

## Fighting the First Indochina War Again? Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–59

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Vietnam War studies have often focused on the United States' commitment to fight communism, but Catholic refugees who moved to the South after the 1954 Geneva Agreements were also determined to fight against Hanoi. In publications associated with these refugees, two fundamental factors explain their anti-communism: their desire to avenge their forced departure from the North and their opposition to atheism. An analysis of these refugees' focus on uniting Vietnam and freeing it from communism sheds new light on the aftermath of their migration, on the political significance of religious faith and on the fashioning of a non-communist nationalism in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Northern Vietnamese refugees, Vietnamese Catholics, anti-communism, Republic of Vietnam, Indochina Wars, the Vietnam War.

In 1954, the temporary partition of Vietnam for which the Geneva Accords provided led to the migration of more than 800,000 Vietnamese to the non-communist zone south of the seventeenth parallel. Among them, official accounts estimated that more than 80 per cent, that is 794,876 people, were Catholics (Bùi Văn Lương 1959, p. 49). Despite its ostensibly temporary nature, the failure to organize elections in 1956 to reunify the northern and southern parts of Vietnam transformed this temporary migration into a permanent one. This turn of events inspired some migrants to work to perpetuate a sense of community among those who had come south. For example, migrants from the Diocese of Vinh — covering the provinces of Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh and Quảng Bình, known collectively as Nghệ Tĩnh Bình — launched a periodical at

their second general assembly in 1957. *Luyện Thép* (Forging Steel), a biweekly publication directed by Father Nguyễn Viêt Khai, served as a link connecting the 20,000 migrants from Nghệ Tĩnh Bình to the South, scattered in twenty-seven camps, in their determination to stand together despite physical dispersion (*Luyện Thép*, 16 July 1957, p. 10).

While by 1957 all northern migrants had been resettled in the South, this anecdote suggests that simple resettlement was not the end of their story. Like those from the Diocese of Vinh, most Catholic refugees did not feel that resettlement in the South represented a satisfactory end to their migration. Their sense of exile remained very real. It raised the questions of how Catholic refugees perpetuated the memory of their migration and how they developed a specific political consciousness.

While previous literature on the 1954 migration has focused on the rationale for the migration and on the displacement and resettlement to which it led, this article explores its cultural and political consequences.<sup>1</sup> As Liisa Malkki (1995, p. 3) noted with reference to Hutu refugees from Rwanda living in Tanzania, institutional support for refugees encouraged the emergence of a nationalist discourse centred around the experience of exile. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1996, p. 2144) underlined the dramatic plot that characterized Hindu refugees' narratives of the 1947 partition of India. The story of an idealized past suddenly shattered by an exogenous and unexplained catastrophe allowed Hindu refugees to stress the injustice that marked their migration.

Catholic refugees in South Vietnam produced very similar transformations of the past and developed a nationalist discourse to accompany them. In these narratives, both their Catholic faith and their forced migration became the core pillars of a discourse advocating the elimination of communism and the unification of Vietnam on non-communist, though not necessarily Catholic, terms. After a short discussion of the historical context surrounding Catholic involvement in the First Indochina War (1946–54), the 1954 migration and the resettlement of refugees that followed, this

article examines the development of a political consciousness among these refugees based on the rejection of their forced migration, on the memory of their suffering during the war, on political initiatives and on the mobilization for international recognition of their plight. Constituting the pillars of the refugees' narratives, these four themes underlined their unique role in both decolonization and in the Cold War. This discourse led the Catholic refugees to believe that they were Vietnam's most authentic nationalists and encouraged them to take action against communism after communist insurgents resumed their fight in the countryside of southern Vietnam in 1959.

#### Chronological Landmarks of the Catholic Migration, 1954–57

Until recently, critics associated Christian communities in Vietnam with Western interference in Vietnamese internal affairs.<sup>2</sup> Recent research shows, however, that Vietnamese Catholics sought independence from both French missionaries and from colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> During the First Indochina War, many of them sided with the nationalist Việt Minh, and the dioceses of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu secured autonomy from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 in recognition of their alliance (Trần Thị Liên 1996, pp. 151–74; Spector 2013, pp. 38–49). This collaboration collapsed in 1951, as the armed conflict changed from a war of decolonization into a front in the Cold War after the establishment of the People's Republic of China and its provision of diplomatic and logistical support to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This turning point in the war had two substantial consequences for Catholic communities, especially after Vietnamese bishops published a pastoral letter on 10 November 1951 urging all believers to side against communism. The militias of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu, which had defended the dioceses' autonomy up to that point, chose to fight against communist attacks and infiltration.

Other Catholics in northern Central Vietnam, from Thanh Hóa to Quảng Bình, and in upland parts of Vietnam, both in the Việt Bắc in the North and in the Central highlands from Quảng Nam to

Lam Đồng, had spent almost all of the First Indochina War under the authority of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Goscha 2011, pp. 231–32). Just like their Catholic brothers and sisters in the Red River Delta, many of them broke with the Việt Minh during the second half of the conflict. These Catholics had gained first-hand experience of the transformations effected by the communists — the revamping of the civil service and land reform, which the Vietnamese Workers Party implemented in specific laboratory zones in order to generate the manpower required for large-scale and modern military campaigns in 1953 (Goscha 2012, pp. 441–62).

This experience of the First Indochina War led many Catholics to migrate to the South once the 1954 Geneva ceasefire allowed civilians to regroup into the zone of their choice, either the northern communist-governed zone or the southern non-communist zone. These refugees were not, however, representative of the Catholic population of Vietnam. Many Catholics remained in the North, others went overseas (Trần Thị Liên 2000, p. 63; 2005, pp. 435–36; 2010, pp. 371–84), and southern Catholics had not developed the same political and religious practices (Hansen 2008, pp. 27–39). Nonetheless, the northern Catholic refugees became prominent in the Republic of Vietnam, as their migration doubled the number of Christians south of the seventeenth parallel (Hansen 2008, pp. 28, 228–32). Their resettlement became a major objective of American modernization programmes in the South.<sup>4</sup> Their relocation was also important to their co-religionist Ngô Đình Diệm, who became the president of the newly created Republic of Vietnam in 1955. He wanted them to play a role in his political, economic and social projects, which centred on agrarian reform. His interest in their playing this role explains the emphasis in many accounts of the history of the Republic of Vietnam on the over-representation of Catholics in its political and military affairs.<sup>5</sup> Recent works have brought nuance to accounts of the proportion of Catholics among migrants and of their logistical role in the resettlement process (Hansen 2008, pp. 118–20; 2009*a*, pp. 178–82; Đặng Phương Nghi 2002). Yet none has explained the conflation of Catholic refugees

with all Catholics, with all refugees or with staunch supporters of Ngô Đình Diệm. It is thus important to demystify the relationship among these groups before turning to the consequences of the southward migration of northern Catholics on the emergence of a distinct political and cultural identity in the South.

Catholicism gained visibility both within and outside Vietnam during the migration, leading many authors to give the impression it involved only Catholics (Manhattan 1984, pp. 62–68; Jacobs 2005, pp. 127–28; 2006, p. 56). Diplomatic correspondence and media coverage of the partition of the country emphasized the experience of Catholics among the migrants to the outside world. As the main skirmishes between forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and refugees leaving the North happened in Catholic parishes, Ngô Đình Diệm and French High Commissioner Paul Ély drew the attention of the international community to the particular plight of these refugees (TTLT2/PThT/AN/14.769). Coverage in Christian magazines also gave the impression that the migration was essentially Catholic (Jacobs 2005, p. 136).

