the south at that time. The other individual was a City Party Committee official named Phan Nam. In a recent interview, Xuân described the shrewd longtime underground agent and Party Official who was at that time living a dual life inside the city and at the military base.

Mr. Phan Nam was from Phú Lộc, he went north in the 1950s and came back when he was still young. He was knowledgeable and clever and he understood the city. Lê Minh was considered to be like an older brother and Phan Nam's leader.... Lê Minh really liked Huế, therefore, he ordered Phan Nam to return to Huế be active, but other people were not able to do that because in order to be active in Huế they must be knowledgeable and understand about the city and which clothes to wear and how to communicate. They had to be the same as Huế native. If you could do that you could live openly here, if not you would be arrested.⁶¹⁹

Nam and Chính had been expecting Xuân's arrival and were waiting to speak with him. Xuân recalls that Chính greeted him warmly, welcoming him to the military base. During this first meeting between the two, it quickly became clear to Xuân that Chính had been keeping close tabs on him and seemed to be intimately familiar with his background and political activities. Apparently, Chính had been monitoring the militant young Buddhist activist closely for some time. Xuân came away from this meeting feeling uneasy. He now began to understand why the police in Huế suspected him of being a communist underground agent. Many of the people he had been working closely with, Xuân realized, had been underground agents who were reporting back regularly to the jungle.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

⁶²⁰ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 3)*, 19.

This unnerving encounter with Chính seems to have been the beginning of a period of several decades where Xuân and others like him remained under the watchful eye of oppressive officials like Chính and other security chiefs like Bảy Khiêm. According to the journalist Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Chính:

was very strict. He was a political commissar on the northern front. With his influence on the Tết Offensive, he was able to make it terrible or not. Mr Xuân [Nguyễn Đắc Xuân] was under his power. After the war, he was the Deputy Party Secretary for this province. That guy had a period of time where he attacked the Sông Hương [magazine] and created difficulties for me...He was really tough. At that time, Nguyễn Trung Chính was extremely strict. People in lower positions like Hương Thọ were less strict.⁶²¹

Xuân was surprised to see that the military base appeared to be little more than a collection of small houses with thatched roofs. Each hut had its own assigned role on the base. Xuân was brought to a hut known the Security Office for the Huế City Party Committee. Inside the hut everything was kept meticulously clean. Clothes, weapons and ammunition were all neatly stored here. The security officers stationed around the hut were all clean shaven and well-dressed and spoke with Hà Nội accents. Xuân recalls noticing how Hoàng Kim Loan and other Party officials relaxed, seemingly comfortable casually strolling around the base, bathing in a nearby stream.⁶²² Following the trails further along into the base, Xuân observed a small thatched hut nestled between two hills. He was shocked to the point of disbelief when he was told this was the main headquarters of the military base.

After his meeting with Chính and Nam, Xuan asked about the location of his friend Tường. At that point, the current leader of the City Party Committee in Huế, Nguyễn Hùng (another high-ranking cousin of Nguyễn Chi Thanh) asked someone to go and fetch him. When Tường arrived, the two embraced very happy to see each other alive and safe after the

⁶²¹ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Recorded, November 30, 2017.

⁶²² Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 3)*, 19.

tumultuous period in Huế they had just lived through. Among the leaders introduced to Xuân at this time was Trần Anh Liên (a Hà Nội native) who was at the time Deputy Party Secretary of the City Party Committee in Huế. Liên immediately made a favorable impression on Xuân. Another local Party leader named Hoàng Lanh, who was a little younger than his colleagues and spoke with a Huế accent was also introduced. These officials were staying in an area of the base called Thành Phố Huế, but, Xuân quickly realized, there was nothing city-like about it. This area was assigned to the Party leadership of Thành Phố Huế and consisted of little more than a unassuming collection of small thatched huts.⁶²³

The Networks of the Communist Party and the National Liberation Front Prior to The Tết Offensive:

After the toppling of the Diệm government near the end of 1963, the government of the Republic was no longer able to control the movement of communist officials and underground agents from the jungle to the city as it had in the past. According to Chu Son, beginning with the height of the Denounce the Communists Campaign in 1957, the leadership of the Communist Party in Huế had been largely relegated to staying in the jungle. In 1964, because of the change in policy by the RVN government, the Zone 5 committee decided it was safe enough to assign several officials from the City Party Committee to return to the lowlands:

When the campaign to denounce and annihilate the communists came to an end, the network of communist underground agents in the urban areas had completely disintegrated. The [fleeing] communists [in the network] followed different paths, some of them surrendered, some move to new areas, moved elsewhere to work, some crossed the border to the north and some went back to the military. Mr. Phan Nam, Mr. Hương Thọ, Mr. Hoàng Lanh and Mr. Tư Minh [aka Lê Minh] went back to the military base and stayed there from 1957 until the Ngô Đình Diệm regime was overthrown. Because the Ngô Đình Diệm regime employed the strategic hamlet/agroville strategy to confine people, people could not make contact with the members of the Front [in the jungle]. Therefore, it was not until 1964, when Mr. Dương Văn Minh took power and replaced Ngô Đình Diệm, that the dissolution of the strategic hamlets was ordered. At that time,

⁶²³ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, 22.

the people at the military bases were able to find their way back. Mr. Phan Nam himself told me about the route he took on his journey [to the city]. During his trek from the military base, he traveled for one day and then dug a secret foxhole. The next day, he began his travels again, dug another secret foxhole and stayed there. Then, after arriving in the lowlands the following day, Nam searched for local people working in the jungle, such as woodcutters, leaf and charcoal collectors [whom he knew to be underground agents]. Nam hid his presence by contacting with people working in the jungle and gradually working his way into the city. Up until 1964, they [the communist officials in the jungle] were unable to return because it is not easy. With the help of the Buddhist movement and with help of Dương Văn Minh [it became safer and easier]. Dương Văn Minh had a younger brother Dương Văn Nhật who was a Việt Cộng in the north. It was this relationship of Mr. Minh with the north, although he didn't like communists [that moderated his views]. He did not fight against the communists like Thiệu and Kỳ. As acting head of state, he ended the Strategic Hamlet program.... The Ngô Đình Diệm regime had many spy's and many people who were loyal to it. But now with the collapse [of Diệm's government]... their system didn't exist anymore.... [Later on] Nguyễn Khánh organized another system, which was not as effective as Ngô Đình Diệm's. Therefore, [beginning in 1964] the communist cadres were able to enter the city more easily. When Phan Nam went to the city... he took responsibility for one aspect of Party business. Then after that, Hoàng Kim Loan also entered the city. The two of them both stayed in the city for many years. Mr Hương Thọ would go to the jungle and return to the city frequently, but just in the area of Hương Thủy. Mr Phan Nam and Hoàng Kim Loan stayed inside the city at the homes of large prominent families in Huế, such as that of Lê Khắc Quyến, Nguyễn Hữu Đính, and bà Thuận Chi. These were large, famous and wealthy families. Because these families were able to provide security for those people. Certainly, if they [the communist officials] followed their [ideological] point of view about class they would search for a normal house [to stay in], but it would have been easy for them to caught...⁶²⁴

Until his death in July of 1967, General Nguyễn Chí Thanh, in addition to being the overall commander of the entire southern front, was also the senior leader on the Zone 5 committee, and thus, directly responsible for Huế. It was Thanh who, in 1967, first drew up the plans for carefully orchestrated simultaneous attacks all over the south during the Tết holiday at the beginning of the following year. According to Tô Nhuận Vỹ:

Mr. Lê Tư Minh was the commander of Thừa Thiên Huế. At that time, in Huế, he was the highest authority, but above him was area commander for Bình Trị Thiên... that is the Central Committee and the High Command....and Mr. Tư Minh was the deputy of the highest-level commander in that area. Lê Minh was the commander directly in charge of the front in Huế.... And Mr. Nguyễn Chí Thanh was based in Hà Nội and commanded in

⁶²⁴ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Sơn (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

the entire south, but he died in 1967... Then here at that time [after the death of Nguyễn Chí Thanh], the commander was Trần Văn Quang. He was the political commissar with the rank of Party Secretary of the Area Committee. He was a general, he was also the area chief [Party leader of two provinces] and the commander and chief... The direct commander of the Huế front was Lê Minh... And I was a journalist on the Huế front. Responsible for the entire area south of the Hương River. A journalist who wrote for the newspapers in Huế...⁶²⁵

Following Thanh's death under disputed circumstances in July 1967, the top leadership of Thừa Thiên Huế province consisted of the following cadres who, particularly among the lower ranks, tended to rotate in and out of these positions within the local Party committees:

General Trần Văn Quang: Party Secretary of the Zone 5 committee, Trí Thiên

Lê Minh: Deputy Secretary of the Zone 5 Committee, Party Secretary of the City Party Committee of Huế

General Lê Chương: Area Committee Deputy Political Commissar (TNV interview 1)

Nguyễn Vạn: Political Commissar for Thừa Thiên Huế

Trần Anh Liên, Zone 5 Committee Member, Deputy Secretary of the City Party Committee in Huế

Tổng Hoàng Nguyên member of the City Party Committee in Huế responsible for security

Hoàng Lanh, City Party Committee Member responsible for the city center

Other Party officials at this time included City Party Committee Members: **Nguyễn Trung Chính, Phan Nam** (underground agent), **Hoàng Kim Loan** (underground agent), **Nguyễn Xuân Ngà, Nguyễn Hoàng Thọ** (underground agent) **Nguyễn Đình Bẩy** (Security Chief) **Phan Thanh Pha**(underground agent). There were also many other lower-level officials serving on local district committees.⁶²⁶

The names of the leading patriarchs of the families who owned large properties where underground agents and traveling Party officials could stay and be housed and protected are: **Thân Trọng Phước, Lê Khắc Quyến, Bửu Đáp, Vĩnh Tứ, Lê Hữu Trí, Nguyễn Văn Hải, Phan Thanh Tường, Ngô Đề, Lê Bá Hàn,** not on this list but should be included is **Nguyễn Hữu Đình** and **Văn Thiên Tường.**⁶²⁷⁶²⁸

⁶²⁵ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶²⁶ Nhiều Tác Giả, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*, 231.

⁶²⁷ Nhiều Tác Giả, 209.

⁶²⁸ Minh Khuê, “Chuyện Ông Thiên Tường ở Huế....”

According to Liên Thành the most sought-after underground agents who escaped the sweeps of the city by RVN police of leaders of the Struggle Movement where:

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường
 Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan
 Nguyễn Đắc Xuân
 Trần Quang Long
 Lê Minh Trường
 Huỳnh Sơn Trà
 Nguyễn Văn Sơ (I think he means Đặng Văn Sở)
 Ngô Yên Thi
 Trần Bá Chữ
 Nguyễn Thị Đoàn Trinh⁶²⁹

Other underground agents of the NLF and the Communist Party operating in Huế during this time. These are people who are well known to have been dedicated activists in the urban movement, who have either served the revolution in this capacity for more than a decade, were thrown in prison or were killed in battle. This list is by no means comprehensive. Only the underground agents that I have some information on are included:

Active before Tết Offensive Between 1960 and 1968:

Nguyễn Đóa, Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, Tôn Thất Dương Hanh, Phạm Thị Xuân Quế, Đinh Cường, Lê Phước Á, Vĩnh Kha, Trần Thân Mỹ, Nguyễn Minh Triết, Phan Duy Nhân, Đặng Văn Sở, Huỳnh Sơn Trà, Nguyễn Duy Đàm, Phan Hữu Lượng, Lê Thanh Xuân, Nguyễn Thị Đoàn Trinh

Active in Huế after 1968:

Vợ Quế, Hoàng Thị Thọ, Lê Thị Nhan, Nguyễn Thị Tâm An, Trần Thị Sen, Nguyễn Thị Cẩm, Phạm Phú Phong, Bửu Chí, Bửu Nam, Nguyễn Duy Hiền

Other underground agents recruited by Lê Công Cơ between 1960 and 1975 in Huế (this list is not comprehensive):

Phạm Thị Nga, Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh, Hoàng Đình Bảo, Mai Thị Cẩm, Dương Thị Chắt, Đoàn Tuyên Châu, Nguyễn Văn Chúc, Nguyễn Thanh Cư, Nguyễn Văn Diệm, Trần Đại Đảng, Trần Đại Đẻo, Phạm Văn Đức, Nguyễn Ích Hà, Trịnh Duy Hiền, Phạm Văn Kháng, Phạm Văn Ký, Nguyễn Văn Lạc, Nguyễn Văn Lạp, Nguyễn Thị Lệ, Nguyễn Linh, Đoàn Phạm Túy Linh, Nguyễn Thúc Lư, Lê Văn Lý, Hồ Văn Mẫn, Dương Đình Na, Võ Đại Ngẫu, Ngô Giác Ngô, Trần Văn Nguyên, Nguyễn Thành Nhân, Trần Kiên Nhân, Nguyễn Thị Nhơn, Đoàn Nhuận, Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Hà Thúc Quyết, Nguyễn Thanh Tân, Nguyễn Thúc Tấn, Nguyễn Thị Thọ, Phạm Thông, Phạm Tiền, Phạm Tín, Phạm Truyền, Trịnh Túc, Đào Viện, Hoàng Việt, Trần Đại Vinh, Nguyễn Bảo Vĩnh (Many of these people were killed during the war, many others went to

⁶²⁹ Lữ Thành, “Mậu Thân Huế – Bị Dồn Vào Đường Cùng,” *Tre* (blog), March 3, 2018.

prisons like Thừa Phủ and Con Đảo where they often endured years of torture and starvation)⁶³⁰⁶³¹

Nguyễn Khoa Điềm and Tô Nhuận Vỹ:

In 1964 and 1965, the Hà Nội government ordered the return to Huế of two recent graduates of the University of Hà Nội. Both men, Nguyễn Khoa Điềm and Tô Nhuận Vỹ, were native to the city but had regrouped to the north (đi tập kết) to study at the university in the late 1950s and after receiving their degrees were eager to return to their home to take an active role in the war of national liberation. As intellectuals with an obvious talent for writing both Điềm and Vỹ were assigned to work in propaganda, with Vỹ working from the beginning as a journalist and Điềm initially being assigned to recruit and train underground agents from among the intellectuals in Huế. During an interview in 2017, Vỹ described his experience as a young man just entering military service in the jungles outside his former home:

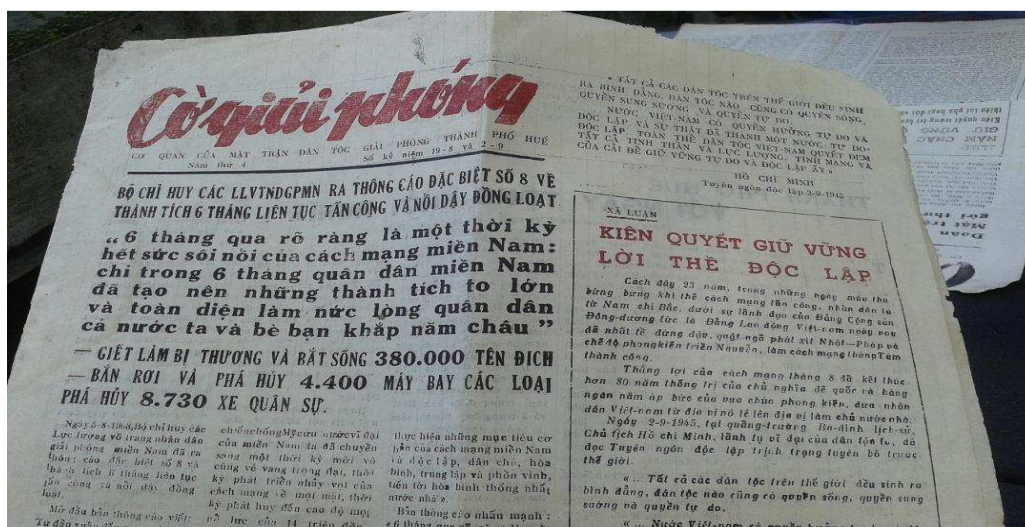
In 1965, I returned to Huế to be a journalist. The newspaper which I wrote in the jungle was called Liberation Flag [Cờ Giải Phóng]... I [originally] come from Vỹ Dạ, I followed my parents to the north. My parents followed the revolution and went to the north....The "Liberation Flag" was printed in the jungle. I have kept a few. This newspaper was formidable, but at times we were chased away by the enemy, making it very difficult to try to publish in a printing house. So many printers weighed many tons., So, [when fleeing the enemy or moving to a new location] all the typewriters were carried on the workers' shoulders while we were attacked. So, [publishing] a newspaper was very difficult, but a newspaper like ours proved that the revolutionary front was still there. So, by any means necessary it had to be published as a weapon, but sometimes it is very hard.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ *Kỹ Yếu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975).*

⁶³¹ In 1967, the City Party Committee member Hoàng Kim Loan wrote a report on one of the new networks that had been built by Lê Công Cơ in the Huế. The report was titled: The Situation of Intellectuals and Government Officials in the City of Huế. In the report Loan states that “currently we have built a network within a number of the enemy’s organizational apparatus’s, such as Public Works, the Post Office, Medicine, the School District, and Provincial Courts.... We already have our underground agents in the area of teaching.... We have organized 14 teachers (a number of them teaching at private schools), 8 civil servants working within the agencies of the enemy, 45 college students and 5 high school students, 1 doctor, 1 businessman and 2 military officers. (Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế, 1954-1975. 223)

⁶³² Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #2 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

Because they were able to print the publication away from the interference of RVN police and with more professional equipment than the local papers being published by underground agents operating in the city, the newspapers overall appearance was more consistently professional in appearance. The number of copies distributed could under the right conditions rise to several thousand per issue. According to Vỹ, the total circulation they could achieve “depended, if times were difficult [only] 300-500 copies [were printed per issue]. If it was easy [to print] then several thousand copies were made. Depending on the number we could deliver.”⁶³³



634

Distribution was accomplished entirely through the toil and dedication of daring individuals without the aid of any automated systems or motor vehicles:

We had a system to deliver it. From the bases in the jungle through a system of contacts, a communications system from the north to here. Like a post office to deliver mail.... At that time, the system was very rudimentary, delivery was on foot and done by hand.... They hid the letters around their belt with a gun and covered it up, making it look simple, everything was rolled up neat and tidy and hidden on their body in a simple way to ensure that the gun, documents and letters were sent safely to the jungle. If they returned, they would bring more materials on the way back...⁶³⁵

⁶³³ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶³⁴ Photo taken on my wife's Iphone.

⁶³⁵ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

The task of delivering the newspapers to their intended audience was extremely dangerous and often required stealth and the ability to spot and avoid ambushes. As a last resort, mail carriers were required to be ready for a fight if they found themselves in a situation where they were backed into a corner.

If they were arrested, of course, they would go to prison or be killed. For example, if a delivery person brought mail to the jungle, they would have to cross the National Highway or the rail lines, but the National Highway and the rail lines have soldiers guarding them. Therefore, every night they would need to find a way to cross over the highway. If they were discovered, they would have to fight.... Throughout the war the National Highways and railways were guarded by Americans and Republican soldiers. If we wanted to bring something to the jungle or bring something back to the city sometimes you would have to trade your life [in the attempt]. To get across the highway was an accomplishment....⁶³⁶

Frequently, in order to prepare for a safe and uneventful crossing, NLF soldiers would engage local underground agents to scout the area before making the journey.

During the daytime, there were some underground agents, such as woodcutters and local villagers who would walk around the area [that the NLF people wanted to cross] and spot ambushes to report their location, so that they could be avoided, but it was not easy because gradually the leaders of the Republic soldiers... became increasingly clever. Underground agents would report an area as having no ambush, but [instead of going out during the day when they would be easily spotted] they would wait until nightfall to deploy an ambush. Therefore, many times the information [we had] was incorrect. Because of this, we would often encounter each other and frequently have to fight and die.⁶³⁷

To prepare for a largescale assault, in the years and months leading up to the Tết Offensive, in 1968, NLF and PAVN forces stationed in the jungles around the city began to dig bunkers increasingly close to the more urbanized areas such as Phú Bài airport on the southern outskirts of Huế.

I was a reporter for the Front at that time.... I witnessed the preparations for the Tết Offensive. When I was an assistant for Mr. Hoàng Lanh... Every week I would ghost write reports to send up the chain of command to the leaders above in the jungle. So, the

⁶³⁶ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶³⁷ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

information the leaders sent to each other I wrote.... Before the Tết Offensive, the allied forces [primarily US and ARVN] knew that the Việt Cộng had big plans for the coming spring. So, they worked harder to clear areas in the Việt Cộng controlled areas and in the jungle. The Americans and the ARVN organized many more sweeps, marching and searching for the Việt Cong.... When they swept, they would use a stick to tap on the ground to find secret holes where communists were hidden... They had experience finding secret bunkers. In those regions when the Republican troops left, they belonged to the Việt Cộng, but when the RVN troops returned they [the Việt Cộng] went back into their bunkers....The Republican military searched carefully everywhere and went up into the hills in the jungle where my military unit was stationed.... In my novel, I wrote very clearly in chapter one. A secret bunker is a small hole for a person to crawl into. Over the top of it there was a lid which was needed for camouflage. They could usually hide 1 or 2 or 3 people. The cover for the bunkers were hidden by leaves. The soldiers of the Republic knew very clearly about them, so to be a Việt Cộng agent was very dangerous, but they were extremely important. Therefore, the officials in the jungle who returned to be active [in the countryside or the city] needed to have secret bunkers to hide in. These secret bunkers were their lifeline. They must be kept secret even from friends. The only person who knew the location was the person who dug the hole. This is because of the fear that if your friends were to be arrested and tortured, they would disclose the location and the [names of] the people protecting that bunker. Because these holes were dug in people's gardens, the people [who owned the garden] would cover the hole and camouflage it. For the people active near the city, secret bunkers were extremely important. On the communist side, they made a major effort to dig more bunkers. On the side of the Republic, they made a major effort to discover them. This is why these secret underground bunkers were the single most important thing [during this time.] One time, I was with a friend who was an ambush soldier who had dug a secret hole where we were living together. Later on, he was arrested and surrendered to the Republic. The soldier sent me a message asking if I was still living in that bunker and assuring me that he would never betray me. But there were a number of [Communist Party] officials and ambush soldiers who knew about what had happened. They searched for that hole until they found it and they destroyed it because they feared I would be arrested [if I used it]. Therefore, in the area around the city, there were not just hundreds of bunkers, but thousands of secret bunkers for the Đặ Cộng.... These secret bunkers had existed for many years, but for major preparations [for the Tết Offensive] in the beginning of the summer of 1967.... they needed elite forces. Đặ Cộng soldiers needed more bunkers, thousands more bunkers.... Sometimes, soldiers of the Republic would find a bunker, but very few because the people [in the area] would protect them. There were areas that the Republic claimed [to control] but those areas were actually free fire zones, where there was shooting all day long. Near Phú Bài, the Americans were firing all day long, but the people living there protected us. I was protected by the people there and lived in a hidden

bunker. The most important thing [for us] was that people in that area supported the revolutionary side.⁶³⁸

While Vỹ was mostly able to keep a safe distance from the RVN military and police personnel stationed around Huế while working on his newspaper, Nguyễn Khoa Điềm, in 1965, had a dual role working in propaganda as well as recruiting underground agents for the urban movement, and thus, had to make regular trips into the city to organize new recruits. However, Điềm seems to have lacked many of the skills and innate abilities that had made Lê Công Cơ such an effective underground agent and organizer because he was quickly identified as a communist agent and arrested and imprisoned at Thừa Phủ where he would remain until he was freed by revolutionary forces in 1968.

Recruiting Thích Đôn Hậu and Lê Văn Hảo

In order to put the best face on the movement of revolutionary soldiers into the Huế during the Tết Offensive, which could certainly appear to many residents of Huế and Central Vietnam like an invading army, a committee composed of prominent local leaders supporting the attack was formed for the purpose of public relations. While various sources appear to ascribe different individuals' membership and varying positions on the committee, according to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, the leaders of the organization were, President Lê Văn Hảo, Vice President Thích Đôn Hậu and Vice President, bà Nguyễn Đình Chi. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was appointed Committee Secretary and placed in charge of writing propaganda for the committee.⁶³⁹

The recruitment of the monk Đôn Hậu into the NLF was a major political victory in an otherwise largely unsuccessful attempt to win over the Buddhist community in Huế to the NLF

⁶³⁸ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶³⁹ For more information on the “Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam” see Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's blog at <http://www.gactholoc.com/c70/t70-593/lien-minh-cac-lltdchbvn-thanh-pho-hue-voi-cuoc-dau-tranh-giai-phong-dan-toc.html>

cause following the suppression of the Struggle Movement in 1966. Hậu was a greatly respected Buddhist leader in Huế with a large following. Beginning in 1956, Hậu had supervised the publication of a newspaper called *Liên Hòa* which wrote about issues important to the Buddhist community. During the Buddhist crisis of 1963, according to Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Liên Hòa* played an important role in mobilizing the local community. The paper's publication was suspended by the RVN government in 1966, undoubtedly contributing to Hậu's decision to openly supporting the NLF.⁶⁴⁰ According to Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, who became a follower of Đôn Hậu in 1956:

In 1946 or 1947, he was almost executed. With the help of Bảo Đại's mother [he was released], she took responsibility for his behavior. Therefore, his [reputation] as a patriot was extremely strong.... He was my teacher... During the movement to fight Ngô Đình Diệm my teacher and I were arrested together at Diệu Đế pagoda.... He brought Buddhism to life. He was very persuasive and very respected in society. Therefore, in 1968, when they [the Communist Party] established the Alliance, at that time called the "Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam", in order to serve in the Tết Offensive people invited him to go to the jungle to become a member of the Front. At that time, he went with them even though he was very old and tired, but he still agreed gladly. To the people of Huế, this monk was a symbol of patriotism. The Front noticed that he had important influence on society.... They carried him to the jungle....⁶⁴¹

Beyond the propaganda effect it may have had on the public opinion of people in Huế during the battle, the Alliance seems to have had no real influence on events. The leadership of the group was selected based solely on their reputations in Huế and was not trusted by the government in Hà Nội, and therefore, was not vested with any real authority or responsibilities.

According to the journalist Tô Nhuận Vỹ:

It was the Communist Party that led the Tết Offensive. Mr Tư Minh was the battlefield commander, and the Area Deputy Party Secretary. Although some people in the Front were raised up [to important sounding positions] this was only a flag to gather around. The Alliance included Thích Đôn Hậu, Bà Nguyễn Đình Chi and Lê Văn Hảo, but the

⁶⁴⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*, 219.

⁶⁴¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân.

actual leadership was provided by the Communist Party. However, in this city, they needed to have people speaking out who local people would listen to. Calling on the people and the people trust them. With this city you had to have people like this, but later on they [those people] were treated badly.⁶⁴²

According to Vỹ, the organization was little more than a public relations effort which was being carefully supervised by Hà Nội:

In reality... [in terms of] all of the activities of the National Liberation Front, the Alliance [of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam], they [Hà Nội] controlled everything from top to bottom, such as Thích Đôn Hậu, Tường, Xuân, everything they did the leaders of the zone committee decided. In the final analysis everything was controlled by the communist central leadership of the south.⁶⁴³

Many years after the war ended, Lê Văn Hảo did several interviews about his experience during the Tết Offensive in which he stated once he was taken to the jungle, he was treated almost like a prisoner, no longer being allowed to choose where he went and what he did. While he was at the military base during the Tết Offensive, Hảo says he slept in a cave and did very little beyond listening to Hà Nội radio and sulking about his situation. According to Hảo, he and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường were together at the military base and that during this period Trần Văn Quang came to see him in a vain attempt to comfort him about his predicament. The leaders at the base, Hảo claims, wouldn't have dared allow him to go back to Huế for fear that he would have second thoughts about joining the revolution. Eventually, Lê Văn Hảo and a group of others associated with Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam, including Thích Đôn Hậu, Nguyễn Thúc Tuân (Tuân was paired up with Đôn Hảo to act as an English and French speaking interpreter during media events and interviews for his longtime friend), Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, and Bà Nguyễn Đình Chi were brought to Hà Nội in 1968 where they did photo ops and met with top Party leaders.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴² Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁴³ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁴⁴ Lê Văn Hảo, Phòng Văn Giáo Sư Lê Văn Hảo, Quê Mẹ, July 1989.

Preparations for the Assault Inside and Outside of Huế:

As NLF and PAVN forces gradually moved into position outside the city over a period of several months, members of the NLF and Party networks in Central Vietnam redoubled their efforts to build up as many underground agents in strategic positions as possible inside of Huế before the assault. During an interview in 2017, Võ described his experiences while living among the assembling attacking forces in the days immediately prior to when the offensive began:

I only knew about the preparations for the big assault during the summer. I knew about the attack on Huế 2 days beforehand... because I was sensitive.... With my rank I would not be informed about it. The night that we attacked Huế in the evening a runner informed me where to assemble... On the liberation side [with regard to] the preparations for the Tết Offensive, there were a large number of underground agents in the city, such as Lê Phương Thảo, Nguyễn Duy Hiền.... There were many of them but not enough. There were other forces of underground agents [besides the teachers and students] like the xích lô drivers and workers, but this was still not enough. Therefore, they had another strategy to raise forces from outside [of Huế] to bring to the city. For example, there were a number of reliable underground agents like xích lô drivers, bread sellers and merchants of various types. It was not easy to enter [Huế] because the police investigated [newcomers], but an increasing number of people went to the city to assist and became xích lô drivers and tofu sellers, living inside the city and gradually becoming familiar with the area.... At that time, I entered the city and stayed in the An Hòa area. At night, the children who were underground agents used sling shots to shoot out all the streetlights on the outskirts of the city. The police were too tired and too busy to deal with it.... This was a people's war, children and youth [participated]....⁶⁴⁵

Longtime underground agents like Nguyễn Thúc Tuấn, who was the patriarch of a large extended family which included numerous underground agents, mobilized virtually his entire family to participate in the assault. According to Phạm Thị Nga, who had already served as underground agent for the youth group formed by Lê Công Cơ and Nguyễn Thúc Lư at Thanh Lương village in 1962 and for the Việt Minh in the 1950s, her cousin Tuấn approached her not

⁶⁴⁵ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

long before the assault began to give her instructions regarding how to coordinate with the incoming revolutionary forces:

He told me that he would be leading people to attack the city and he gave me orders what to do.... When revolutionaries came to the city, they all connected with him. He was an underground agent that connected with all the networks. The network from him led to me and many others. Because we all trusted him and looked up to him, he gave us orders and everyone followed them.⁶⁴⁶

According to Nga, on Tuân's orders, just before NLF and PAVN forces entered the city, her modest home inside the Citadel became a clearing house for vehicles, weapons, equipment and food supplies:

Tuân assigned my family two drivers with two cars so that when the revolutionaries came in [to the city] they could use them. They gave me lots of equipment and weapons to store in my house. At that time, I was pregnant. They attacked on the 1st and 2nd day of the lunar New Year. We bought a lot of food and stored it in our house. When the revolutionaries attacked into Huế, the civilians were very afraid. Many of them threw away everything. They had to run away. They threw away fish sauce, rice, gasoline the necessities and the revolutionaries took that and used it, but afterward they repaid it all.⁶⁴⁷

January 30, 1968, and the First Phase of the Attack:

According to Lê Minh, on the first night of the combined PAVN/NLF assault on ARVN and American forces stationed in Huế, it took little more than three hours for revolutionary forces to seize control of over ninety percent of the city. The astonishing rapidity with which the defenses of the city collapsed was the result of more than a year of meticulous planning and preparations and would not have been possible without close coordination with a substantial contingent of underground agents already mobilized and equipped for battle inside the defensive perimeter put up by ARVN forces. These forces could rely on logistical support and bases of operation provided by a number of underground families already discussed in detail in previous chapters.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁶ Phạm Thị Nga, Interview #2 with Phạm Thị Nga, April 1, 2014.