Within the southern part of Vietnam, the migration seemed to channel the massive support of international Catholic solidarity. While the role of such organizations as CARE and the International Rescue Committee (Pergande 1999, pp. 60–70; Pergande 2002, p. 169; Elkind 2005, pp. 65–69; Elkind 2014, pp. 999–1000) was important, most of the private aid flowed from Christian charities (Kauffman 2005, p. 225; Flipse 2003, pp. 131–43). This aid circulated through Monsignor Phạm Ngọc Chi's auxiliary resettlement committee, comprised of a team of ten priests working from Saigon (Hansen 2008, pp. 188–93). Even lay organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF sometimes had to distribute assistance from the precincts of churches, as they were the largest public spaces available in the camps in the South (ICRC/M/280). The visibility of Christian organization in the efforts to aid the refugees gave the impression, both inside and outside South Vietnam, that the migration was essentially Catholic, even though American governmental aid was by far the most important.

The material assistance of international Catholic charities was not the only factor in explaining the large visibility of Catholics in the migration. The political influence of the Vietnamese Church also seemed magnified south of the seventeenth parallel. Monsignor Ngô Đình Thục, President Ngô Đình Diệm's older brother, epitomized the close relationship between the Church and the state. In handwritten notes made sometime in July or August 1954, he imagined that Catholic refugees could neutralize competing non-communist political forces there. High on his list of such forces were nationalist parties such as the Đại Việt or the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDDĐ), as well as southern political and religious groups such as the Bình Xuyên, the Hòa Hảo and the Cao Đài, which variously controlled Saigon and large areas of the Mekong Delta.

- 1) Active duty soldiers in the South would like nothing better than demobilisation. If we can enrol refugees ranging from seventeen to forty-five years old in the army (and prioritise married men) — we could already find jobs ... for most of the refugees — and we would have an anticommunist army. Ask Mr Hinh's opinion. If the soldier is married, he could support his family with improved pay. This [is] for simple soldiers.
- 2) Reserve Officers in training could return home and be replaced by trained refugees (including those unused from Tonkin). Union activists could become political cadres in the army (in order to indoctrinate the soldiers), all this is equally valid for Central Vietnam....
- 3) Anticipate a Bình Xuyên–Đại Việt collusion if we automatically merge the Tonkin police with the Sûreté in South Vietnam. Prevent this by enrolling the Northern policemen into the army and disperse them into different corps. (TTLT2/PThT/AN/14760)

According to Ngô Đình Thục's thinking, the new state could fully trust Catholic refugees. They should occupy crucial positions in the police and the army. South Vietnam would thus be entirely committed to the fight against communism, and its state would always remain loyal to Ngô Đình Diệm's rule.

In practice, however, Ngô Đình Diệm never fully trusted the refugees. He wanted Catholics to play visible roles, but despite his brother's plan he was concerned about the risk of refugees' coalescing into a political force that might emerge to compete with him. Lê Quang Luật, an influential Catholic political leader from Phát Diệm who became high commissioner (*đại diện chính phủ đặc trách di cư*) for the evacuation proposed to Ngô Đình Diệm a plan for the resettlement of the 1954 refugees. He suggested resettling them in the Central Highlands as close as possible to the seventeenth parallel and granting them full administrative autonomy. But, according to French intelligence reporting on this project, Ngô Đình Diệm's close advisors feared "seeing a mass of Tonkinese people emerge there, who could, with adequate leadership, lean to any political camp deemed most appropriate" (SHD/10H/4195). The creation of an autonomous Little Tonkin in upper southern Vietnam was clearly not in Ngô Đình Diệm's plans. Rather, the president dispersed the northern Catholic refugees, whose religious faith and anti-communism were beyond doubt, among three hundred resettlement camps across coastal areas, the highlands and the Mekong Delta. While the relationship between the northern refugees and Ngô Đình Diệm requires a more comprehensive analysis, their resettlement suggests that being a refugee or being Catholic did not guarantee the president's favour.<sup>6</sup> He could not allow migrant communities to remain united; they had to be dispersed once and for all.

#### A Migration Ends, an Exile Continues

Dispersion and resettlement did not prevent refugees' finding their own meaning for their displacement. Migration did not end with the termination of the resettlement programmes. Like the Hindus from East Bengal who settled in newly independent India (Chakrabarty 1995, p. 2144), Vietnamese refugees from the North denounced the injustice of their new situation, justified it with a historical narrative and advocated a new future for their country. In their case, that future concerned non-communist Vietnam. They used several

forms of media to create numerous outlets for disseminating their ideas to one another, to their fellow Vietnamese compatriots, to the international community and even to the Vatican. For instance, the purpose of *Đường Sống* (The way of life) — a semi-weekly published in Saigon and directed by Father Trần Văn Hiến Minh, a refugee priest from Bùi Chu — was to guide all Catholic migrants in their resettlement. *Luyện Thép* went even further in seeking to unite all the parishioners from the Diocese of Vinh scattered into twenty-seven camps after the process of resettlement came to an end in 1957. It reflected a determination that the end of state programmes dedicated to resettling those parishioners would not bring a change in their identity. Refugee activists would continue to use the media that they created to make clear their commitment to avenge their exile.

The first and most explicit component of the activists' narrative lay in their interpretation of the 1954 Geneva agreements. In their view, the ceasefire in Vietnam included in those accords had two main victims: Vietnam and the refugees. Just as the nation had endured partition, so too had refugees been forced to leave their homeland with nothing but the shirts on their backs. Despite the temporary and the voluntary nature of the civilian regroupment provided for in the Geneva Accords, refugee narratives emphasized that it was a forced departure. All of their publications — Catholic or non-Catholic — insisted that the refugees left their homeland unwillingly, that the participants in the Geneva conference had imposed this migration on them.

Protests had started in all the major cities of Vietnam as soon as rumours of a partition spread in June 1954 (ANOM/HCI/SPCE/4). At the time of migration and resettlement, the southern government's propaganda tended to equate migration with a national anti-communist struggle (VNCH 1955, pp. 167–71). But, even years after the migration, refugee media reminded readers of the coercive nature of the migration. A 1957 article on the Geneva agreements insisted, for example, that “almost a million Vietnamese ... had to leave their homeland (*quê hương*) and all their belongings to come with the barest necessities to the South in their search for freedom



and justice” (*Luyện Thép*, 1 August 1957, p. 3). Resettled or not, refugees writing for such outlets still felt very deeply the injustice of their forced departure. Even though they knew that they would not return to the North in the near future, they expressed their opposition to the idea of living in permanent exile.

The corollary to the innocence of the refugees in their narrative of the Geneva ceasefire and its aftermath was to identify themselves as victims and to name a culprit. “Vietnamese communists” and “French colonialists” had, according to this narrative, unjustly divided the country and sealed the fate of the refugees at the 1954 Geneva conference. In 1956, when the referendum set in the accords should have taken place, refugees continued denouncing these two major protagonists in the First Indochina War for their responsibility for the partition of the country. In February 1956, the newspaper *Tự Do* (Liberty), run since 1954 in Saigon by several refugee participants in the city’s literary and journalistic scene, insisted on the falsity of the Geneva armistice and its hypocritical provision for a referendum.

Nobody is surprised by the sly plot that the colonialists and communists introduced at the Geneva Accords with the possibility of organising a referendum in 1956.

Everybody knows that it is a trap set in order to seize the whole S-shaped territory, place it under the yoke of a red empire and invade all of Southeast Asia! (*Tự Do*, 18 February 1956, p. 1)

Two months later, the same newspaper expressed delight that Hanoi could not convince Moscow to call for an international conference on the organization of the proposed referendum (*Tự Do*, 4 March 1956, p. 1). This criticism of the referendum did not mean, however, that refugees like the journalists at *Tự Do* had given up on returning to their homeland or seeing Vietnam united. On the same day that their newspaper celebrated the failure of Hanoi’s calls for a referendum, the Republic of Vietnam established its National Assembly, whose members “were vested by the people with the arduous and privileged responsibility ... together with President Ngô Đình Diệm, of overcoming every difficulty and danger ... and preparing the March

to the North” (ibid.).<sup>7</sup> In other words, refugees were thus not only the victims of the partition; they were also meant to become the main protagonists in the future unification of the country.

A few weeks later, in April 1956, an open letter published in *Tự Do* insisted again on the role of National Assembly members, especially those who were refugees, in the creation of a non-communist and unified Vietnamese nation. The author argued that refugee members of the assembly should not represent only the interests of the million northern refugees living in the South, or even only those of the millions of Vietnamese in the South. Their political responsibilities reached well beyond the seventeenth parallel. They must remember that they had migrated “in the wake of a general anti-communist movement. They migrated to oppose communism, to build a free and just society.... [I]n the task of writing a Constitution, they must not forget the ten[s] of millions of Vietnamese in the North and their descendants” (*Tự Do*, 22 April 1956, pp. 1, 4). The Geneva Agreements had bound them to create a non-communist and unified Vietnamese nation. It was thus their responsibility to avenge both their forced migration and the country’s partition.

The newspaper *Luyện Thép* shared this interpretation of Geneva. “Three years ago, on the 20 July 1954, the Geneva ceasefire was established as a result of an artful plot by the communists colluding with the colonialists for the partition of the country” (*Luyện Thép*, 1 August 1957, p. 3). The following year, the same newspaper insisted again on the injustice of the partition of the country.

From the legal perspective, the persons responsible for the signature of the Geneva Agreements are the colonialists and the Việt Cộng. The signatures of those persons are well known, still show on paper, engraving forever in the history of Vietnam their responsibility in dividing the country.... Therefore, whose responsibility is it to unite the country? I dare to believe it is the responsibility of the entire population. We want to retrieve from the Việt Cộng any role in the unification of the territory because sooner or later, Việt Cộng are the enemy of the people. That is why we dare to propose to stop all forms of communication, from postal exchange, conferences or negotiations with the Việt

Cộng. I dare to believe that there is only one way to address the Việt Cộng: the people of Vietnam from south to north standing together in order to eliminate the puppet government of the Việt Cộng and reunite the country. (*Luyện Thép*, 15 July 1958, p. 3)

The displacement caused by the Geneva agreements, this line held, was not a voluntary migration. It was, according to Catholic refugee newspapers, a forced exile of nationalists betrayed by the collusion of Vietnamese communists and the French. By pinning the blame for all of Vietnam's woes on the "communists" and the "colonialists", Catholic refugees could equip their nationalist narrative with a powerful foundational discourse. Denunciation of the partition legitimized emphasis on the injustice of their plight. It also helped them express their opposition to both communist and colonial rule. Mobilization through the printed press for continued self-identification as refugees and denunciation of the Geneva agreements had a common import. Although the northern Catholic refugees' migration had officially ended, their exile continued as long as this unjust expulsion from their homes remained unavenged. Recalling the catastrophe highlighted both the refugees' suffering and their commitment to the nation. Linking their personal destinies to the realization of a united Vietnam, northern Catholic refugees presented themselves in their media organs as the authentic nationalists, just as Hindu refugees did in post-partition India.

### Shaping a Collective Memory of the First Indochina War

Another central point to the narrative developed in the northern Catholic refugee press involved the creation of a new memory of the First Indochina War, whose outcome had led to their migration to the South in the first place. Like any memory-making process, Vietnamese Catholic refugees' interpretation of historical time proved a highly selective, idealized and personal process. Nevertheless, central to that narrative was a claim that their collective experience should serve as a model for all non-communist Vietnamese to follow in opposing their common oppressors, the Vietnamese communists.

This pedagogical model prescribed a specific vision of the Vietnamese nation and its history. The refugees' memory of the war was, that is, to become non-communist Vietnam's new collective memory.

A reinterpretation of the conflict preceding the ceasefire not only legitimated belief in the injustice of the northern Catholic refugees' departure, but it also served as another means of insisting on the "true" and "authentic" nature of refugee nationalism. This historical narrative underlined the refugees' place in the nationalist struggle against both colonialism and communism. This narrative had existed ever since conflict in Indochina had emerged as a Cold War hot spot. Countless accounts written in the South after 1955 challenged Hanoi's claim to unite, and to form a legitimate government for, Vietnam. In mounting this challenge, refugee Catholics shared much with non-Catholic counterparts, but they nevertheless developed a specific narrative of their own.

As Peter Hansen has shown, members of the migrant clergy often used biblical references to comfort their parishioners. Numerous examples drawn from the Old Testament reminded listeners that their migration was not "a singular curse, but rather a repetition of biblical history" (Hansen 2008, p. 258). In addition to these obvious references to scripture, Catholic refugees also sought to rewrite the history of the First Indochina War as a history of Catholic resistance against communism, which could now be transformed to serve as the basis for a wider, more inclusive nationalist resistance against that same force. Refugees from the Diocese of Vinh claimed, for example, to have experienced the worst treatment from communist rule. They argued that this first-hand knowledge of communist rule made them paramount witnesses of the evils of communism, and thus essential interpreters of the First Indochina War.

In the minds of those refugees, communism hijacked a national struggle in which they had fought not just from 1950, when the Cold War arrived in Indochina, but from its beginning during the August Revolution of 1945 itself. Articles in *Luyện Thép* insisted on the need to reclaim this defining moment. After all, it was at that point that history had allowed the Vietnamese to take power,

to declare national unity and independence. Recovery of the August Revolution was essential because the event was void of “communists” or “colonialists” until Hồ Chí Minh and the communist party hijacked what was a purely nationalist endeavour. Writers in *Luyện Thép* thus denounced the communists’ betrayal of Vietnamese nationalism.

After the success of the August Revolution, the population of Nghệ An vividly participated with its bravest men and greatest strengths in the liberation of the country and the establishment of national independence. But those Việt Cộng manipulated the resistance, the spirit of the Revolution and the patriotic attachment of the people of Nghệ An to realise the objectives of the Communist Party.... After their victory at Cao Bằng, the border crossing was freed and the Việt Cộng started to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat, where Nghệ An province was picked as an experimentation laboratory. (*Luyện Thép*, 16 March 1958, pp. 24–25)<sup>8</sup>

In another article, a certain Thanh Hoan insisted that the communists were not the only Vietnamese to have fought for independence. He recalled that the people of Nghệ An province enthusiastically participated in the Việt Minh front.

Every child and elder sang those meaningful words: the Việt Minh army saves the nation.... Vietnam, free and independent, etc.... Every village and city hoisted the red flag with a yellow star. Independence, freedom, happiness who wouldn’t rejoice with such a promise! (*Luyện Thép*, 24 January 1957, p. 29)

The population in Nghệ Tĩnh Bình was all the more involved in the nationalist struggle as Hồ Chí Minh, a native of Nghệ An, “was recognised by everyone as the old father of the people” (ibid.). Thanh Hoan believed that Hồ Chí Minh had been personally responsible for what happened afterwards. “It is the same guy who brought the people of my homeland under the fanatic control of the red empire in order to realise a utopia” (ibid.).