⁶⁴⁷ Phạm Thị Nga, Interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga.

⁶⁴⁸ Bowden, *Huế 1968, A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*, 121.

According to Chu Son, who had just recently finished his basic training as an ARVN lieutenant in Sài Gòn, the ARVN Captain, Tôn Thất Trục, who recruited him in Hội An in 1965 to become a propagandist for the Struggle Movement had since been promoted to Major in the ARVN military. On the first night of the Tết Offensive, Trục ordered his men to stand down allowing revolutionary forces to completely bypass them on their way into the city while heading straight for their primary objectives.⁶⁴⁹

The seizure of the Chính Tây gate by NLF underground agents on the west side of the Citadel allowed the rapid advance of PAVN/NLF forces into the most heavily fortified area of the city. According to Tô Nhuận Vỹ:

The gate on the west side of the Citadel was a very important gate, the night [of the initial attack] they entered in the Citadel, some of the soldiers guarding that gate that night were underground agents. They opened the gate for the soldiers to enter. Underground agents around the city were extremely important. They supported very strongly this attack. At that time, the [student] forces [were mobilized] such as the underground agents of Lê Phương Thảo [Lê Công Cơ]. In the city center.... a group of intellectuals, students... stood up on the side of the revolution.⁶⁵⁰

This initial assault on the Citadel was led by City Party Committee leaders, Nguyễn Trung Chính, and Phan Nam in collaboration with the underground agent Nguyễn Văn Quang. Coming from their underground bunkers in Quảng Điền, City Party officials gathered a force of underground agents along the way into the city. Once most of the city had been successfully occupied, it was then divided into two security zones with City Party Committee member Tống Hoàng Nguyên placed in charge of the north bank of the Hương River and Nguyễn Đình Bảy assigned responsibility for the south bank.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁹ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Son (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

⁶⁵⁰ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁵¹ “Giải Phóng Nhà Lao Thừa Phủ,” *Sự Kiện và Nhân Chứng*, n.d., <https://sknc.qdnd.vn/ky-niem-sau-sac/giai-phong-nha-lao-thua-phu-500847>.

According to an article published in *Nhan Dan* in 2010, Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm) was placed in charge of the initial assault on the southern part of the city, including Thừa Phủ prison and the MACV compound which were located on the southeastern end of the city not far from the riverbank. Here, where some of the most intense fighting of the battle would take place, in addition to a number of government offices, was also the location of Huế's two famous elite high schools, Quốc Học and Đồng Khánh. The initial efforts to seize control of the prison by Khiêm on the first night of the Tết Offensive were repulsed by ARVN forces, but Khiêm rallied his troops across the street behind the protective walls of Đồng Khánh High School. The following day, he ordered a full-scale assault. After several days of intense fighting, Khiêm reports that he ordered the encirclement of the prison, placing it under siege. Shortly thereafter, the NLF seized control of the main building and by 3:30 p.m. on February 3, 1968, the entire prison was under revolutionary control. According to Khiêm, on the following day, 500 of their liberated comrades were selected to supplement the armed forces and issued guns for the protection of their hometown. In addition to killing many of the enemy and the liberation of more than 2000 prisoners at Thừa Phủ, Khiêm states that, during the advance, he also “captured alive some oligarchs for the puppet regime” who worked for the CIA and RVN police, as well some leaders from “reactionary” parties.⁶⁵²

Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo), an early member of Lê Công Cơ's Youth Association in Huế, was one of the many former members of the urban movement enlisted into the military that day. According to Đạo:

I was put in prison because I was active in dissident organizations and then fled into the jungle. After that, I went back to the city to be politically active, but there were spies who infiltrated the organization. One of them had an appointment with me and arrested me at that meeting.... I was on the list of prisoners who would be sent to Côn Đảo, but while on

⁶⁵² Thứ Năm, “Chuyện về Một Người Anh Hùng,” *Nhan Dan*, February 4, 2010, <https://nhandan.com.vn/tin-tuc-sukien/chuyen-ve-mot-nguoi-anh-hung-418463/>.

the way there the northern Army [PAVN] captured Hải Vân pass. The ARVN were afraid that, if they took us south, the PAVN soldiers would free us. So, we were kept in Huế. In 1968, I was liberated [from Thừa Phủ prison] in Huế.⁶⁵³

Others from the urban movement in Central Vietnam who were freed at this time included Sơn Hải, Nguyễn Bích, Nguyễn Khoa Điềm and Nguyễn Nhung. Đạo, Sơn Hải and Nguyễn Nhung were immediately armed and mobilized for service in the battle in Huế. Hải was killed in battle shortly thereafter when the public relations unit he was serving in was completely surrounded at Phú Vang.⁶⁵⁴

The Tết Offensive in Thanh Lương Village:

In the years just prior to the Tết Offensive, the residents of Thanh Lương village 10km north of Huế intensified their involvement in the growing insurgency of the NLF in the countryside around Huế. During this period, one resident of the village named Dương Hèo, who was a member of the extended family of Nguyễn Thúc Tuân and Nguyễn Thúc Lư and the granddaughter of mandarins and military mandarins (*quan lãnh binh*) on both sides of her family, was living a dual life, working as a street peddler and an underground agent in and around Huế.⁶⁵⁵

Although he was fairly wealthy and lived on rent paid by tenant farmers living and working on his lands, Hèo's father, like the family patriarch Nguyễn Thúc Duyệt, was a member of the Communist Party, having joined during the height of the French War in 1948. Regardless of their status within the Party and support for the Việt Minh, during the 1950s her family members maintained their (relatively) wealthy lifestyle and outward appearances of upward mobility.

⁶⁵³ Nguyễn Văn Ninh, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013.

⁶⁵⁴ Nhung, Interview with Nguyễn Nhung.

⁶⁵⁵ Dương Hèo, Interview Dương Hèo.

According to Hèo, “Her father and her uncle were rich kids (viên anh viên em), they lived lives of leisure and did not work. Their family were landlords.” In 1954, her father had decided to stay in the south (while several other family members left for the north) in order to help build the Communist Party there from the grassroots. A few years later, he was denounced as a communist and taken to prison. According to Hèo, her father was still in prison during the [American] war.... While he was in government custody, he was tortured and severely mistreated. Outrage at his mistreatment was a strong motivator for his children to join the NLF and fight bitterly against the Diệm government in the early 1960s. From 1962 until 1967, Hèo worked as a Gái dịch vận (peddler) in the local markets, using her profession as a cover to gather information.⁶⁵⁶

During this period, as part of her assignment as an underground agent of the NLF, she was asked to monitor ARVN troop movements. Hèo recalls that at that time she was an attractive young woman, and she was able to use this to her advantage to become acquainted with ARVN soldiers in order to gather information and to hitch rides in military vehicles avoiding checkpoints and moving from one area to another without being searched. The RVN soldiers were generally friendly and didn’t feel threatened by the diminutive young girl struggling with an oversized load of goods. In her baggage, concealed among the wares she carried for her work as a peddler, she often carried supplies for wounded NLF and PAVN soldiers, such as bandages and medications.

To reduce her risk of being caught with incriminating documents, Hèo invented her own system for coding messages which she would then pass on to a contact who was an elderly man who would take the information to the jungle. As the years went by and the war continued to

⁶⁵⁶ Dương Hèo.

heat up, Hèo was reassigned to work as a nurse (hậu cần) for a PAVN military unit operating in the area sometime in 1967. Her unit (sư đoàn 3 tiểu đoàn K8) fought at Quảng Thọ. Before the Tết Offensive in 1968, she was reassigned again and ordered to stay at one location working as an informant for NLF soldiers in the jungle. She had no direct contact with American soldiers until 1968.⁶⁵⁷

In the aftermath of one of the most destructive battles of the war, Hèo remembers returning home to find all of the houses in her village and all the vegetation burned to ashes by the napalm or killed by Agent Orange. Her brother Bòn who had fought in the Tết Offensive was missing... According to Hèo, during this period because of the constant danger, life was counted in seconds and not in hours since people faced death at any moment. As in 1953, when her family's substantial home was burned down by the French, in 1968, it was burned again by the Americans.⁶⁵⁸

In May 1968, Hèo was working as a combat nurse near Phú Bài airport. Her assignment was to stay hidden inside a small bunker where she was taking care of 18 wounded soldiers. One day while she was nursing her patients alongside her fiancé who was an NLF soldier and her sister who were assisting her with the wounded, the bunker was hit by napalm. The flames swept through the entire length of the trench killing her sister and her fiancé immediately and severely burning Hèo on her arms, legs and back. The following day while the American Army searched the area, a wounded Hèo moved surreptitiously to another nearby bunker to hide. For four days Hèo lay hidden until American and ARVN soldiers discovered her hiding place. Hèo recalls that she intended to explode a grenade she was clutching as a final gesture of defiance before she was

⁶⁵⁷ Dương Hèo.

⁶⁵⁸ Dương Hèo.

taken prisoner, but she was too weak to carry it out, and in the end, she surrendered without a fight.

She was then brought to the American base at Phú Bài and four days later transported to Đà Nẵng for medical treatment. An American soldier helped her when she was arrested in Phú Bài, after she had been left out in the sun for days. According to Hèo, this American fed her and took good care of her, telling her that he had served two years in Vietnam already and would be going home soon. Two months after this she was brought to Phú Tài in Quy Nhơn and held there in a temporary prison. During this time, Hèo says that she was beaten and tortured and “punctured” by her captors. Because she still had three pieces of shrapnel inside her body, she was eventually taken to Dân Y hospital in Quy Nhơn for surgery to have it removed but the operation was unsuccessful. While she was there, she managed to escape her captors by sneaking past some sleeping guards.⁶⁵⁹

Hèo recalls that, before 1968, as a security measure she carefully hid her name from other people in the NLF. Only a few people knew who was who or who held what position inside the NLF organization. But after Tết, many Vietnamese whose names had been kept secret were exposed. As a result, Hèo was unable to return home safely for several years.

The Treatment of Prisoners of War by NLF in Huế, the Policy vs the Reality:

Today, in the minds of many Vietnamese who survived the war, the treatment of prisoners during the Tết Offensive in Huế by soldiers and officials of the NLF is the most controversial unresolved issue still dividing Vietnamese living in Vietnam from Vietnamese people living abroad. While there is a consensus among witnesses, historians and the Vietnamese

⁶⁵⁹ Dương Hèo.

public that thousands of innocent civilians were killed during the 26 days of fighting in the city, one of the biggest unresolved questions remaining about the war, particularly for people from Huế, concerns the policies and intentions of the leaders of the NLF with regard to the treatment of prisoners taken during the battle.

All the surviving members of the NLF that I know of who lived through these events, and who have written or spoken on the subject, regardless of how they feel about the Communists or the Communist Party, have uniformly and unequivocally stated that there was never an official policy ordering the mass execution of prisoners. If any largescale massacres did occur, which based on my research, seems likely, but is not proven, the killings would almost certainly have been ordered by the leaders of the security forces tasked with rounding up RVN spies, collaborators, police, military people and officials. These leaders were longtime trusted members of the Communist Party who were vested with the authority to make important decisions.

In fact, RVN propaganda about terrible crimes committed by a diabolical group of vengeful intellectuals from the urban movement obfuscates the grim realities of a very brutal occupation. Based on the evidence, it is clear that the truth of what happened is terrible and tragic enough without embellishment. There is no doubt that an ugly side of humanity was revealed in Huế during Tết in 1968. Desperation to survive and win, and the ruthless nature of the civil war in Central Vietnam, combined with years of suppressed rage over the torture and murder of dissidents and Communist Party officials in Huế, boiled over during the assault, resulting in an extraordinarily vicious 26-day occupation of the city. According to Tô Nhuận Vỹ, this was a result of a confluence of chaotic circumstances leading to unchecked violence perpetrated by individual soldiers and officials:

I participated in the rebellion in Hữu Ngạn, on the right side of Hương river. I worked as a propagandist, and there definitely was no order to kill people like that.... But taking

prisoners to the jungle was extremely difficult. Therefore, they could be killed if they resisted. But some people had no public position because they were spies or collaborators, their names were on a list of collaborators. They arrested them. And to people [who witnessed the arrest] they [appeared as if] they were just normal people. There were many people [arrested], and it was difficult to bring to the jungle, therefore, they were killed quickly on the street without emotion.⁶⁶⁰

In 1986, more than a decade after the war ended, an ailing Lê Minh published an article in *Sông Hương Magazine* in Huế in which he apologized for the unnecessary brutality which took place during the battle on the NLF side. At that time, Tô Nhuận Vỹ was working as the editor of the local journal which to this day regularly publishes the work of artists and intellectuals who supported the revolution in Huế. During an interview in 2017, Vỹ recalled working with Minh to sneak the article past the censors:

If you have read the article that Mr. Tu Minh (Lê Minh) published in *Sông Hương* magazine, for that magazine I was the magazine editor. Lê Minh was the Commander in Chief of this front. At that time, he said that during the war if we made a mistake with one family, we should apologize to one family, if we were wrong about ten families, then we should apologize to ten families. But we should also explain to them that during war it was very difficult to distinguish between this side and that side. That is to say, to know people's sympathies.... At the time when *Sông Hương* magazine published that [article], if we put it up for review [by the censors], they wouldn't have allowed us to publish it. Because they kept very careful control, but Mr. Lê Tu Minh was a very straightforward commander.... However, in terms of the Vietnamese government and its propaganda methods, for decades they did not put out any information. They remained quiet. Meanwhile, on the opposing side, they put out more materials. At first, they said that during Tết there was about eight or nine hundred people [massacred]. Then they increased it to over a thousand, then two thousand and then gradually increased from there...⁶⁶¹

According to Vỹ, the issue of what took place during the attack continues to drive a wedge between many friends and families in Vietnam to this day. This is something for which he feels some level of responsibility because he took up the task of writing about the experiences of

⁶⁶⁰ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁶¹ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

participants on the revolutionary side, but was never able to express the pain and suffering of those who did not support the revolution:

An issue in this country is the problem of the Tết Offensive which is sharply dividing us, but this is totally unwarranted. I have more details about... the complexities of the Việt Cộng liberation forces assault on the city. There was some I discuss directly in my writings on the period before and after the Tết Offensive in this country. “Đòng sông phẳng lặng” was an award-winning [series] of novels... However, a shortcoming of [those novels] is that the pain of the people living in the city was not reflected in them, I just wrote from the perspective in the liberated area....⁶⁶²