In mentioning in these articles in *Luyện Thép* the early participation of the inhabitants of the Nghệ Tĩnh Bình in the Việt Minh, their authors further underlined the “dupery” of the communists. The

latter used, this line of thought went, the nationalist front to fool the people, including the “authentic” nationalists who had signed on immediately with the Việt Minh in 1945.<sup>9</sup>

In reflection of the strong feeling of betrayal, articles appearing in *Luyện Thép* differentiated between the Việt Minh and what they called the Việt Cộng. While the first term designated an organization involved in the common struggle against the return of colonial rule, the second organization exemplified the treachery of the communists.<sup>10</sup> The historical narrative was one of a betrayal. One editorial even reminded readers that none other than Hồ Chí Minh signed the 6 March 1946 accords allowing French troops to return to Vietnam, thus paving the way to the outbreak of the First Indochina War (*Luyện Thép*, 16 May 1957, p. 3). Its reference to the ill-conceived Franco–Vietnamese accord failed to mention the approval of other Vietnamese nationalists, such as the VNQDD’s Vũ Hồng Khanh. It thus helped further to build the refugees’ case for their status as “authentic” nationalists. According to their narrative, Vietnamese communists and French colonialists had betrayed the nationalist cause for the entire duration of the First Indochina War, a cause that those who now found themselves refugees had defended from the start. Text after text emphasized the fight of these latter against Marxism following the struggle against colonial rule. In an open letter, one Father Nguyễn Việt Khai referred to “ten years of cruel fighting against the Việt Cộng” (*Luyện Thép*, 1 June 1957, p. 4), thus ignoring the fact that northern Catholics’ support for the Việt Minh lasted at least until 1949.

A record of different places and times in which Catholics had faced communist oppression served to flesh out this historical narrative of continuous opposition to communism during the First Indochina War. These essential moments would constitute the historical benchmarks of Catholic resistance to communism. A long article in *Luyện Thép* denouncing the geographical regroupment following the Geneva agreement recalled this chain of events.

After nine years of armed fighting and after the heavy defeat of Điện Biên Phủ, the communists eventually dropped their masks.

The people clearly see the nefarious purposes of the Việt Cộng, abusing the spirit of resistance in order to oppress and enslave civilian manpower through a general mobilisation ... against which resistance rose up everywhere, particularly in Làng Nghi (Diễn Châu, Nghệ An) in 1951, Hưng Yên (Nghệ An) in 1952, Nam Đàn (Nghệ An) in 1953, etc. where the people expressed their insubordination to the yoke of Hồ Chí Minh's group. (*Luyện Thép*, 1 August 1957, p. 3)

It is uncertain whether the events cited in this article constituted significant challenges to the hold of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on Inter-zone IV, covering the Northern Central areas from Thanh Hóa to Quảng Bình. While Trần Thị Liên (1996, p. 551) gives substantial evidence of harsh communist rule in this area in January 1953, as a People's Committee organized the marathon trial of eighty Catholic priests with court sessions that lasted from six in the evening until two the following morning, she does not refer to these specific events. Regardless of their actual threat to communist rule at the time, reference to these episodes served a different purpose in the hands of Catholic refugees seeking to shape an authentic non-communist nationalism. Starting in 1957, *Luyện Thép* insisted that the episodes were worth remembering. For they demonstrated that the Catholics of the Diocese of Vinh had been national heroes in their anti-communist resistance during the First Indochina War, and not only after the migration. The magazine devoted long articles to commemorating these rebellions (*Luyện Thép*, 16 April 1957, p. 3; 16 November 1957, p. 3; 16 January 1958, pp. 20–21; 16 March 1958, pp. 24–25) so that readers could look back on — or learn for the first time of — the heroic actions of these villages in the Nghệ Tĩnh Bình region.

The reproduction of this historical representation eventually started to bear fruit, as readers mentioned those events in the letters that they sent to the editor of *Luyện Thép*. An item published in a special edition for the 1958 Lunar New Year holiday recalled the experience of the war:

The natives of the Nghệ Tĩnh Bình supported their native son, Hồ Chí Minh, but their patriotism was betrayed when the

latter proved to be a Soviet agent, turning the countryside into ashes and tearing families apart. I remember my homeland fighting communism with bravery and leaving for the South.... I will never forget the names and faces of those revolutionary combatants, those inspiring models of patriotism coming from the Nghệ Tĩnh Bình in the past, present and future.... I will never forget those historic days when Hung Yên rebelled, when Lưu Mỹ demanded freedom, when Quỳnh Lưu rose up. (*Luyện Thép*, 16 March 1958, pp. 24–25)

Northern Catholic refugees started reproducing a narrative that emerged out of the migration.<sup>11</sup> The interpretation of the First Indochina War that they advanced not only justified their migration to the South but also served as a reminder of the communist threat that might arise in the near future. More than just a forum in which the natives of Nghệ Tĩnh Bình who now lived in southern Vietnam could engage with one another, *Luyện Thép* was a powerful medium for disseminating the meaning of their displacement. Rather than becoming anonymous residents of the Republic of Vietnam, the magazine encouraged its readers to perpetuate a sense of exile, underlining the temporary nature of their departure and reiterating their promise to return one day to the North. This pledge of revenge was an omen of the things to come — the resumption of the war. But discrediting communism, which had in their view caused all their woes, was just as important as preparing for any sort of military engagement.

### Establishing a Philosophical Opposition to Communism

Unlike those from Nghệ Tĩnh Bình, other Catholic refugees from the North produced a historical narrative directed at the rest of Vietnamese society. Rather than the personal experience of life under the communists, they emphasized theological and philosophical reasons for their opposition to communism. In contrast to many other nationalist groups, Catholics had spiritual reasons for fighting this enemy. Of all the sins and dangers of communism, atheism was the most threatening. But Catholic nationalists needed to demonstrate



that atheism was not simply a “Catholic problem”. It was, rather, a problem for all the non-communist Vietnamese whom these Catholic refugees hoped to rally behind their cause.

The attack on Vietnamese communists’ atheism was hardly new. Charles Keith (2012, pp. 201–7) shows that many Vietnamese Catholics in the late 1920s took an increasingly anti-communist stance, almost a decade before the Pope himself issued the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* of 19 March 1937 condemning the atheist threat of international communism. What proved new from 1955 onward was the Catholic refugees’ claim that their interpretation of the Cold War could provide a solution to the fate of the Vietnamese nation. To support this claim, they associated the history of the nation with their fight against atheism.

Ignoring many Catholics’ continuing alliance with or neutral view of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, books or manuals to advance this line produced for refugees insisted on the total opposition of Catholicism to communism. A widely distributed manual, entitled *Công giáo và Cộng Sản* (Catholics and communists) (Nguyễn Văn Căn 1956), attempted to explain the reasons for this deep antagonism. Originally published in 1953 in Paris with the purpose of asserting the incompatibility of all religions with communism (ibid., p. 3), the book exemplified the growing hostility of many Vietnamese Christians towards communism. Its lay Catholic author, Nguyễn Văn Căn, singled out Marx’s and Engels’s doctrine for its materialist interpretation of human societies and its atheistic orientation. According to him, this *Weltanschauung* consisted of a total negation of the spirituality of all human beings. Hence, it represented the polar opposite of any form of religion. Any collaboration with those advocating these doctrines would lead, sooner or later, to the ultimate downfall of spirituality (ibid., pp. 22–23). Spiritual and philosophical concerns thus formed, Nguyễn Văn Căn argued, core reasons for opposing communism.