In the years and months leading up to the Tết Offensive, a heavy emphasis was placed by NLF intelligence assets and their controllers on identifying the secret agents and secret collaborators of the CIA, the RVN police and the military living in the city, so that these agents could be quickly rounded up during the occupation. According to Vỹ:

The RVN and US... kept secret lists of people who were collaborators [with the RVN government], secret agents and spies. Before they entered the city, we needed to uncover the secret activities and secret forces of the enemy. The most important thing [for NLF underground agents] was to discover a list [of agents and informers] for the American side and for the Sài Gòn army... The [NLF underground agents] operating in the inner city had to find that list. In my novel, the main character and protagonist [came to be] trusted by the family of the deputy police chief of the province, eventually discovering a list. This secret list, which I wrote about in my novel was a real thing.... Those covert collaborators [with the RVN government] who were ordinary people, and which no one knew about because they lived normally just like everyone else. People didn't know about them, and they turn out to be secret agents and who worked as informers for Sài Gòn.... People didn't know because they lived normal lives. They definitely did not wear badges! The list [they found] consisted of many ordinary people.... Even in my family, there was a younger brother in-law, a family member of my sister. A husband who fixed motorbikes and bicycles on the street. No one knew. This guy escaped completely after working as a collaborator of the US and Sài Gòn. So, after liberation, the spy Ho went to America, but this Ho was not the Ho we knew here in the Republic of Vietnam, this was Ho the CIA agent. It turned out that he was officer level [held the rank of an officer]. The only person who knew about this was the person who repaired the motorcycles and bikes[meaning Ho himself]. There were large numbers of them [spies] all around the

⁶⁶² Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

country. But from the point of view of regular people, they perceived the people arrested as being ordinary civilians. So, this is exactly why people hate each other.⁶⁶³

According to Vỹ, many errors in judgement were made during the initial assault when squads of ambush soldiers on their way into the city unknowingly arrested and executed several underground agents of the revolution, at least one of whom had an important job working for the Republic. During an interview in 2017, Vỹ recalled:

There was one case... at that time the city was being occupied... An [official] who was the Party Secretary of Hương Ngạn District grabbed me.... He told me we were going to meet an important person. He and I went down to area of the market chợ Công to meet a Communist Party member, who at that time had gotten into the position of being an ARVN Airforce lieutenant at Phú Bài airport.... When he [the lieutenant] came back to his hometown for Tết, he came to meet [family] and to do things related to work, however, while on the outside he was a lieutenant of the Sài Gòn Air Force, a member of the Communist Party entered the city. The official had brought me to be a witness to a happy meeting. When we arrived and the parents of the man saw the District Party Secretary whom they had known since the resistance war against the French, they knew the revolution had arrived and greeting us saying, “he was arrested and taken away already, arrested and taken away already.” His parents were happy because they believed he was arrested [as a show], so he could be released and free to return to work [in the RVN military] again in the future.... But the group of people who arrested him thought he was a real catch. An Airforce Lieutenant but a Party member? The Party Secretary’s face turned purple because he knew there had already been situations where people were killed by mistake, he had just heard about that happening and now he was seeing it himself. He immediately ordered his military escort to chase after them. The policy at that time... for sergeants and up, was that they must be brought to the jungle [for interrogation].... But at that time, with all the difficulties and suffering from war the soldiers on the battlefield thought they could stay [in the city] for some time, but if now they took a prisoner to the jungle and returned to the area of the fighting it would take 10 to 12 days, therefore, there were many cases of people being arrested and take them down to Đồng Cát[Hương Thủy] and then killed but with the excuse that the prisoners had fought back. In this situation...he was afraid that the young lieutenant would be killed. Only the night before one of his people had been shot. Before he was shot, he had said ‘I am an underground agent, I want to talk to this person or that person,’ but the group of ambush soldiers believed that it was trick, because the night before that a man had been arrested who was a member of the Đại Việt Party. That guy had been killed because they didn’t want to take him to the jungle with all the difficulties [of getting there]. When they brought him out intending to shoot him, he shouted “HỒ chủ tịch muôn năm.” Before he

⁶⁶³ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

shouted the slogan the people in the group believed that he was clearly a member of the Đại Việt Party. A party that was against the communists, but since he shouted “Hồ chủ tịch muôn năm” [they thought] maybe he is a good person, so they held him till the next day to continue questioning him, but that night their security was lax, and the man killed one young ambush soldier and escaped. Because they had been tricked like that the day when this lieutenant said that he was an underground agent, they thought it was another trick. Executed. On my side in the war there were mistakes like that. The Party Secretary Lê Hùng Vinh was the person I was with. He was the leader who built the rebellion [NLF] in that district. He grabbed ahold of me to take me to witness a happy meeting, but it turned out to be a tragedy like that. I tell this story so that Aaron will understand that in the war people were killed by mistake like this. It was very difficult to know which side this person or that person was in the war. If people wore badges [insignia of rank] then that was fine. If they wore a badge on their shoulders then they were easy to distinguish, but some people do not support one side or the other. Like a regular person, but they if they are active secretly it is very hard to know. Therefore, speaking about Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, he was perceived as a murderer during the Tết Offensive, and another person even more famous than Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường. Tường never returned to Huế during the Tết Offensive, but it was said that he came here and ordered the killing, and even that he sat in a court at Bãi Dâu down in area of the Gia Hội Bridge and sentenced thousands of people to die, but he never returned here. Tường was in the jungle he never returned here, but people made up stories like this. On the side of the revolution the propaganda [responding to the allegations] was very weak. If you read what Lê Tư Minh wrote, if the communists followed Lê Tư Minh’s way they would apologize openly to the people, but the revolution ignored this and said nothing for many decades up until now. Therefore, the other side put out more materials. . . . When I was awarded a medal from the President [of Việt Nam] for [my book called] “Dòng Sông Phẳng Lặng”, I told him that the things I wrote about people in the liberated area, the area which the Sài Gòn government called a “free fire zone”, I would never regret writing about their suffering, but with regard to the suffering of the people in the city during the war, I haven’t written yet. This is something unfinished.⁶⁶⁴

While not as sensational as the vicious brutality described by Liên Thành in his writings about the Tết Offensive, in which he claims that hundreds of people were buried alive at the behest of a group of diabolical communist intellectuals from Huế, it seems clear based on the accounts of a number of eyewitnesses that I have spoken with that a large number of smaller massacres did take place at various stages of the attack. At least one of them possibly involving a

⁶⁶⁴ Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

group of prisoners as large as four hundred people which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

During an interview in 2018, Chu Son tearfully reflected upon how the brutal civil war and the sudden opportunity to strike back in a meaningful way against old enemies in Huế brought out the worst in people who would otherwise have been very likely to have led perfectly ordinary lives:

The people in Mỹ Lợi liked to work in medicine and education. They did not want to join the army or to become officials because going in to the army or serving as an official [in the Republic] meant going against their friends and family. So, during the Tết Offensive, 8 people [from that village] were killed who did nothing wrong. Later I asked my friends who had participated in the Tết Offensive... as team leaders like Nguyễn Đắc Xuân who was the leader of a squad, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan was also the leader and Lê Công Cơ who was leader of a team and Đặng Văn Sở who was also the leader of a team. I was curious, so I asked them after 1975... for the truth about what happened during the Tết Offensive in Huế. Because I thought if the communists killed people like that it was unacceptable. So, two of them answered me. Đặng Văn Sở answered me like this, "I went to school to study but did I not study anything at all. I was working as an underground agent, so my studies were extremely sluggish. My teacher scolded me. During Tết, one of the goals was to find that teacher and kill him." Đặng Văn Sở later taught at the University of Đà Nẵng. "That teacher lived on the other side of the river. We swam over, but on the other side the shooting from the Americans was too intense, so we could not swim there. That teacher survived because of Americans. If I could have gotten past them, he would be dead." The second person was Hồ Tịnh Tĩnh. In 1968, he went to the war zone and then went to Hà Nội to work at the radio station called Tiếng Nói. When I asked Hồ Tịnh Tĩnh he said this, "some laborers who had been drafted escaped... and ran to the Trí Thiên battlefield. They had heard the Liberation Army would come back because their parents and siblings were Việt Cộng.... They were in the army and they defected. When the South Vietnamese government brought these deserters to the front line, they heard the communists would return and they welcomed the opportunity to follow the communists. I took in 3 people like that while we were retreating and brought them to the mountains. Then I went to a meeting. After the meeting, I came back and ordered my 3 deserters to prepare their bags and go. So, the 3 people went ahead of me. While I was walking behind them, I heard one of them scream, 'Mr. Tĩnh, we have been ambushed' but those bullets were from me."⁶⁶⁵

It is clear from stories such as that of the Airforce lieutenant/underground agent recounted by Tô Nhuận Vỹ and that of the deserting RVN soldiers murdered by an NLF cadre

⁶⁶⁵ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Son (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

that the indiscriminate violence that took place during the assault impacted not just supporters of the Republic and innocent bystanders, but also a number of families in Huế who strongly supported the revolution. Perhaps, the best-known case where this occurred was the killing of the father of the underground agent Nguyễn Duy Hiền. Hiền was student of Ngô Kha and an active agent of the NLF in Huế. However, according to Tô Nhuận Vỹ

Nguyễn Duy Hiền did not join the Communist Party, but he was still loyal to the revolution... His father was killed by the communists by mistake during the Tết Offensive... He was still active in the network, but never joined the Party. After the war he was still able to hold a high position.... He still saw the good in the revolution and participated in the struggle of the urban movement in the city with Võ Quê. These people are famous all over the south. Everybody knows them...⁶⁶⁶

Hiền and his future wife Hoàng Thị Thọ would go on to become important leaders in the student movement in the 1970s, working closely with a new generation of activists attending Quốc Học, Đồng Khánh and Huế University. Since then, Hiền has become one of the most respected scholars of the student movement in Huế. However, when I visited his home in 2017 to interview him and his wife Thọ about the student movement, I got the distinct impression neither one was eager to discuss this controversial topic.⁶⁶⁷

Today, many questions regarding who bears responsibility for the unchecked violence perpetrated by members of the NLF which took place in Huế during the occupation remain unanswered. However, before these questions can meaningfully be addressed, first, the actual sequence of events detailing specifically what happened needs to be established. This information can only be provided by the NLF leaders who were directly responsible for leading the attack on the city, but those involved who have tried to give a detailed accounting of

⁶⁶⁶ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁶⁷ Hoàng Thị Thọ, Interview with Hoàng Thị Thọ, not recorded, n.d.

precisely what happened have been discouraged from speaking out by the Vietnamese government. According to Tô Nhuận Vỹ:

In the case of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, a lot of people, especially in California, Vietnamese people believe that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường are two individuals who are representative of the intellectuals who went to the jungle, who were the butchers of the Tết Offensive.... Why were there these false accusations? They were not butchers, but now if you asked a Vietnamese who joined the army of the Republic of Vietnam.... Sài Gòn soldiers believe that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and the Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường were the two killers during Tết.... Actually, with regard to the case of the Tết Offensive, what Mr. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Mr. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường have said [in their defense] was only heard by those on the liberation [NLF] side. But they [the other side] won't listen. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân is not a butcher. He did not kill anyone, but up to now it [these accusations] have become an extremely serious problem. Two people who represent the intellectuals from the jungle are said to have been butchers...⁶⁶⁸

Chilling second-hand accounts of show trials presided over by the vengeful communist leader Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, in which the defendants were sentenced *in mass* to be buried alive, are directly contradicted by a number of eyewitness accounts of participants in the offensive as well as a number of other people whom I have spoken to who were in Huế at that time. In fact, Tường was not at any time as the historian Olga Dror has characterized him, “a leader of communist forces in the South.” Tường’s importance to the revolution in Huế and Central Vietnam stemmed from his reputation in the community as a teacher and an activist. According to Nguyễn Quang Lập, a famous Vietnamese dissident blogger, author and playwright who was asked by the Huế City Party Committee in 1986 to write a narrative of the battle based on the account of Nguyễn Trung Chính, “at that time, Lê Minh spoke a sentence to me [about Tường] that I could never forget,” Minh said “Tường did not return to Huế, nor did he have authority to return to Huế. As the committee secretary [of the Alliance of National, Democratic

⁶⁶⁸ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

and Peace Forces of Vietnam] Tường's power actually only [extended to being] secretary for Mr. Hào and Mrs. Chi. Besides Tường is incapable of doing evil."⁶⁶⁹

After speaking with a number of participants in the offensive in Huế to find out the truth, Lập decided that evidence regarding Tường's whereabouts overwhelmingly supported his claim that he was not present in Huế during Tết in 1968. In order to make the evidence for the case he was building for Tường's innocence available to the public, Lập recently compiled a blog which includes the accounts of a number of eyewitnesses.

Based on what I am told by people that have known him for many years, Tường was not a member of the Communist Party in Hà Nội, and to my knowledge was never vested with any real authority over anyone. According to Chu Sơn, who first met Tường when he was his student at Quốc Học in the early 1960s, not long after the war ended, Tường traveled to Hà Nội several times attempting to gain admission to the Party but was unsuccessful.⁶⁷⁰

According to the blog compiled by Lập, which details a conversation with Nguyễn Trung Chính concerning Tường's whereabouts, Chính, who was one of the highest ranking Communist Party leaders present in Huế at the time, never saw Tường in the city at any point during the entire 26-day occupation:

During the time of the Tết Offensive, I was on the front lines and Tường was in the rear. Therefore, I don't know very clearly [exactly where he was]. But at that time, I know Tường was the committee Secretary of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam. When we took control of the city and established the revolutionary government, I was the Party Secretary of District 1, the area of the city center. Nguyễn Hữu Vấn was the President of the Peoples Committee in District 1. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, Tường's younger brother, participated in this committee. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân took responsibility for youth affairs. Many others also returned to Huế, but I did not see Tường.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁹ Nguyễn Quang Lập, "Lời Cuối Cho Câu Chuyện Quá Buồn," February 9, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/notes/4504440282930651/?comment_id=307064943151252.

⁶⁷⁰ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Sơn (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

⁶⁷¹ Nguyễn Quang Lập, "Lời Cuối Cho Câu Chuyện Quá Buồn."