The author of *Công giáo và Cộng Sản* insisted that there was a reason for publishing his manual again in 1956 in a second, augmented, edition. He intended this new edition for all those

Vietnamese who either had some sympathy for the communist regime or did not understand the meaning of the migration southward (ibid., p. 7). He thus implied that the antagonism between Catholics and communism characterized the plight of all refugees from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, that everyone in Vietnam, Catholic or not, shared that plight. For Nguyễn Văn Cẩn, the complete incompatibility between Catholicism and communism served as a trope for the wider battle between communism and anti-communism and for the salvation of Vietnam. He urged readers to understand that it was “communists who betrayed the nationalist struggle ... thus explaining the migration of a million refugees” (ibid., p. 37). This narrative rested on three important simplifying distortions of the complex reality of the First Indochina War: communists were traitors, Catholics were nationalists, and all those among the one million individuals who had moved to the South were thus Catholic nationalists. To Nguyễn Văn Cẩn, the plight of Catholic refugees was the plight of all the migrants, and it, in turn, also embodied the wider nationalist struggle against colonial rule.

In order to elaborate this history of Catholic resistance against communism, the book listed all the clergymen who had been abducted, imprisoned, tortured or executed in every diocese north of the seventeenth parallel during the First Indochina War. The conflict thus appeared a war against atheist aggression, rather than a war of decolonization. Out of thirty-nine abducted and eighty-nine imprisoned or tortured priests, most of the fatalities had occurred in the Dioceses of Lạng Sơn and Bùi Chu, and most abductions or cases of imprisonment in those of Thanh Hóa and Vinh (ibid., pp. 19–21). Not surprisingly, the events in question happened mostly in locales in which the Democratic Republic of Vietnam first implemented rectifications, the Maoist technique for political indoctrination, and land reform. The republished *Công giáo và Cộng Sản* aimed not only to pay tribute to those who had endured imprisonment or execution but also to offer a new historical account of the resistance against communism during and after the First Indochina War. It relegated decolonization to the status of a thing of the past in a reinterpretation

of the conflict that suggested that all that mattered in the future was Vietnamese Catholics' commitment to fight communism.

The French missionary priest Fernand Parrel, who proved instrumental in the creation of the Personalist doctrine advocated by Ngô Đình Nhu and his brother Ngô Đình Diệm (Keith 2012, p. 239; Miller 2013, p. 44), also warned Catholic believers of the dangers of communism in a book entitled *Để giúp người công giáo giải đáp những vấn nạn Cộng Sản về tôn giáo* (To help Catholics react against the communist threat to religion) in 1955 (Parrel 1955). On one level, as a response to a book published in the Soviet Union on the antagonism between religion and communism, the book went well beyond all allegations of an opposition to patriotism with which communists often saddled Christianity there. It had implications for Indochina and other parts of the world that also faced communist expansion.

Over sixty pages, Father Parrel's essay underlined the commonalities and the differences between the two doctrines. Both interpreted life as a struggle and aimed for the liberation of human beings from oppression (Parrel 1955, pp. 8–10, 28–29, 34–36). However, the differences between the two were immense and actually positioned Catholics and communists in a totally antagonistic relationship. "Catholicism cannot live alongside communism as the latter is based on materialism and atheism" (ibid., p. 3), he wrote. They were polar opposites. His book underscored many other differences between them. Individuals, whose spirituality achieved fulfilment in Christianity, were drowned within the greater good of society under communist rule (ibid., pp. 14, 38), and the Catholic ecumenical spirit also contrasted with communism's rigid division of human societies into social classes opposed to one another (ibid., p. 31).

Highlighting the potential danger of communist expansion, Parrel insisted that the threat was global and not one only targeting Christians. The party had totalitarian ambitions, since "not only does the party reign supreme, but none can disobey" (ibid., p. 30). Its authoritarian rule relied on surveillance, denunciation and repression (ibid., p. 32). Comparing communist regimes to the Third Reich,

he sought to persuade readers, mainly Vietnamese Catholics, that the danger that these regimes presented was as grave, if not graver, than that of fascism during the Second World War.

Despite the global threat that communism posed, Father Parrel argued that its expansion targeted Vietnam in particular. He stressed the role of communists in the First Indochina War. Among all the antinomic differences between Catholicism and communism, the first one that he highlighted after reaffirming Christian opposition to communist materialism and atheism (*ibid.*, p. 3) was the low value that it attached to human life. Communists' materialistic view of human beings was most obvious in their sending soldiers to slaughter during the conflict.

To anyone who is truly communist, there is no notion of good or evil, the only concern is to know whether [something] helps the doctrine success [sic] or not.... In contrast, Catholic morale not only forbids killing because it is evil, as the fifth commandment has taught, but does not authorize killing even though this would bring good. (*ibid.*, pp. 5–7)

Thus, in the eyes of the missionary, communists had no morality, to the point that they could turn into cold-blooded murderers. Parrel stressed this idea further in claiming, “communists have no problem sacrificing lives, as we saw in Korea and Điện Biên Phủ”, where human wave attacks compensated for the lack of modern firepower with manpower. Parrel believed that communism had revealed its true nature during the First Indochina War. Its expansion now threatened the rest of the world, but Vietnam stood at the forefront of the fight. His denunciation of communist oppression of Catholics in the Soviet Union thus allowed Parrel to warn Vietnamese Catholics of their responsibility. They must recognize the inhumane nature of communism and save their fellow Vietnamese from totalitarian rule.

Interpretations of the incompatibility between Catholicism and communism and of the resultant slaughter during the recent war discussed here implied that the present and the future of Vietnam were at stake. The media targeting Catholic refugees highlighted

the fact that their lives were tied to the future of the nation and underscored their responsibility to save Vietnam, if not the whole world, from a communist threat.

### A New Historical Vocation

The Catholic refugees' narrative did not only point towards the past. It also served as a road map towards the creation of a new anti-communist nationalism for the future, to be shared by all Vietnamese. In this respect, the concerns of both Catholics from zones controlled by the communists and Catholics engaged by a philosophical opposition to atheism, merged. Spirituality could play the role of a psychological weapon against communist expansion. Father Trần Hữu Thanh, a Redemptorist priest from Central Vietnam ordained in Hanoi in 1942, wrote a training manual on the role for spirituality that he attributed to a Personalist revolution (Trần Hữu Thanh 1955).

The Personalist doctrine, inspired by the French Catholic intellectual Emmanuel Mounier's criticism during the 1930s of both capitalist and Marxist materialism, became a great inspiration to Ngô Đình Diệm and especially his brother Ngô Đình Nhu (Miller 2004, pp. 449–50; Keith 2012, pp. 196, 239–41; Miller, 2013, pp. 43–48, 137–40). But Catholic refugees such as Father Trần Hữu Thanh also found that this doctrine provided non-communist Vietnam with useful tools in the struggle against Hanoi. Declaring that Personalism was in total opposition to communist materialism (Trần Hữu Thanh 1955, pp. 23, 29), Father Trần Hữu Thanh added that communism was amoral to the point it did not have any nation (*vô tổ quốc*) (ibid., p. 71). Personalism could form a new common denominator among non-communist Vietnamese. The defence of the person and its spirituality would serve as the ultimate rampart against communist expansion. However, the priest insisted that his argument did not imply the conversion of all non-communist Vietnamese to Catholicism. In a chapter entirely devoted to the political underpinnings of the revolution that he envisioned, he explained,

Religion is both beside and above politics. Beside, in the sense that it should not interfere with politics. Above, however, as religion provides answers to the role and the salvation of human beings, which is why politics should not detract from its role and instead provide all the material conditions for its development. (ibid., p. 82)

In this view, spirituality was much broader than the practice of religion. It was compatible with all existing faiths in Vietnam (ibid., p. 18). This intellectual weapon was supposed to bring an unprecedented national cohesion to non-communist Vietnam, one that was very different from previous opposition to Vietnamese communism. Unlike the nationalist parties born in the 1930s, such as the Đại Việt and the VNQDD, Personalism could bring all Vietnamese together, regardless of their political affiliation. Far from requiring exclusive membership, Father Trần Hữu Thanh added, “because a Personalist revolution only determines general principles, people have the freedom to choose the means to realize this vision” (ibid., p. 82). At least in theory, as long as one opposed communism and respected the spirituality of human beings, political affiliation would not pose any problem.