The underground agent Nguyễn Thúc Tuân participated in the initial occupation of the city but was reassigned from his role inside Huế to work as a member of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam after the battle was well underway. In 2015, Tuân was asked by the author Phạm Xuân Dũng about Tường's whereabouts during the Tết Offensive. Below is a translation of his response as recorded by Dũng:

Mr. Tuân affirmed that during the Tết Offensive, Tường did not return to Huế. Tuân said that he was a logistics coordinator who welcomed [NLF] forces back to the city, so everyone who returned to the city from the jungle, he knew about. He did not see Mr. Tường among those who came back from the jungle. [Tuân also said] he did not see Tường among those in the jungle who were returning to Huế. Immediately after the Tết Offensive, Mr. Tuân went to the Khe Tráí military base where Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Lê Văn Hảo were waiting there to welcome him and others who had just come from Huế to join the Alliance.⁶⁷²

As one of Huế's most prolific scholars, over the past 15 years, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân has written extensively and in meticulous detail about the Tết Offensive and the role he played during the attack. According to Xuân, Tường was assigned to write propaganda for the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam and never entered Huế during the Tết Offensive:

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường is a good writer... who wrote the complete outline of the platform for the Union [Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam in Huế]. Mr. Tường also wrote invitations to Dr. Lê Văn Hảo - professor at Huế University of Literature and at the University of Pedagogy - to join this Alliance. In addition, the Huế City Party Committee also invited the Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu, and Ms. Nguyễn Đình Chi ... After that, the Alliance [of National, Democratic and Peace Forces of Vietnam] in Huế was established. Professor Lê Văn Hảo was the President of the Union, Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu and Ms. Nguyễn Đình Chi were the Vice Presidents, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was the committee Secretary. The alliance was established, but only after Mr. Lê Văn Hảo went from Huế to the military base around the end of January 1968... The Huế City Party Committee dug a cross-mountain tunnel in Khe Tráí, west of Hương Trà district, to serve as a living and working place for the Union. Khe Tráí Tunnel was a secret base of the Huế City Party Committee... During the days of the Tết Offensive battle in Huế City, Mr. Tường was the committee Secretary of the Union, so he had to stay at Khe Tráí Tunnel to welcome the rest of the Union leaders from Huế city, who were preparing to go. The leaders of the Union were old and had just gone to the

⁶⁷² Nguyễn Quang Lập.

jungle [for the first time], so all the business of the Union was in the hands of Mr. Tường. In addition to Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu and Mrs. Nguyễn Đình Chi, there was also elderly Nguyễn Đóa, Mr. Tôn Thất Dương Tiềm, and Mr. Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. After the Lunar New Year of 1968, the battle zone of Thừa Thiên Huế was heavily bombed. Around the beginning of March 1968, the Union delegation had to stay in the Trí Thiên military base bordering Laos. In July 1968, they were taken to Hà Nội. However, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and I still stayed in Khe Trá, then worked together on... a newspaper....⁶⁷³

Xuân's recollection of events is supported by a number of others ranging from participants in the events to local Vietnamese scholars of the period. According to Chu Sơn, who was staying in a small village not far outside the city during the attack:

In fact, there was no court in Huế on that occasion. The truth is Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường did not return to Huế during the Tet offensive of the "Front". Only Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân returned to Huế, but I have no evidence to accuse or justify Phan and Xuân.⁶⁷⁴

Liên Thành's incendiary claims of mass murder committed by a group of highly respected revolutionary intellectuals from Huế may actually have helped to conceal the truth about the killings that took place in the city during this period by drawing attention away from the real culprits. During the final withdrawal of NLF forces from Huế, the question arose of what to do with the remaining prisoners that had been rounded up. According to two of my sources, nearing the end of February when NLF and PAVN soldiers were preparing to withdraw from the city, Lê Công Cơ's refusal of an order from the security chief Bảy Khiêm to execute captives led to his dismissal from service in Huế:

Mr. Cơ spoke a little [about it] and not very deeply. He was Vietnamese communist, but he also had something else besides that. Because of that, he was kicked out of Thừa Thiên Huế. I heard that he was denounced for not killing people during the Tết Offensive. Therefore, he was exiled to work in the ethnic minority villages for 6 six months, eating rice by hand with ethnic minority people. ... During the withdrawal after Tết, he refused to kill people. This is what Mr. Cơ said. I don't know what really happened. In my opinion, Mr. Cơ loves Huế very much and he loves the people in the city very much.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ Nguyễn Quang Lập.

⁶⁷⁴ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Sơn (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

⁶⁷⁵ Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ).

The order to kill prisoners, according to Vũ Kỳ Nam (an NLF member and close friend of Cơ who was not present at the time), was given to Cơ by the security chief Nguyễn Đình Bảy (aka Bảy Khiêm) whom Nam refers to contemptuously as a “police dog.” By this time Khiêm had already come to dislike and resent the young organizer. According to Nam:

In 1968, in Huế during the Tết Offensive, Lê Công Cơ participated in the fighting on the NLF side. At that time Bảy Khiêm rounded up about 400 people. Among these people some of them were RVN soldiers trained for ceremonies and drills but not fighting and they were not anti-communists. The rest of the people in that group of 400 were civilians. Bảy Khiêm ordered Lê Công Cơ to kill them all. Lê Công Cơ refused saying that they were not anti-communists they were just civilians. Bảy Khiêm became very angry. He tried to take Lê Công Cơ’s gun and his [Communist] Party membership card. He informed the City Party Committee that Lê Công Cơ’s loyalties were suspect. This took place at Gia Hội bridge near Đồng Ba market.⁶⁷⁶

These statements are supported by the fact that after the Tết Offensive City Party Committee Member Hoàng Kim Loan was placed in charge of the urban movement in Huế and Lê Công Cơ did not return until Loan’s arrest by Liên Thành several years later. After 1975, Bảy Khiêm was assigned the task of controlling and monitoring intellectuals in Huế. According to the retired official and former student activist Nguyễn Xuân Hoa:

Mr. Bảy Khiêm was a police chief who was very reckless, and you could say that he was very experienced. He was a police chief from the period of the resistance war against the French. He had a very clear understanding of Huế, and a very clear understanding of the Sài Gòn regime. He was also a very skilled professional. He had the point of view of a policeman. Like a doctor. This place has bacteria, that place has germs. Mr. Bảy Khiêm was the person who forced Lê Công Cơ to leave Huế and go to Đà Nẵng [here Hoa is referring to a second time after the war, in the late seventies I think].⁶⁷⁷

Beginning several years after the end of hostilities in 1975, a number of intellectuals who had worked as underground agents for the urban movement of the NLF in Huế, such as Nguyễn Thúc Tuân and Lê Công Cơ, were persecuted to varying degrees by the tyrannical police chief and his allies and subordinates. The source of their power over their rivals, who have also held

⁶⁷⁶ Vũ Kỳ Nam, Interview #2 with Vũ Kỳ Nam., Recorded, April 5, 2014.

⁶⁷⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

powerful positions in the government, is not entirely clear. I suspect it has to do with their relationships with more influential leaders in the national government in Hà Nội. When asked during an interview in 2017 if it was true that Bảy Khiêm ordered Lê Công Cơ to massacre prisoners at the Gia Hội bridge during the Tết Offensive, the former revolutionary journalist Tô Nhuận Vỹ responded:

That I do not know. I only know Bảy Khiêm was the director of police, a Huế person. He went to the north for a long time and held a high-ranking position. Mr Cơ has a good character, good things about him, but he is not perfect. But the bad things Mr. Bảy Khiêm did at that time in Bình Trí Thiên, I did not witness. But his character I do know. For example, in Nguyễn Thúc Tuân's situation [after the war] he did something really terrible. After this many people knew how terrible what he did was and he didn't fix it, but about that situation with Cơ, only Cơ knows.... But after the liberation here (in 1975), the way they treated Lê Công Cơ was not right because in a situation like Cơ's, he should have been able to have... a more important position, but for some reason, Cơ could not get promoted. Mr Hoàng Lanh also could not protect Cơ. For me, I think people always have good and bad traits, but they ignored his good traits. Therefore, Cơ reacted very angrily [by moving to Đà Nẵng]⁶⁷⁸

The historian Trần Gia Phụng has written what I would argue is the most accurate account of the NLF-led occupation of Huế that I have seen up to this point. Phụng was a student at the University in Huế graduating in 1965 and then a high school teacher in Đà Nẵng until the communist takeover in 1975. Having lived in Huế not long before the Tết Offensive took place and being familiar with the participants on a personal level, Phụng has first-hand knowledge of the attitudes, ideas and individual personalities of members of the intellectual community in Huế from that period. After the war ended, Phụng retired from academia in Việt Nam, only returning to public life as a scholar in 1995 when he was able to move to Canada. Since leaving Việt Nam, Phụng has authored numerous Vietnamese language articles critical of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party and expressing support for the Republic. Today, Phụng is the only author writing on the Republican side (that I know of) with a detailed and reasonably accurate

⁶⁷⁸ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

understanding of the organizational structure of the NLF and the character and actions of its leadership. In his blog posts about the Tết Offensive, Phụng has argued that it was the security forces of the NLF who were charged with arresting and identifying valuable detainees:

After 4 days of fighting, the communists occupied most of the right [south] bank of Huế city. The communists released about 2,000 prisoners who were being held in prisons... In terms of politics, right after occupying the left bank, (the north of Huế, including the inner city and Đông Ba market ...), on the second day of Tết, the communist created the [revolutionary] government... On the 3rd day of Tet (1-2-1968), Hà Nội radio announced the establishment of the Alliance in Huế led by Lê Văn Hảo, professor of literature at Huế University as President, and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường as committee Secretary. To distinguish here, Lê Văn Hảo was the President... in Huế. In the whole of the South, this Alliance was chaired by Trịnh Đình Thảo. Hà Nội radio station also announced that on February 14, 1968, Lê Văn Hảo was appointed to the chair of the revolutionary government of Huế. The Deputy Chairs were Ms. Đào Thị Xuân Yến (also known as Mrs. Tuân Chi), and Hoang Phuong Thao. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, when he was a student living in Huế, organized a group called the "Buddhists Suicide Squad" in 1966 to fight against the "Thiệu Kỳ" regime, then fled to the communists, and now returned to Huế in charge of a team to do "Youth Work".... Communist security units were active after the communists temporarily occupied Huế.... Tổng Hoàng Nguyên was in charge of the left (north) bank, and Nguyễn Đình Bảy (Bảy Khiêm) was in charge of the right (south) bank. These units tracked down and killed all the RVN government employees and employees working in US agencies, or those who collaborated with the US Central Intelligence Agency. It was these security units that authored the tragic deaths in Huế, especially when the communists were about to withdraw.⁶⁷⁹

The Impact of the Tết Offensive on the Civilian Population:

According to the former student activist leader Lê Văn Thuyên, who is currently a historian in Huế and was living on the south side of the city when the fighting began:

The events of Mậu Thân were extremely sudden and transformative. It is easy to understand because this campaign was a completely secret plan of the north. A number of students were underground agents in the city at that time. Their organizations were able to prepare, so they readied themselves to participate in important activities. At that time, we definitely did not know what would happen. When the Tết Offensive was over we felt stunned because there was such an intense battle [in the city] for the first time. At that time, I was at a boarding house near Freedom [Tự do] stadium. There was a very crowded refugee center there administered by the University of Pedagogy. I followed my family to the refugee center. Every day I looked across the river to the citadel and saw airplanes bombing and the naval bombardment of the American fleet firing their guns.

⁶⁷⁹ Tran Gia Phụng, "Mậu Thân: Cộng Sản Tấn Công Huế."

The Trảng Tiền bridge had collapsed. People on the other side of the river wanted to cross to find refuge. They had to use the boats of the people living on the river near Đông Ba market. They hired the people on the river to take them across.... Then after 25 days and nights later the [communist] soldiers withdrew. The city was devastated. My family and I returned home to find that our house was covered in mold and the front yard was full of moss. We walked along Lê Lợi Street where there were bodies everywhere, mainly of revolutionary soldiers.⁶⁸⁰

Indiscriminate killing was by no means limited to the forces on the revolutionary side.

The loss of life caused by US bombing and naval bombardment took a heavy toll on the civilian population. In his book *Portrait of a Generation*, Tản Hoài Dạ Vũ, who was a student activist who joined the NLF in the early 1970s, recalls witnessing the destruction of much of the city and the intense suffering of its inhabitants:

After 25 days and nights of being liberated, the city of Huế was again engulfed in metal and violence.... During the frenzied counterattack, US aircraft and warships dropped bombs and shells all over. The city of Huế was left in ruins in many places, the houses of the good people were shattered and collapsed. Countless corpses were left drying in the streets and in the rice fields outside the city. The radio station in Huế spread the screams and cries of people who have died from the fires and flying bullets which went on all day long. The Sài Gòn government used the opportunity to propagandize, "Raise your voice against the Việt Cộng who bury people alive."⁶⁸¹

During an interview in 2017, Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, who lived in the citadel about 1 mile from the Gia Hôi bridge and had been a Struggle Movement activist but did not join the NLF until the 1970s, recalled his good fortune living in a small slice of the city that was almost completely untouched by the battle:

I was in a special case during the period of the Tết Offensive because the area where I lived was not affected. The National Liberation Front took over the city but did not occupy the entire city. I was at the end of Huỳnh Thúc Kháng St which the liberation forces could not capture because this was near the fortress Mang Cá, and they [the Republic] still held the residential area where I was living. So, the attacks of the Liberation Front did not affect that residential area. At that time, I was afraid of the bombs and bombs were dropping all the time because the fighting in the vicinity was fierce. After 26 days and nights when the Liberation Front withdrew from Huế, then we went out into the city. Everything was damaged and destroyed by bombs and munitions.

⁶⁸⁰ Lê Văn Thuyên, Interview with Lê Văn Thuyên.

⁶⁸¹ Tản Hoài Dạ Vũ and Nguyễn Đông Nhật, *Phác Họa Chân Dung Một Thế Hệ* (Đà Nẵng: Bản Trê, 2013), 187.

It could be said that this was the cruel result in Huế. After that, a scene occurred where many people went out to search for the bodies of their loved ones. Later the government organized propaganda about a massacre during the offensive. Then the city lived in tragic circumstances.⁶⁸²

The inevitable eventual withdrawal from the city of NLF and PAVN forces after almost a month of the bloodiest urban fighting of the war was remarkably successful given that it was accomplished in the face of the immense combined firepower of the US marines, Airforce and Navy which was being brought to bear with goal of doing everything possible to prevent their escape. Despite a disciplined retreat, PAVN and NLF forces nevertheless endured enormous losses in the fighting as they made their way back to their bunkers and military bases in the countryside.

According to Chu Son, the order to leave the city was given by the local commanders, but was not approved by the Hà Nội government, effectively bringing an end to Lê Minh's political career in the Communist Party, "after the Tết Offensive in 1968, he [Lê Minh] was withdrawn to Hà Nội and placed under house arrest. The reason was that he expressed his opinions a little too freely... What was the Tết Offensive? A suicide attack... In the Tết Offensive, the commander didn't know anything about the plan of attack. Lê Minh was in a position in which so many of his soldiers died and he was the Commander in Chief on the battlefield.... Minh ordered his men to fight and withdraw on the 22nd day. He had to withdraw."⁶⁸³ Minh and his subordinates in Huế took action to preserve their forces and local networks which had been gradually and painstakingly built up over the course of many years. With so many lives he cared deeply about at stake, Minh did not see remaining in the city to fight to the death as a worthy sacrifice. However, from the perspective of Communist Party leaders in

⁶⁸² Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

⁶⁸³ Interview #2 Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

Hà Nội, the attack on Huế “was a military offensive in Vietnam, but a political offensive in the US.”⁶⁸⁴ This was the price of forcing an American withdrawal paid with the lives of many NLF soldiers and members of their support networks.

In terms of the preparations for the Tết Offensive by the Zone Committee here, the people directly leading this offensive, their plan was to fight for three or 4 days and then withdraw to the countryside, but above them there was another plan. Fight until victory. This plan was different in reality, [but regarding] who was the policymaker for this plan, and who was the policymaker for that plan, there was so much information that was not made public, and there were many plans. But the people here knew about the first plan of the [local] Area Committee from Lê Minh who was the Deputy-Secretary [of the Area Committee], which were to fight for three or 4 days and withdraw. However, the people above him decided to fight to seize control [of Huế]. Their plans were so different. It was not good. In the end, the people here had to accept the orders from the people above, they could not do the opposite. After the war, some people on one side believed that the attack [should have been] for just a few days and then a withdrawal to the countryside, they still have their reasons to defend their plan, but the leaders above them thought this was a [necessary] price. In the end the soldiers who stayed in Huế the longest had value. That value was shaking the White House.⁶⁸⁵

According to Lê Minh, it wasn't “until the 20th day [of the occupation], that anyone dared to discuss withdrawal because the order [to remain in Huế] had not been retracted. On the 21st, we reported to the ministry, still no reply. We decided to withdraw, because now even if the reinforcements arrived, the situation would not have changed... [At this point] we rearranged our work looking for a way out of the city.”⁶⁸⁶

During the course of the battle, a large number of underground agents in the city had revealed their identities publicly in order to aid in the assault. An effort was made during the withdrawal to integrate as many of these people safely back into the population as possible:

When the enemy started to indiscriminately bombard the city, we promptly evacuated each part of the population to the countryside. When we started to withdraw the directions, we notified the districts to bring the population back in as soon as the enemy

⁶⁸⁴ Interview #2 Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ).

⁶⁸⁵ Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Interview #2 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ.

⁶⁸⁶ Lê Minh, “Huế Trong Chiến Dịch Mậu Thân,” *Sông Hương*, March 7, 2014, <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c302/n14489/Hue-trong-chien-dich-Mau-Than.html>.

arrived, in order to immediately establish a legal position for the people. Thanks to that, a number of underground agents installed in the city remained legal to continue their activities... By February 26, 1968, the entire force had withdrawn from the city.⁶⁸⁷

In the months and years following the withdrawal of PAVN and NLF forces from Huế.

NLF guerillas faced escalating American and RVN sweeps and counteroffensives in the countryside. The cost to the NLF and the Communist Party of the Tết Offensive in men and material was enormous, but as a demonstration of power and in terms of the impact on the political dynamics in Huế, the effect was transformative. According to Chu Son, after Tết “the NLF was weaker militarily but was very strong politically...[in Huế], the Front had never been so strong.”⁶⁸⁸ It was the enduring strength of the NLF, demonstrated during and after the offensive that finally convinced Son that the war could never be won by the Republic, and that he should leave the RVN military and begin working as an underground agent of the City Party Committee under the supervision of Hoàng Kim Loan.

Conclusion:

The Tết Offensive in Huế remains one the most debated and controversial episodes of the Vietnam War. While over the past 50 years, a great deal has been written on the subject, as yet, there has been very little sincere dialogue between the two groups of former adversaries who fought in Huế in 1968 regarding what exactly happened during the 26 days the city was occupied by PAVN and NLF forces. Instead, both sides have continued to speak past each other in an attempt to persuade the larger Vietnamese public of the truth of their version of events. Based on the evidence, there is no doubt that Vietnamese people on both sides as well as those caught in between the two warring factions experienced horrific levels of violence during the battle. It is

⁶⁸⁷ Lê Minh.

⁶⁸⁸ Chu Son (aka Trần Huệ), Chu Son (Trần Huệ) Interview 3.

my hope that this chapter of my dissertation can help start a discussion that will circumvent the old propaganda narratives still being reproduced by both sides and instead encourage people to focus on sharing their own memories and personal experiences of what happened.

Outside of Vietnam few people have even heard the names of the people accused of perpetrating the alleged massacres, much less listened to their side of the story. This might not be a problem if they really were the brutal and capricious vengeful mass murderer's they have been portrayed to be by Liên Thành, but the facts tell a much more complicated story. There are many provable inaccuracies in Liên Thành's version of events which has largely been shaped by half-truths and falsehoods fed to him by victims of police torture.⁶⁸⁹ Over the years, propagandists on both sides have distorted their narratives of the battle to suit their own purposes. In my view, the only way that historians will ever get closer to the truth about what actually happened is by seeking out and studying closely as many eyewitness accounts of the battle as possible.

Unfortunately, with so many participants and survivors having already passed away, there is still a great deal of work to be done on the subject, and the group of eyewitnesses and participants that remains alive today grows smaller with each passing year.

⁶⁸⁹ For example, Liên Thành's understanding of the NLF command structure and the network in Huế derives largely from information extracted from the interrogation of City Party Committee member Hoàng Kim Loan. This information has been repeated by historians in the US such as Olga Dror, who in the notes on her translation of *Mourning Headband for Huế* mislabels Lê Minh as a colonel. Minh was actually a political official with no military rank and a very long history in Huế. She identifies him only as the "the commander of military operations on the left bank of the Perfume River" page xliv She also claims, quite implausibly for anyone who knows the history of the Communist Parties relationship with intellectuals from Huế like Tường, that during the Tết Offensive in Huế, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường "was one of the leaders of Communist forces in the South." Page xlvi These errors almost certainly originate with the former police chief who refers to Hoàng Kim Loan as a Lt Colonel in his writings available at <https://viteuu.blogspot.com/2014/01/hue-46-nam-toi-ac-diet-chung-cua-bang.html> Knowing these sorts of details is critical to understanding how power and authority were allocated within the network of the Communist Party. In her defense, Dror does go on to say that she has "no intention or the ability to evaluate here the role of Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường or Nguyễn Đắc Xuân or anyone else in Tết Mậu Thân... page lii *Mourning Headband for Hue An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*, By Nhã Ca, Translated and with introduction by Olga Dror, Indiana University Press, Bloomington Indiana

Epilogue:

Confinement at Côn Đảo

For many of the participants in the urban movement in Central Vietnam the years following the Tết Offensive in 1968 were an extremely difficult period of the war. With the greater part of the underground networks in Huế now having exposed itself to public view during the PAVN/NLF occupation of the city, a significant number of long-standing underground agents were forced to flee their homes and their relatively comfortable lives in urban areas for military bases in the jungle or seek safety across the DMZ. Others remained in confinement, having been moved out of the region to remote prisons like those on the islands of Phú Quốc or Côn Đảo.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, during the 2 years following their arrest in 1964, the student activists Dương Đình Na, Nguyễn Thúc Tần, Trịnh Túc and Phạm Truyền were being held together in Thừa Phủ prison in Huế. Before being shipped out together to Côn Đảo island in 1966, Na and Tần were given trials and more lengthy sentences. This was a consequence of their crimes being deemed more serious because they had received government scholarships to attend institutions of higher learning. After Na and Tần were tried and convicted of treason, all four young men were sent together by ship to an infamous prison on Côn Đảo Island. By then they had already been joined at Thừa Phủ by several other student organizers from the same organization who had been arrested in the nearby cities of Đà Nẵng and Tam Kỳ.⁶⁹⁰

Arriving at Côn Đảo in late 1966, the group of young activists began an ordeal which, for most of them, would last between seven to nine years. Originally built in 1861 by the French colonial government, Côn Đảo (aka Poulo Condore, aka Côn Sơn) prison had a long history of

⁶⁹⁰ Aaron Lillie, “Vietnam’s Forgotten Revolutionaries: Student Voices From Inside the Vietnamese Revolution” (University of Washington, 2012).

housing troublesome Vietnamese political dissidents. The total number of prisoners held at Côn Đảo 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. 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.⁶⁹¹

During an interview in 2013, Trịnh Túc, who spent seven years on the island from 1966 to 1973 and still suffers from chronic health conditions related to his incarceration, described the conditions in the prison at the time

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 cá khô 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.⁶⁹²

The behavior of the prisoners on the island was policed primarily by other inmates. This was accomplished through a system in which the most hardened criminals were placed in charge of managing the prison and maintaining discipline. Given the title "Trustee" by the wardens, prisoners from this group were actively encouraged and sometimes even coerced, when

⁶⁹¹ Holmes Brown and Don Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoner* (Washington D.C.: Mobile Indochina Education Project, 1973), 66.

⁶⁹² Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

necessary, into being ruthless and sadistic towards political prisoners. According to a report written in 1970 protesting the inhumane conditions at Côn Đảo, 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.⁶⁹³

Because of his prior experience working as an underground journalist in Huế, in 1968, Trịnh Túc was secretly issued a radio by a committee of Communist Party members which had been formed by a group of inmates. Equipped with this valuable contraband item, Túc was able for a time to return to his former role as a journalist collating, analyzing and disseminating news to fellow inmates:

In Côn Đảo prison, there was a Communist Party committee. This committee assigned me a small radio so that I could synthesize the news about current events in the south and in Côn Đảo. 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.⁶⁹⁴

Unbending resistance to prison authorities was seen as a demonstration of patriotism and political will in support of the revolution. The former student activist leader from Tam Kỳ, Đỗ Hùng Luân, became known for his consistent demonstrations of stubborn defiance towards the

⁶⁹³ Brown and Luce, *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoner*, 78.

⁶⁹⁴ Trịnh, interview #1 with Trịnh Túc.

authority of the prison guards. Luân has recently written a book about the time he spent in Côn Đảo prison. During an interview, he shared some of his recollections of prison life on the island:

I was with Dương Đình 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 Côn Đảo 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...⁶⁹⁵

In 1970, the prison was visited by a delegation led by two US congressmen accompanied by the anti-war activist Don Luce. The trip had been arranged so that members of the group could see for themselves if there was any truth to the accounts of former inmates from the prison regarding the living conditions and systematic human rights abuses that were taking place on the island. Having planned in advance to avoid being taken on what would have otherwise been a carefully choreographed tour of the island, Luce chose to diverge from the assigned route at a prearranged location where his informant had told him prisoners were being kept in tiger cages. In an article written over thirty years later, Luce described his visit to Côn Đảo:

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

⁶⁹⁵ Đỗ Hùng Luân, Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân.

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....⁶⁹⁶

As unbearable as their existence was on Côn Đảo, those student activist members of the Youth Association who were sent to the infamous prison island in the 1960s at least managed to survive the bloodiest years of the war. Many of their comrades who escaped arrest and fled into the jungle in 1964 were not so fortunate. As Dương Đình Na summarized it during an interview in 2013, “if I had stayed... [in Huế], I would already be dead.”⁶⁹⁷

After the arrest of City Party Committee member Hoàng Kim Loan by police in Huế in 1972, another large contingent of student activists and underground agents was arrested and sent to Côn Đảo based on the information divulged by Loan while under interrogation.⁶⁹⁸ This group, which included Chu Sơn, Hoàng Thị Thọ, Võ Quế, Lê Văn Thuyên, Phan Hữu Lượng and a number of others active at the time in Huế, were fortunate to have been given shorter sentences than those who were caught earlier in the war. As a result, most of them returned home after less than a year on the island.⁶⁹⁹⁷⁰⁰⁷⁰¹

The Death of Nguyễn Thúc Lư:

In 1971, Nguyễn Thúc Lư and Lê Công Cơ were assigned to go on one final training mission together. After having completed their duties in the jungle the two revolutionary organizers were then ordered to return to their regularly assigned areas. During an interview in 2013, Lê Công Cơ recalled seeing Lư in the jungle before parting ways for the last time:

⁶⁹⁶ Don Luce, “Don Luce, ‘The Tiger Cages of Vietnam,’ Torture American Style, n.d., [Http://Www.Historiansagainstwar.Org/Resources/Torture/Luce.Html](http://www.Historiansagainstwar.Org/Resources/Torture/Luce.Html),” n.d.

⁶⁹⁷ Dương Đình Na, Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na.

⁶⁹⁸ Liên Thành, “HOÀNG KIM LOAN HẮN LÀ AI?”

⁶⁹⁹ Lê Văn Thuyên, Interview with Lê Văn Thuyên.

⁷⁰⁰ Hoàng Thị Thọ, “Về Chuyển Tàu Lịch Sử Đầy Đi Côn Đảo 102 Người Yêu Nước Năm 1972,” n.d.

⁷⁰¹ Phan Hữu Lượng, Interview with Phan Hữu Lượng, November 14, 2017.

...we went on a mission to return to the jungle for training. [After that] Lư, Cờ 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....⁷⁰²

According to Cờ, Lư was killed on a mission to collect supplies, “they shot him, and his leg was broken. Lư pulled the pin from a grenade and waited for the enemy, when enemy rushed at him, he threw his grenade and killed some of them.”⁷⁰³ Lư's cousin, the former underground NLF and Việt Minh agent Phạm Thị Nga (in her mid-80s) still remembers vividly the moment she learned of her cousin Lư's death:

Lư died on April 30[1971]. At that time, I had a watch shop on Trần Hưng Đạo Street. Lư's group came back to the city and stayed with Lan [Đương Đình Na's sister]. They bought supplies and transported them back to the jungle. One day on his supply route Lư, was ambushed by RVN soldiers. Lư and some others in his group were wounded. Lư 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 Lư 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 Lư was dead. Maybe that was his soul bringing the watch back to me to inform me that he was gone.⁷⁰⁴

The Rise of a New Student Movement in Huế

The construction of a new bridge across the Hương River in 1970, which is today known in as Cầu Phú Xuân (sometimes referred to as the American Bridge), was intended by the leaders of the Republic to be a grand gesture to demonstrate their benevolent intentions in the aftermath

⁷⁰² Lê Công Cờ, interview #2 with Lê Công Cờ, recorded, April 3, 2014, 115–16.

⁷⁰³ Lê Công Cờ, interview #1 with Lê Công Cờ, recorded, August 14, 2013, 116.

⁷⁰⁴ Phạm Thị Nga, interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga, recorded, September 2, 2013, 106.

bitter struggle over the city in 1968. According to Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, who currently still lives less than a mile from where it was built:

Many people have written about it. In Huế to go back and forth to the north bank and south bank of the river there was a rail bridge and the Tràng Tiền Bridge. The need to build more bridges was just normal. In 1970, Thiệu rebuilt Phú Xuân [the area around the of the original settlement Huế by the Nguyễn lords]. People said that he did this to get the sympathy and support from people in Huế because after 1966 he suppressed their movement. In their hearts, they were against Thiệu even more than they had been against Mr. Kỳ (Nguyễn Cao Kỳ) because Thiệu was a Catholic. Then Thiệu built this bridge as a gift to gain support for his run for president. But when preparing for the presidential election, the movement against Thiệu of Sài Gòn government was at its' most ferocious.... There was even a national student conference meeting here [in Huế] that made a decision to support the Liberation Front inside the university lecture halls which took place publicly in the southern cities. They issued a statement in favor of the interim government's (chính phủ lâm thời) 10-point solution, a very antagonistic attitude at the time. When the bridge was completed and Mr. Thiệu was about to be inaugurated [as President], they set up a platform [on the bridge where Thiệu could speak]. In front of the platform there were huge demonstrations. Demonstrators flooded the bridge and flipped over the stands. The fence which was prepared for the President to cut the ribbon was thrown it into the river. The bridge was given a name by default. It was called the anti-American bridge, some people said it was the "New Bridge", the supporters of the people's army called it the bridge of "Resistance Against the US", because at that time it was not officially opened, and no one had [officially] announced the bridge's name.⁷⁰⁵

Beginning in the aftermath of the Tết Offensive in 1968, the remaining student organizers and underground agents who had not exposed themselves publicly during the battle began to quietly rebuild their networks in the city. According to the former student activist leader Võ Quê, in the early 1970s, while he was attending Huế University, there were numerous demonstrations taking place in the streets of Huế against the American presence in Vietnam.⁷⁰⁶

During this period, a new group of female activists began to take a leading role in organizing the student led protests taking place in the city. In the early 1970s, members of the group from Đồng Khanh High School and Huế University known as Nhóm Áo Trắng, such as Lê Thị Nhân, Hoàng Thị Thọ, Nguyễn Thị Tâm An, Trần Thị Sen, Ngô Võ Hồng Trân, and Nguyễn

⁷⁰⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Hoa, Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa.