Despite the dispersion of the migrants, the 1954 partition generated a narrative centred on the denunciation of the ceasefire, a reinterpretation of the First Indochina War and the promise of a fresh start for Vietnamese nationalists. In practice, however, this vision for a universal bond among non-communist nationalists translated into very different initiatives. Not all Catholics agreed on the role of faith in the nationalist struggle. While the clergy never encouraged a holy war or the forced conversion of all Vietnamese to Christianity, some Catholic refugees believed their new beginning was also one for the Vietnamese Church. Colonel Trần Văn Minh, commander of the First Military Region of the State of Vietnam, clearly interpreted war against communism as a holy fight. At Christmas 1954, he addressed his soldiers with a strong reference to Christianity:

Like you, as we celebrate the time that the Messiah came, I think of all the soldiers who fell to protect freedom, God’s religion.

I think of all the Lord's sheep in the national army of Vietnam following the path of God. I think of all the soldiers of God on the other side of the seventeenth parallel who struggle for the salvation of both their person and religion against the communist yoke. (SHD/10H/4215)

Others, however, did not associate their religion with the prospect of actual military confrontation. Like Father Trần Hữu Thanh, they saw in Catholicism a weapon to be used in the psychological war against communism. That struggle had not stopped with the Geneva agreements. In contrast to Father Trần Hữu Thanh's open-mindedness towards other faiths, some Catholic refugees considered the struggle a perfect opportunity for Catholicism to grow more important in Vietnam. *Luyện Thép* exhorted its readers to understand the historic mission that Catholic refugees incarnated. They could play a role in the spread of the word. Just as the Christian faith had developed in ancient Rome despite persecution, so too would Catholicism progress in Vietnam. As one believer writing in that biweekly magazine put it, "Christianity lies at a turning point in Vietnam's history, as it did in Rome's history, in creating a new generation of men. Similarly, the migration of the Vietnamese people over the last few years is linked to the Vietnamese Church's history of evangelisation" (*Luyện Thép*, 30 October 1958, pp. 8–9).

Proselytization would serve God's glory. But the historical role of Catholic refugees could also lie in the struggle against communist expansion and thus serve the salvation of the Vietnamese nation. Proselytization had a very pragmatic purpose in the current political circumstances. *Đường Sống* insisted that spreading Catholic faith could serve as the ultimate remedy against communism.

To denounce communism, one shall not point to isolated individuals, as it may lead to personal vendetta. Instead, one should strive for the complete elimination of communism.... [C]ommunism has weaknesses that one should exploit. For example, there cannot be any communism with religion; that is why the most effective way to prevent communist expansion would be to spread the influence of religion. (*Đường Sống*, 14 July 1956, pp. 1, 4)

According to an article in *Luyện Thép*, Catholic refugees had major responsibilities in giving non-communist Vietnam new hope. More than anyone else, they must spread the faith precisely because they had survived both communist rule and the migration south.

In the ongoing bloody conflict, God has saved many of us from a certain death, but he has also vested us with a mission.... Those who have left feel lighter because they fled [the] communist yoke; but they should not forget one thing. A great threat, similar to the previous world war, hides under the mask of communism and the flight of Vietnamese Catholics must serve as a warning or more precisely, as a remedy that the Lord is giving....

One reason suffices in order to explain why refugees must evangelise with greater energy: The Devil's most violent and most active servant today is communism, which follows us and infiltrates our communities to cast sorrow on each individual as well as humanity as a whole.

For ten years, we have fought to death this enemy.... We have an experience that we should use as a remedy inherited from father to son. (*Luyện Thép*, 30 October 1958, pp. 8–9)

As Christians, Catholic refugees were supposed to spread the love of God in their immediate surroundings. But their migration pushed them to believe that they had the key to saving all of Vietnam and, perhaps, humanity in its entirety. While all of them — let alone other Christians from the North or from the South — did not share entirely the same ideas about the role of religion, Catholic refugees nevertheless tended to believe they were vested with a manifest destiny.

### Seeking International Recognition

As time passed, the refugees' narrative of the past, present and future course of events linking their personal fates to the birth of a new Vietnamese nation became increasingly difficult to sustain. They found themselves dispersed all across southern Vietnam and a March to the North never seemed to be realized. But they defended their nationalist commitment to reuniting Vietnam, as they remained



convinced that Vietnamese Christianity lay at the intersection of two historical developments: decolonization and the war against communism. Refugees sought international recognition for this unique and unprecedented role.

Maintaining a refugee identity was particularly difficult. Ngô Đình Diệm did nothing to reunite the country or allow the refugees to remain united in the South. Nor did the Vatican, which introduced several measures undercutting Catholic refugees' self-representation as a distinct diocese from the North. The Holy See's reforms did not explicitly target the refugees' political activism. Rather, they paved the way for the creation of a Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy, organized in three religious provinces — Hanoi, Huế and Saigon — through the papal bull *Venerabilium Nostrorum* of 24 November 1960 (Trần Anh Dũng 1996, pp. 139–44). This bull entirely removed that hierarchy from the intermediate authority of Western missionaries. Although this act marked the success of decades of activism on the part of the Vietnamese clergy, Catholic refugees proved extremely reluctant to integrate themselves into the southern dioceses. They wanted to maintain their northern origins and, with them, a source of legitimacy for claiming to defend one united Vietnam.

The tendency of many Vietnamese Catholics to ignore or drag their feet in implementing the Vatican's instructions was not new. Pierro Gheddo (1970, p. 70) and Peter Hansen (2008, p. 123) show that the clergy migrated to the South in greater proportions in comparison with lay Catholics despite the Vatican's call urging the clergy to remain with their parishioners in the North.<sup>12</sup> Even before the migration, too, the Vatican had strongly criticized the role of clergy in Phát Diệm in commanding self-defence militias during the First Indochina War. As a consequence, Father Hoàng Quỳnh, commander-in-chief of those militias, resigned his military position but eventually returned to this function for lack of a suitable replacement (SHD/10H/1039).

In August 1956, just a month after the referendum to reunify Vietnam should have taken place, Cardinal Giuseppe Caprio of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of the Peoples in the Vatican

sent a letter to the Vietnamese bishops requiring the integration of all the migrant missionaries, either European or Vietnamese, into the southern hierarchy. He insisted, “it is time to *normalise* the situation of the Catholic refugees with regard to canon law, as well as that of priests and believers with regard to the diocese where they live” (*Đường Sống*, 25 August 1956, p. 1; *Sao Việt*, October 1956, p. 352). In October 1961, following the creation of the three Vietnamese religious provinces, new instructions coming from the Vatican affected all migrant clergy and not just missionaries. The Holy See required all of them, either in South Vietnam or abroad, to integrate themselves into dioceses below the seventeenth parallel (*Ban thông tin đại phận Sài Gòn* [Information bulletin of the Diocese of Saigon], January 1962, p. 10). That there was resistance to these instructions is clear in the need for the episcopal conference of Vietnam to repeat them four months later (*Ban thông tin địa phận Sài Gòn*, May 1962, p. 19). Only in May 1962 did the episcopacy successfully abrogate the status of the father superior of each migrant diocese (*địa phận di cư*), ending the migratory status of a large part of Vietnamese Christianity and discouraging self-identification to dioceses in exile (*Ban thông tin địa phận Sài Gòn*, June 1962, p. 4). The migrant clergy integrated themselves into the local hierarchy when they received formal instructions from Rome to do so, but they did so only reluctantly.