⁷⁰⁶ Võ Quê, Interview #1 with Võ Quê, Recorded, October 27, 2017.

Thi Cẩm, joined with male student activist leaders such as Võ Quê and Nguyễn Duy Hiền, to stand at the forefront of the clashes taking place with RVN police in the streets of Huế in the early 1970s.

Following the arrest of Hoàng Kim Loan in 1972, Lê Công Cơ was reassigned to work in Huế where, upon his return, he quickly went to work organizing and rebuilding the underground movement which had been greatly disrupted by the arrest of its most senior leader inside the city.⁷⁰⁷ During the final years of the war, Cơ was able to do a great deal to revitalize the movement, founding a number of new newspapers and thoroughly infiltrating the leadership of the various student government associations which were popular in the city at that time.

Not long after Cơ's return to Huế, early in 1973, the poet and professor Ngô Kha was arrested and secretly killed. It is widely believed by those who knew him in Huế that his gruesome execution was ordered by Liên Thành in retaliation for Kha's work organizing political demonstrations in public defiance of the RVN government and police.⁷⁰⁸⁷⁰⁹ According to John Schafer, "three days after the Paris Peace Treaty was signed, Ngô Kha was seized and beaten to death with a hammer by men acting on orders from Liên Thành... He was first buried on the road to Thuận An beach but then Liên Thành, fearing his body would be discovered, ordered that it be dug up and buried in An Cựu, a village south of Huế."⁷¹⁰ This senseless killing of one of Huế most beloved educators at a time when the war was drawing near an end, only served to further embitter his friends against the Republic, steeling their resolve to make one final push towards toppling the Sài Gòn government.

⁷⁰⁷ Lê Văn Thuyên, Interview with Lê Văn Thuyên.

⁷⁰⁸ Phan Bùi Bảo Thy, "Liên Thành, Kẻ Sát Nhân Trong Những Ngày Miền Trung Biến Động," *An Ninh Thế Giới*, May 27, 1975.

⁷⁰⁹ Schafer, "Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness," 1–2.

⁷¹⁰ Schafer, 12.

Conclusion:

This research project is still very much a work in progress. Due to time constraints, I was unable finish writing a final chapter. A great deal of important research remains to be done on this topic by scholars based outside of Vietnam to bring the previously unheard voices of Vietnamese people who supported the NLF and the Communist Party into academic debates and discussions about the war. Over the past 50 years, the continued marginalization of southern revolutionary forces by documentarians and scholars in the US who dismiss and attempt to delegitimize supporters of the Communist Party and the NLF by either completely ignoring them or labelling them manipulated pawns, has imbued many areas of oppressive silences within the Vietnamese historical record. While many from the older generations of activists who organized and supported the networks of the Communist Party and the NLF in Central Vietnam have already taken their stories with them to their graves, there yet remains a significant contingent of survivors of the war, many of whom are eager to speak about their experiences.

Until recently, researchers of the Vietnam War based outside Vietnam have largely ignored the diversity of experiences and perspectives of a broad cross section of Vietnamese people living in the south. Because no one faction can or should speak for all of Vietnam, in this dissertation I have included a range of different voices and viewpoints, with the unifying theme being disaffection with the policies of the Sài Gòn government.

Frequently, in American narratives and American documentaries of the Vietnamese American War, the conflict in Vietnam has been greatly oversimplified. By reducing the root causes of the conflict to a war of aggression being waged by “North Vietnam” against an embattled “South Vietnamese” Republic, supporters of the Republic of Vietnam and the American war effort have for many years succeeded in completely ignoring large segments of the Vietnamese

population who were violently opposed to a permanent partition of the country at the 17th parallel. By bringing to light the voices and backgrounds of the people who opposed the Sài Gòn government and the American military project in Vietnam, this dissertation demonstrates the size and strength of what was by the early 1960s, a deeply entrenched urban revolutionary Central Vietnamese community.

Beginning with the inception of the Communist Party in Huế in 1930, this dissertation tracks the various affiliated underground networks development and evolution through World War II, the French War of decolonization, the Diệm government, the Struggle Movement, the Tết Offensive and then concluding in the early 1970s. Through a broad overview of the context in which the urban movement, the Communist Party and NLF were operating in Central Vietnam, my intention is to help provide the reader with a more nuanced understanding of the conditions in which the Vietnamese-American War arose in Central Vietnam from the perspective of the people who fought against the Sài Gòn government on the revolutionary side.

It is my hope that having read through these pages the reader will come away with a basic understanding of who the principal characters involved in organizing the NLF and the Communist Party in Central Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s were as individuals, what their backgrounds and motivations were, and how they related to each other. Although at times a bit repetitive, by conveying the family backgrounds and personal stories of those who joined the Party or the NLF in Huế and the surrounding areas in this dissertation, I have demonstrated the local/homegrown origins of a central Vietnamese revolutionary movement of the Communist Party and affiliated networks.

While my research and writings on the Tết Offensive remain incomplete, in Chapter 5, I have directly addressed the controversial reports of massacres in Huế which have continued to

divide families and communities in Vietnam to this day. Based on the evidence, I argue that RVN news reports of vicious brutality and kangaroo courts overseen by a group of prominent intellectuals from Huế are not supported by the facts and are directly contradicted by the accounts of eyewitnesses and by the accounts of people living in the city at the time. These accusations served an important purpose by helping to discredit highly respected community leaders from Huế whose support for the revolution was an embarrassment to local officials but may also have helped conceal the war crimes of Communist Party security officials who were assigned the task of rounding up and deciding the fate of prisoners of war.

Today, many of the residents of Huế who participated in the networks of the Communist Party and the NLF during the war are still living on the same patch of land upon which they were born and raised. Having initially been largely kept silent due to intense pressure from the Communist Party based in Hà Nội, over the past 20 years, this community has created an ever-growing trove of written materials which is currently available online in Vietnamese. Additionally, a great deal has also been posted online by the Vietnamese diaspora community. Sifting through all this for reliable information can, at times, present significant challenges for scholars, but these forums can also offer the opportunity for researchers to gain important insight and engage directly with the unresolved historical debates which to this day still bitterly divides many families and Vietnamese veterans of the war inside and outside the country.

Bibliography:

- “ANH HÙNG TRƯƠNG CHÍ CƯỜNG.” *Bộ Chỉ Huy Quân Sự Tỉnh Quảng Trị*, n.d. <http://bchqsquangtri.com.vn/truyen-thong-llvt/anh-hung-llvtnd/anh-hung-truong-chi-cuong.html>.
- Appy, Christian. *Patriots, The War Remembered From All Sides*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Công Thông Tin Điện Tử. “Bà Nguyễn Đình Chi,” n.d. <https://thuathienhue.gov.vn/vi-vn>
- Bart Barnes. “NGUYEN NGOC LOAN DIES AT 67.” *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1998. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1998/07/16/nguyen-ngoc-loan-dies-at-67/6d360dcf-b95b-451d-ae82-1ecff1607151/>.
- “Biển Đông Miền Trung - Phần 1.” Accessed April 28, 2021. <http://batkhuat.net/tl-biendong-mientrung-01.htm>.
- Biggs, David. *Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam*. University of Washington Press, 2018.
- Bowden, Mark. *Huế 1968, A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017.
- Brown, Holmes, and Don Luce. *Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoner*. Washington D.C.: Mobile Indochina Education Project, 1973.
- Bullington, James R.. *The Impolite American Consul: A Memoir of the 1966 Buddhist Struggle Movement in Huế* (blog), n.d. <https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2020/08/the-impolite-american-consul-a-memoir-of-the-1966-buddhist-struggle-movement-in-hue/>.
- Bửu Nam. “Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường Với ‘Thế Hệ Vàng’ và Tâm Thức Huế.” *Sông Hương*, December 28, 2015. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p75/c155/n22035/Hoang-Phu-Ngoc-Tuong-voi-The-he-vang-va-Tam-thuc-Hue.html>.
- Bửu Ý. Interview with Bửu Ý. Recorded, November 21, 2017.
- “Căn Cứ Khu Ủy V - Biểu Tượng Vững Bền Của Lòng Yêu Nước.” *TTXVN Vietnam News Agency*, July 31, 2018. <https://dhtn.ttxvn.org.vn/tintuc/can-cu-khu-uy-v-bieu-tuong-vung-ben-cua-long-yeu-nuoc-6329>.
- Cao Huy Thuần. “Đại Lão Hòa Thượng Thích Trí Quang: ‘Một Trang Lịch Sử,’” n.d. <https://quangduc.com/a66773/dai-lao-hoa-thuong-thich-tri-quang-mot-trang-lich-su>.
- Chapman, Jessica M. *Cauldron of Resistance, Ngo Dinh Diem the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.
- Chu Sơn. Interview #1 Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ). Recorded, March 29, 2015.
- Chu Sơn. Interview #2 Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ). Recorded, August 20, 2015.
- Chu Sơn. Interview #3 Chu Sơn (aka Trần Huệ) December 2017.
- Chu Sơn. “Gia Đình Cơ Sở (Tiep Theo). Article by the Vietnamese Scholar Chu Sơn about the life of Nguyen Thúc Tuấn and other members of underground families in Huế.” Blog. *Gia Đình Cơ Sở ở Huế* (blog), n.d. <http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-3>.
- . “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 1.” Diễn Đàn Forum. Accessed February 19, 2019. <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/co-so-hue-1>.
- . “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế – 2.” Diễn Đàn Forum. Accessed February 19, 2019. <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-2>.
- . “Gia đình cơ sở ở Huế, phần 3/3.” Diễn Đàn Forum. Accessed February 19, 2019. <https://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/gia-dinh-co-so-3>.
- . “Tập Văn Ngày Mai - Nhóm Ngày Mai Trong Phong Trào Hòa Bình Tại Huế (1954).” *TẠP CHÍ SÔNG HƯƠNG*, n.d. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c255/n9675/Tap-van-Ngay-Mai-Nhom-Ngay-Mai-trong-phong-trao-Hoa-Binh-tai-Hue-1954.html>.
- “Chuyện về Bác Sĩ Lê Khắc Quyến - Tạp Chí Sông Hương.” Accessed February 19, 2019. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p2/c16/n21233/Chuyen-ve-bac-si-Le-Khac-Quyien.html>.
- “‘Commoner Is Wed to Annam’s Ruler’, The New York Times, 21 March 1934.” *New York Times*, March 21, 1934. <https://www.nytimes.com/1934/03/21/archives/commoner-is-wed-to-annams-ruler-catholic-girl-18-is-married-to.html>.

- Currey, Cecil B. *Victory at Any Cost, The Genius of Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap*. Virginia: Potomac Books Inc., 2005.
- Davis, Bradley. *States of Banditry: The Nguyễn Government, Bandit Rule, and the Culture of Power in the Post-Taiping China-Vietnam Borderlands*, 2008.
- “Di Tích Cơ Quan Tinh Uy Lâm Thời Thừa Thiên Huế (1942 - 1945).” *Thừa Thiên Huế*, September 13, 2012. <http://baothuathienhue.vn/di-tich-co-quan-tinh-uy-lam-thoi-thua-thien-hue-1942-1945--a3676.html>.
- Đỗ Hùng Luân. Interview #1 with Đỗ Hùng Luân. Recorded, August 14, 2013.
- . Interview #2 with Đỗ Hùng Luân. Recorded, September 18, 2014.
- . Interview #3 with Đỗ Hùng Luân. Recorded, March 11, 2019.
- Đỗ Hùng Luân. *Thang Ngay Cua Muoi Nam Ay*. Đà Nẵng: Nha Xuất Ban Đà Nẵng, 2010.
- Đỗ Hùng Luân, Trương Cao Nhã, and Nguyễn Nhung. *Những năm tháng ấy, Hoạt Động Cách Mạng Của Hội Liên Hiệp Thanh Niên-Học Sinh-Sinh Viên Giải Phòng Quảng Nam Tại Tam Kỳ (Thời chống Mỹ)*. Đà Nẵng: Đỗ Hùng Luân, 2005.
- “Đồng Chí Võ Chí Công Từ Trần.” *Báo Điện Tử*, September 8, 2011. <http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Home/Dong-chi-Vo-Chi-Cong-tu-tran/20119/98466.vgp>.
- Dương Đình Na. Interview #1 with Dương Đình Na. Recorded, July 28, 2013.
- Dương Đình Na. interview #2 with Dương Đình Na. Not recorded, September 3, 2013.
- Dương Đình Na. Interview #3 with Dương Đình Na. Not recorded.
- Dương Hảo. Interview Dương Hảo, July 24, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended*. New York: Picador, 1997.
- “Giải Phóng Nhà Lao Thừa Phủ.” *Sự Kiện và Nhân Chứng*, n.d. <https://sknc.qdnd.vn/ky-niem-sau-sac/giai-phong-nha-lao-thua-phu-500847>.
- Giebel, Christoph. “Terminology Matters: The Fiction of ‘South Việt Nam’ and Representations of the Republic of Việt Nam,” 2019.
- Hạ Nguyên. “Những ‘Lá Thư’ Thơ Của Phan Duy Nhân.” *Thừa Thiên Huế*, January 14, 2016. <http://baothuathienhue.vn/nhung-la-thu-tho-cua-phan-duy-nhan-a19837.html>.
- Hạo Nhiên. “Chùm Ảnh Đại Lão HT.Thích Đôn Hậu Lúc Sanh Tiền.” *Phật Học Đời Sống*, n.d. <https://phathocdoisong.com/chum-anh-dai-lao-ht-thich-don-hau-luc-sanh-tien.html>.
- Ho Duy, Lê. “Mười Chập và một thời...” *Cong An Thanh Pho Da Nang*, 2008. http://cadn.com.vn/news/65_9002_muoi-chap-va-mot-thoi.aspx.
- “Hồ Nghinh - Một Đời vì Nước, vì Dân.” *Báo Điện Tử Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam*, February 27, 2017. <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-tuong-van-hoa/ho-nghinh--mot-doi-vi-nuoc-vi-dan-428207.html>.
- “HOÀNG LANH,” n.d. <https://thuathienhue.gov.vn/vi-vn/Trang-ch%E1%BB%A7/Th%C3%B4ng-tin->
- Hoàng Minh Tường. “Thi Pháp Tiểu Thuyết và Chất Sử Thi Trong Phả Chí [*].” *Sông Hương*, April 23, 2013. <http://www.tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p4/c18/n11727/Thi-phap-tieu-thuyet-va-chat-su-thi-trong-pha-chi.html>.
- Hoàng Thị Thọ. Interview with Hoàng Thị Thọ. Not recorded, n.d.
- . “Về Chuyến Tàu Lịch Sử Đầy Đi Côn Đảo 102 Người Yêu Nước Năm 1972,” n.d. https://En.Wikipedia.Org/Wiki/Massacre_at_Hu%E1%BA%BF,” n.d.
- “https://Phanxipang.Wordpress.Com/2012/09/18/Quoc-Hoc-100-Nam-Li/,” n.d. <https://phanxipang.wordpress.com/2012/09/18/quoc-hoc-100-nam-li/>.
- Hue-Tam Ho, Tai. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Huy Phương. “Người Việt.” *Tháng Tư... Thù Hận* (blog), n.d. <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/nhin-tu-little-saigon/Thang-Tu-thu-han-1546/>.
- Jacobs, Seth. *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam 1950-1963*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2006.
- Keith, Charles. *Catholic Vietnam, A Church From Empire To Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