This is why the widespread idea that Vietnamese Catholics worked hand in glove with the Vatican during the Cold War does not stand up to careful scrutiny. While the clergy dragged their feet in integrating themselves into southern dioceses, some lay Catholics openly criticized Rome’s decisions. Tensions ran high when, in 1960, the Vatican closed all the seminaries run by Catholic refugees and centralized ecclesiastical education in two centres traditionally controlled by French priests. Refugee seminars that had stressed a strong parallel between the spiritual and political implications of Catholicism could no longer train priests.

This attempt to disempower the refugee clergy did not go unnoticed. An article in the newspaper *Ngôn Luận* (The opinion),

a newspaper in Saigon founded by Hồ Anh, a refugee journalist, immediately criticized this step. A French intelligence report summarized the article:

This decision goes against all the hopes that the Vatican had inspired until now among Vietnamese Catholics. Benedict XV's encyclical "Maximum Illud" gave birth to the idea that native priests should be in charge of the evangelisation of their own country's population. H.H. John XXIII's encyclical of 28 November 1959 recognized that "the ultimate goal of evangelisation was to create a national church in all countries and to entrust the native clergy with its administration"....

This latter decision has significant consequences with regards to the Vietnamese people. All Vietnamese, Catholic or not, are well aware that the Vatican has recently elected seven new cardinals, including a Japanese, a Filipino and even a South African priest. However, not only does Vietnam not have a cardinal, but all its clergy are considered to be useless. In the meanwhile, Vietnamese Catholics, the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese people prove that their free land is one of the front-line strongholds in the defence of faith and that it faces communism in the world's most crucial spot: Southeast Asia. (SHD/10T/963, pp. 43–44)

The criticism in the article highlighted the contradiction between the Vatican's support for the creation of national churches and the function that Catholicism seemed to have for its author. Christianity in Vietnam was a major protagonist in two historical developments: decolonization and the war against communism. For the author, the Vatican's position disavowed the progress of the Vietnamese Church in both of these fields. It did not do justice to the role of Vietnamese Catholics in the struggle against both French colonialism and the expansion of international communism. Despite the hierarchical nature of Catholic institutions, Catholic refugees did not fear criticizing Rome's decisions. They thought that they perfectly embodied Rome's policy of encouraging the development of national churches and therefore could not understand why this achievement would remain unsanctioned, without the nomination of a Vietnamese cardinal. In their view, Catholic refugees' vanguard role in the international

struggle against communism merited them worldwide recognition, not the status of a church in exile. A genuine proclivity for rebellion did not motivate this selective and sometimes critical interpretation of the Holy See's directions. According to these Vietnamese Catholics, the corollary of a national church in the particular context of Vietnam's struggle for independence required both political and military involvement in the fight against communism.

Catholic refugees turned to the international community, convinced that the Western democratic states would recognize their historical role in the fight against communism. They were well aware of the sudden interest that international public opinion had shown in them since the time of their migration. An article in *Luyện Thép* proudly declared,

The world's public opinion was profoundly distressed by the dark fate of the Vietnamese people and was pleased to see the success of Free Vietnam as a guarantee of its resistance against communist expansion in Southeast Asia. As a token of its recognition, more than forty countries have established diplomatic relationships with the Republic of Vietnam in order to foster economic and cultural exchange. (*Luyện Thép*, 15 September 1957, p. 1)

Vietnam was thus not just any Third World country. It stood as a rampart against communist expansion and deserved to be recognized as a crucial player in the worldwide struggle against communism. A refugee professor representing Vietnam at the fourth Conference for Peace and Christian Civilisation in Florence in June 1955 urged his audience to remain supportive of Vietnam's fight against communism.

The truth compels me to admit that the 600,000 Catholic refugees leaving North Vietnam have not just left their homes because of their fate, because of the Christ and for their love of freedom.... We are not all guilty, but we are all responsible.... For too long, Europe and America have not placed enough confidence in the role and the mission of the Asian and African people.... I implore you to do everything you can so that Vietnamese can tomorrow live as a free people, so that the future of the two million Vietnamese Catholics will not be one of tyranny and persecution. (ICRC/RR/234-223-001)

The professor underlined the nationalist desires of the refugees. Their determination to fight communism could not remain unknown. The Western world had to entrust Asian and African populations in general, and Vietnamese Catholics more specifically, with the task of leading the struggle against communism. Thus, despite their dispersal and the lack of support from Ngô Đình Diệm or the Vatican, northern Catholic refugees sought to perpetuate a discourse connecting their personal fates to both the creation of a Vietnamese nation and the international fight against communist expansion.

### Conclusion

Many Catholic refugees developed a strong political consciousness following the 1954 migration southward. Their denunciation of the Geneva agreements and their memory of the First Indochina War led them to present themselves as authentic nationalists in both combatting communism and uniting the nation. Moreover, they had also developed philosophical reasons for opposing communists' atheistic vision of human society. Although this commitment to defend spirituality against atheism translated in practice into several incoherent and possibly counterproductive initiatives, Catholic refugees nevertheless claimed with certainty that they stood at the intersection of two international and historical trends, decolonization and the fight against communism, and that their position deserved international recognition. These elements of Catholic thought in northern migrants' early years in the South suggest three important conclusions concerning the nature of the migration, Catholicism and the Indochina wars.

First, historians need to appreciate consequences of the 1954 migration beyond merely the social and economic realms. The migration encouraged the creation of a nationalist discourse that had, for Catholic migrants, strong religious undertones. Just as the First Indochina War and the Geneva ceasefire had local, national and international dimensions, so too did refugees' narratives speak in specific and distinct ways to their local counterparts, non-

migrant southern Vietnamese; to their national competitors, the communists; and to their prospective international partners, the Vatican and the West.

Second, Catholics refugees' narratives underscore the multiple dimensions of religious belonging in Vietnam during the Cold War. For some Catholic refugees, advocating faith in God referred not only to participation in a religious tradition. It also signified one's opposition to Hanoi and a pledge to create a united and non-communist Vietnam. This political commitment became even more critical after communist cadres resumed active struggle in the South in 1959.

While a few thinkers in the mid-1950s had underlined the incompatibility of communism with religious faith and while a few groups had started proselytization, the widespread insecurity of the southern countryside by 1960 further grounded Christian opposition to communism. In March 1960, the episcopal conference sent a memorandum warning all Vietnamese Catholics of the dangers of communism (Trần Anh Dũng 1996, pp. 126–32). It was the first time since 1951 that a pastoral letter explicitly addressed political matters in addition to religious ones. In that letter, the bishops denounced the deceptive appearance of peaceful coexistence and urged Catholics to take a firm position against the threat of a communist takeover. The bishops reminded readers that Marx's and Lenin's materialist position (*chủ trường duy vật*) represented the antithesis of spiritual, supernatural, metaphysical or moral thought and was "thus, against the truth in general and against Catholicism in particular" (*ibid.*, p. 126). The letter insisted that Catholics be all the more watchful for communist cadres who, according to a captured document reproduced in the letter, infiltrated into Catholic communities in order to "divide and rule" (*chia để trị*) and to "use the enemy against the enemy" (*dùng địch để diệt địch*). Not all Vietnamese bishops in the South advocated such anti-communist vigilance, and nothing suggests that Catholic laity as a whole conformed to this official commitment to resist communism.<sup>13</sup> But for the first time since 1951, Catholicism took a strong political position. For the episcopacy, being Catholic

in 1960 implied much more than simply fasting during Lent and participating in ecumenical dialogue. In the particular circumstances of a renewed communist threat, it involved a political duty as well, one that many Catholic refugees had urged everyone to fulfil ever since they migrated to the South.

A third conclusion — suggested by the development of Catholic refugees' political consciousness during the years immediately following their migration — serves to highlight a neglected aspect of the Indochina wars. The refugees' denunciation of the 1954 ceasefire and determination both to eliminate communism and to unite Vietnam offer one more indication of the need to move beyond persistent understandings of the First and Second Indochina Wars as two separate armed conflicts, each defined above all by the involvement of a foreign power. These wars were also, for Catholic refugees as for many others, a thirty-year-long civil war among Vietnamese.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Christopher Goscha and an anonymous reviewer for *SOJOURN* for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

### List of Abbreviations

**ANOM/HCI/SPCE:** Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Haut Commissariat de France en Indochine, Service de protection du Corps expéditionnaire (National Archives of Overseas Territories, French High Commissar in Indochina, Protection Service of the French Expeditionary Corps), Aix-en-Provence, France

**ICRC/M:** International Committee of the Red Cross/Matériel (material), Geneva, Switzerland

**ICRC/R–R:** International Committee of the Red Cross/Réfugiés et requérants d'asile (refugees and asylum seekers), Geneva, Switzerland

**SHD/10H:** Département terre, État Major, Archives de l'Indochine, Service historique de la défense (Army, General Staff, Archives on Indochina, Historical Service of the Defence), Vincennes, France

**SHD/10T:** Département terre, État Major, Deuxième bureau, Service historique de la défense (Army, General Staff, Military Intelligence Office, Historical Service of the Defence), Vincennes, France

**TTLT2/PThT/AN:** Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ 2, Phủ thủ tướng, An Ninh (Vietnamese Archival Centre no. 2, Archival Funds of the Prime Minister, Security), Ho Chi Minh City

**VNCH:** Việt Nam Cộng Hòa (Republic of Vietnam)

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## NOTES

1. Most of this literature see the refugees as either victims (Wiesner 1988*a*, 1988*b*; Phạm Kim Vinh 1985; Vương Kỳ Sơn 2009), lackeys of Western imperialism (Đặng Phong 2004, pp. 48, 54), opportunists serving a dictatorial regime (Lacouture and Devillers 1960, p. 299; Halberstam 1965, p. 120; Shaplen 1966, pp. 191–192; Kahin and Lewis 1967, p. 76; Trần Tâm Tinh 1968, 1978*a*, pp. 107–117, and 1978*b*) or religious fanatics blinded by CIA propaganda encouraging migration or by an archaic practice of Catholicism (Hải Trung 2004; Đặng Phong 2004, p. 54; Manhattan 1984, pp. 62–68; Cmdt Florentin 1959, p. 3). While Peter Hansen (2008, pp. 126–36, 2009*a*, pp. 182–83, and 2009*b*, pp. 129–130) has debunked these myths in his studies of the migration and resettlement, two further articles have imagined the possible link between physical dispersion and anti-communism (Nguyen Lien Hang 1995; Hardy 2004).
2. The most famous accounts come from an orthodox critique of American intervention in Vietnam, linking Catholics to colonialism and Ngô Đình Diệm (for example, Fitzgerald 1972, pp. 80–81). Vietnamese accounts reflect a pro-communist or a pro-Buddhist stance (Cao Huy Thuần 1968, pp. 17–20, and 1990, p. 3; Thích Nhất Hạnh 1967, p. 14).
3. Studies of Christian communities in Vietnam from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries highlight the fact that their introduction to Vietnam cannot be reduced to their relationship to Vietnamese authorities (Forest 1998; Cooke 2004, pp. 261–62, and 2008, p. 387; Dutton 2006, pp. 175–96; Launay 2003; Mantienne 2003, 2012; McLeod 1994; Ramsay 2004, p. 311, and 2008, pp. 45–49). For cases of Vietnamese Catholics' questioning the superiority of French missionaries during French colonial rule, see Keith (2012, pp. 88–93).



4. For a discussion of refugee resettlement as an example of an American nation-building initiative, see Jacobs (2005, pp. 187–89, and 2006, pp. 52–58) and Carter (2008, pp. 89–90). For a more nuanced discussion of refugee resettlement as an example of an ill-conceived alliance between Saigon and Washington, see Miller (2013, pp. 109–10, 165–70). For a recent discussion of American insistence on including Article 14d, allowing civilians to regroup to the zone of their choice during the Geneva conference, see Catton (2015, p. 332).
5. Several authors have emphasized the importance of a Catholic connection in the United States in backing Ngô Đình Diệm and the Catholic refugees (Jacobs 2005, p. 18, and 2006, pp. 27–31; Fisher 1997*a*, pp. 95–97, and 1997*b*, pp. 122–23), thus underlining the role of Catholics in the Republic of Vietnam. For a more nuanced analysis of Ngô Đình Diệm’s stay in the United States during the First Indochina War, see Miller (2004, pp. 441–47). Among Vietnamese accounts insisting on Catholics’ over-representation in the Republic of Vietnam, in addition to the Buddhist-oriented accounts cited above, see Trần Tâm Tinh (1978*a*, pp. 107–17), also translated from French into Vietnamese and published in Hanoi (1978*b*).
6. While Ngô Đình Diệm and the refugees shared a strong commitment to opposing communism, a closer look at their relationship suggests that they disagreed on how to fight it and reunite the country (Nguyen Phi Vân 2015, chaps. 5–6).
7. The term “March to the North” (Bắc tiến) resonates with the “March to the South” (Nam tiến) during which the dynasties of the Đại Việt from the eleventh to the nineteenth century expanded their territory and took over Cham lands and lands of the Khmer empire.
8. The battle of Cao Bằng in October 1950 marked the first large military victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam over the French and freed the passage for Chinese material support, which had started in May (Goscha 2011, pp. 82–83).
9. It is important to note that Catholic refugees’ narratives showed a determination to root their nationalist commitment to the August Revolution. But none referred to the early years of the Việt Minh, after 1941, when Hồ Chí Minh had called for a general resistance against fascism.
10. The term Việt Cộng is a derogatory form for Vietnamese Communist (Việt Nam Cộng Sản) that must have existed since the 1930s in the wake of a confrontation between Vietnamese Communists and Vietnamese Nationalists, both in Southern China and in the prison on Poulo Condore (Goscha 2011, p. 484).
11. Even forty years later, Father Trương Bá Cần — one of the very few refugees from Nghệ Tĩnh Bình to join the communist side and the man who ran the only Catholic periodical authorized in Vietnam after 1975

- wrote the history of the Diocese of Vinh during the Indochina wars using articles from *Luyện Thép* without discussing the paper's political agenda (Truong Bá Cấn 1996).
12. Between 11 and 72 per cent depending on the diocese (Hansen 2008, p. 119).
  13. As the country's leading anti-communist, Monsignor Ngô Đình Thục, the president's brother, signed the letter first. In contrast, the last signature was that of Monsignor Nguyễn Văn Bình, a southern bishop known for being a dove. The two men nevertheless conveyed the same idea to all Catholic believers in the South: communism was on the move again.

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