- Khanh Linh. “Nguyễn Khoa Điềm – Khép Lại Sự Nghiệp Hơn 30 Năm Làm Chính Trị, Giờ Chỉ Còn ‘Nỗi Lo Văn Hóa.’” *Thế Giới Giải Trí*, n.d. <https://youthvoicescount.org/nguyen-khoa-diem-khep-lai-su-nghiep-hon-30-nam-lam-chinh-tri-gio-chi-con-noi-lo-van-hoa/>.
- Kỹ Yếu Ảnh- Hội Liên Thanh Niên--Học Sinh--Sinh Viên Giải Phóng Trung-Trung Bộ (1960-1975). Đà Nẵng: Đại Học Duy Tân, 2011.
- Lê bá Vận. “Các Khoa Trường ĐHYK Huế.” *Mutual Association of Hue School of Medicine* (blog), 2010. http://www.ykhoahuehaingoi.com/ky/k_CacKhoaTruongDHYKHue_LeBaVan.html.
- Lê Công Cơ. interview #1 with Lê Công Cơ. Recorded, August 14, 2013.
- . interview #2 with Lê Công Cơ. Recorded, April 3, 2014.
- Lê Công Cơ. *Năm Tháng Dâng Người*. Đà Nẵng: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012.
- Lê Duẩn. *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, n.d.
- Lê Hiếu. “Cách Mạng Tháng Tám ở Huế: Dấu Chấm Hết Cho Chế Độ Phong Kiến,” 2020. <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/cach-mang-thang-tam-o-hue-dau-cham-het-cho-che-do-phong-kien-1083326.vov>.
- Lê Minh. “Huế Trong Chiến Dịch Mậu Thân.” *Sông Hương*. March 7, 2014. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c302/n14489/Hue-trong-chien-dich-Mau-Than.html>.
- Lê Thị Nhân. Interview with Lê Thị Nhân. Recorded, November 29, 2017.
- Lê Văn Hảo. Phỏng Vấn Giáo Sư Lê Văn Hảo. Quê Mẹ, July 1989.
- Lê Văn Lân. “Phong Trao Hòa Bình,” May 16, 2014. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c306/n15329/Phong-trao-Hoa-Binh.html>.
- Lê Văn Thuyên. Interview with Lê Văn Thuyên, November 3, 2017.
- Liên Thành. “HOÀNG KIM LOAN HẸN LÀ AI?,” n.d. <https://www.uybantruyto.com/2018/06/03/hoang-kim-loan-han-la-ai/>.
- . “Liên Thành-Hãy Đưa Cộng Sản Ra Tòa Hình Sự Quốc Tế Hãy Đưa Cộng Sản Ra Tòa Hình Sự Quốc Tế,” n.d. <http://biendongmientrung-lienthanh.blogspot.com/2010/01/lien-thanh-hay-ua-cong-san-ra-toa-hinh.html>.
- . “Thiếu Tướng Nguyễn Ngọc Loan,” n.d. <http://amigalink.com/bdmt/bailienquan/tuongloan.html>.
- Lillie, Aaron. “Vietnam’s Forgotten Revolutionaries: Student Voices From Inside the Vietnamese Revolution.” University of Washington, 2012.
- Lữ Thành. “Mậu Thân Huế – Bị Dồn Vào Đường Cùng.” *Tre* (blog), March 3, 2018.
- Luce, Don. “Don Luce, ‘The Tiger Cages of Vietnam,’ Torture American Style, n.d., <http://Www.Historiansagainstwar.Org/Resources/Torture/Luce.Html>,” n.d.
- Mai Văn Hoan. “Giới Thiệu Chi Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam Tại Huế - Nhà Văn Tô Nhuận Vỹ.” *Sông Hương*, November 27, 2009. <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c185/n4227/Gioi-thieu-chi-hoi-nha-van-Viet-Nam-tai-Hue-Nha-van-To-Nhuan-Vy.html>.
- Marr, David G. *Vietnam 1945, The Quest for Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Martin, Douglas. “Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, 84, Seen as Hero in Vietnam, Dies.” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2007, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/26/world/asia/26thi.html>.
- McAllister, James. “‘Only Religions Count in Vietnam’: Thích Tri Quang and the Vietnam War.” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2008): 751–82.
- McAllister, John T. *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution*. Princeton University: The Center for International Studies, 1969.
- McCoy, Alfred. *The Politics of Heroine in Southeast Asia*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- Minh Khuê. “Chuyện Ông Thiên Tường ở Huế...” *Thừa Thiên Huế*, n.d. <https://baothuathienhue.vn/chuyen-ong-thien-tuong-o-hue--a1906.html>.
- Năng, Báo Công an TP Đà. “Mười Chập và Một Thời...” Báo Công an TP Đà Nẵng: CADN Online- Kết nối niềm tin. Accessed February 19, 2019. http://cadn.com.vn/news/65_9002_muoi-chap-va-mot-thoi.aspx.
- “Ngô Kha - Ngu Ngôn Một Thế Hệ.” *Nhân Dân*, December 16, 2005. <https://nhandan.com.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/ngo-kha-ngu-ngon-mot-the-he-431155/>.

- Ngô Vĩnh Long. Phone interview with Ngô Vĩnh Long. Telephone interview/Not recorded, August 25, 2013.
- Báo Thanh Niên. “Người thầy 102 tuổi,” November 23, 2015.
<https://thanhnien.vn/content/NTE5Njg3.html>.
- Nguyễn Đắc Xuân. “Hồi Ký ‘Năm Tháng Dâng Người’ Của Ông Lê Công Cơ Cần Phải Viết Lại Với Một Tâm Thế Khác Hoặc...” *Hồi Ký “Năm Tháng Dâng Người” Của Ông Lê Công Cơ Cần Phải Viết Lại Với Một Tâm Thế Khác Hoặc...* (blog), August 31, 2012.
<http://www.gactholoc.com/printer.php?id=212&tbl=contents>.
- . Interview #1 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân/Not recorded. Not recorded, October 15, 2017.
- . Interview #2 with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân. Recorded, November 11, 2017.
- . “Nhớ Tiên Sĩ Lê Văn Hảo Thời ở Huế.” *Sông Hương*, January 21, 2015.
<http://tapchisonghuong.Com.vn/tin-tuc/p2/c16/n18384/Nho-Tien-si-Le-Van-Hao-thoi-o-Hue.html>.
- . “Những Gì Tôi Biết về Giáo Sư Tôn Thất Dương Ky, và Gia Đình,” May 15, 2013.
<https://www.gactholoc.com/c31/t31-369/nhung-gi-toi-biet-ve-giao-su-ton-that-duong-ky-va-gia-dinh.html>.
- . *Từ Phú Xuân Đến Huế (Tập 1)*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012.
- . *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 2)*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012.
- . *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế (Tập 3)*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2012.
- Nguyễn Nhiên. “Những Kỷ Niệm Của Một vị Tướng Trên Đất Bình Trị Thiên Khói Lửa.” *Công an Thành Phố Đà Nẵng*, n.d. (http://cadn.com.vn/news/64_5482_nhung-ky-niem-cua-mot-vi-tuong-tren-dat-binh-tri-thien-khoi-lua.aspx).
- Nguyễn Quang Hà. *Bí Thư Thành Ủy Hoàng Lanh Với Phong Trào Cách Mạng Thành Phố Huế*. Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2017.
- Nguyễn Quang Lập. “Lời Cuối Cho Câu Chuyện Quá Buồn,” February 9, 2018.
https://www.facebook.com/notes/4504440282930651/?comment_id=307064943151252.
- Nguyễn Quang Vinh. Interview with Nguyễn Quang Vinh, December 12, 2016.
- Nguyễn Thị Diệu Hương. “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City (1957-67).” 2017.
- Nguyễn Thúc Tuân. “Unpublished Letter Written by Nguyễn Thúc Tuân to Aaron Lillie.,” March 31, 2014.
- Nguyễn Văn Ninh. Interview #1 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo). Recorded, August 6, 2013.
- . Interview #2 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo) not recorded, September 2, 2013.
- Nguyễn Văn Ninh. Interview #3 with Nguyễn Văn Ninh (aka Đạo). Recorded, March 20, 2014.
- Nguyễn Xuân Hoa. Interview #1 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa. Recorded, October 23, 2017.
- . Interview #2 with Nguyễn Xuân Hoa. Recorded, November 27, 2017.
- . *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Huế*. Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2013.
- Nhiều Tác Giả. *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Thành Phố Huế, 1930- 2000*. Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2010.
- . *Lịch Sử Phong Trào Đô Thị Huế 1954-1975*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015.
- . *Một Thời Sống Đẹp*. Đà Nẵng: Hội Nhà Văn, 2017.
- . *Những Chân Trời Khát Vọng*. Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2013.
- “Nhìn Lại Lịch Sử Từ Một Nạn Nhân Của Di Sản Cường Quyền Trên Bước Đường Tị Nạn,” n.d.
https://www.giaodiemonline.com/thuvien/mluc/mluc_II06/606_khaiphong-hvg.htm.
- Nhung, Nguyễn. Interview with Nguyễn Nhung. Recorded, September 21, 2017.
- Nu-Anh Tran. “Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963).” University of California, Berkeley, 2013.
- Peter Grose. “Peril Seen in Vietnam Buddhist Drive,” June 9, 1964.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/06/09/archives/peril-seen-in-vietnam-buddhist-drive.html>.
- Phạm Thị Nga. interview #1 with Phạm Thị Nga. Recorded, September 2, 2013.
- Phạm Thị Nga. Interview #2 with Phạm Thị Nga, April 1, 2014.

- Phan Bội Bảo Thy. “Liên Thành, Kẻ Sát Nhân Trong Những Ngày Miền Trung Biến Động.” *An Ninh Thế Giới*, May 27, 1975.
- Phan Hoàng Quý. Interview with Phan Hoàng Quý. Recorded, September 21, 2015.
- Phan Hữu Lượng. Interview with Phan Hữu Lượng, November 14, 2017.
- Phúc An. “Độc Chuyện Từ Tủ Lê Quang Vinh.” *Cà Mau*, April 16, 2015. <http://baocamau.com.vn/van-nghe/%C3%B0oc-chuyen-tu-tu-le-quang-vinh-36215.html>.
- Quán Như. “HOÀNG NGUYỄN NHUẬN (Pen Name Hoàng Văn Giàu) (1938 – 24.07.2016) Môi Tình Đoàn Hữu Hơn Ba Mươi Năm.” *Nam Giao* (blog), July 29, 2016. <http://hoangnamgiao.blogspot.com/2016/07/hoang-nguyen-nhuan-1938-24.html>.
- Schafer, John C. “Ngô Kha, Vietnam’s Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 13, no. 1 (February 2018): 1–41. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2018.13.1.1>.
- Sullivan, Patricia. “S. Vietnamese Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi,” June 27, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/26/AR2007062602195.html>.
- Tần Hoài Dạ Vũ and Nguyễn Đông Nhật. *Phác Họa Chân Dung Một Thế Hệ*. Đà Nẵng: Bản Trữ, 2013.
- Taylor K.W. *Voices from the Second Republic 1967-1975*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Thanh Tùng. “Một Thời Tranh Đấu qua Những Lá Thư Giữa Hai Miền.” *Tiền Phong*, April 30, 2010. <https://tienphong.vn/mot-thoi-tranh-dau-qua-nhung-la-thu-giua-hai-mien-post192810.tpo>.
- Thứ Năm. “Chuyện về Một Người Anh Hùng.” *Nhân Dân*, February 4, 2010. <https://nhandan.com.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/chuyen-ve-mot-nguoi-anh-hung-418463/>.
- Tô Nhuận Vỹ. Interview #1 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ. Recorded, November 10, 2017.
- . Interview #2 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ. Recorded, November 16, 2017.
- . Interview #3 with Tô Nhuận Vỹ. Recorded, November 30, 2017.
- Topmiller, Robert J. *The Lotus Unleashed, The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002.
- Tran Gia Phụng. “Mậu Thân: Cộng Sản Tấn Công Huế.” *Tiếng Dân*, n.d. <https://baotienngan.com/2018/02/12/mau-than-cong-san-tan-cong-hue/>.
- Trần Nguyễn Anh. “Trăm Năm... Cởi Bỏ Oan Khiên.” *Tiền Phong*, n.d. <https://tienphong.vn/tram-nam-coi-bo-oan-khien-post687577.tpo>.
- Trang Chủ » Thơ Việt Nam » Chùm Thơ Bất Hủ » Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, and Huỳnh Minh Nhật. “Tuyển Tập 10 Bài Thơ Hay Nhất Của Nhà Thơ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường,” n.d. <https://ocuaso.com/tho-viet-nam/chum-tho-bat-hu/10-bai-tho-hay-nhat-cua-nha-tho-hoang-phu-ngoc-tuong.html>.
- Trịnh, Túc. interview #1 with Trịnh Túc. Recorded, August 4, 2013.
- . Interview #2 with Trịnh Túc, not recorded. Not recorded, September 3, 2013.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Trullinger, James. *Village at War, An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam*. New York: Longman, 1980.
- Truong Cao Nhã. Interview with Trương Cao Nhã. Recorded, October 5, 2017.
- “Trương Chí Cương (1919 - 1975).” *Công Thông Tin Điện Từ Thành Phố Đà Nẵng*, n.d. https://danang.gov.vn/gioi-thieu/chi-tiet?id=1701&_c=46.
- Truong Nhu Tang. *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath*. New York City: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, 1985.
- Tuần Báo Văn Nghệ TP.HCM. “Bắt gọn và tiêu diệt một phái đoàn Quân sự của tướng De Gaulle do Castella chỉ huy, nhảy xuống cô đô Huế (8/1945),” May 16, 2018. <http://tuầnbaovannghe.tphcm.vn/bat-gon-va-tieu-diet-mot-phai-doan-quan-su-cua-tuong-de-gaulle-do-castella-chi-huy-nhay-xuong-co-do-hue-8-1945/>.
- “VỀ VIỆC HÒA THƯỢNG ĐÓN HẬU LÊN NÚI, RA BẮC TRONG VỤ TẾT MẬU THÂN 1968.” *Thư Việt Hoa Sen*, April 22, 2011.
- “VIETNAM’S FAITHS UNDERLIE RISING; Buddhist□Catholic Disputes Sharpened Under Diem.” *New York Times*, September 14, 1964.

- Vinh Linh Nguyễn. “Lịch Su Tam Kỳ.” unpublished article by a historian from Tam Kỳ
“Vo Chi Cong, Vietnamese Leader, Is Dead at 99.” *New York Times*, September 15, 2011.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/asia/vo-chi-cong-vietnamese-leader-is-dead-at-99.html>.
- Võ Kỳ Nam. Interview #2 with Võ Kỳ Nam. Recorded, April 5, 2014.
- Võ Nguyên Giáp. *Peoples War Peoples Army*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc, 1962.
- Võ Quê. Interview #1 with Võ Quê. Recorded, October 27, 2017.
- Vũ Bá Học. Interview with Vũ Bá Học. Recorded, September 24, 2017.
- “World: The Saigon Thi Party.” *Time*. Accessed February 20, 2019.
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941937,00.html>.
- Wulff, Erich. “The Buddhist Revolt: Diem’s New Opponents Deserve U.S. Support.” *The New Republic*, August 31, 1963. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1963-pt12/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1963-pt12-14-2.pdf>.