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# The Twin Tyrannies

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### 4. A Recall to Arms

The last French soldiers left Saigon on April 28, 1956. To the dismay of Hanoi, the principal Western signatory to the Geneva Accords thus washed its hands of Indochina, specifically of any responsibility to promote elections. The revival of warfare in the South thereafter was not, at the outset, prompted by a policy decision in Hanoi but resulted instead from spontaneous anger among local opponents of the Diem regime. A peasant told American researcher James Trullinger that he and his village attributed the communists' temporary dormancy to cunning—a calculation that if Hanoi waited until Southerners had experienced a few years of Diem, they would be ripe for revolution. Southern fighters began to launch attacks on government troops and installations without authorization from any higher authority.

The first communist call to arms was an impassioned December 1956 missive to the Northern politburo from Le Duan, still presiding over COSVN in the Mekong Delta. He described the persecution of comrades, the snuffing out of Party cells, the tightening military grip of Saigon, especially in the Central Highlands. In response, Hanoi reluctantly agreed that Southern fighters should be authorized to shoot in self-defense. It also endorsed some assassinations of “reactionary traitors” and terror bombings of “Diem institutions.” A small contingent of intelligence officers and elite sappers—what Westerners would call commandos—was dispatched southward. Thereafter, in the course of 1957, Southern communists claimed that 452 South Vietnamese government appointees, mostly village chiefs, were killed, kidnapped, or suborned. Terrorism resumed: seventeen people died in an attack on a bar in Chau Doc on July 17; thirteen were wounded in a Saigon café on October 10; thirteen American servicemen were injured by three other bombings in the capital.

**The next important development was the recall of Le Duan to the North.** In the summer of 1957 when he reached Hanoi with a comrade, for a time the two were held in a guesthouse under guard. This was a precaution presumably rooted in the power struggle then taking place, precipitated by the ongoing economic crisis. The new arrivals nonetheless sneaked out in the evenings to amuse themselves, finding standing room at the Hong Ha Theatre and suchlike, until guards deflated their bicycle tires to keep the visitors at home. Le Duan is alleged to have complained savagely that the politburo sought only a quiet life: “They have abandoned us.”

The longer he spent in Hanoi, the better he understood how little support for a new war would be forthcoming from either Moscow or Beijing. Yet fierce energy enabled him, during the months that followed, to shoulder past Northern rivals and become a major influence upon the politburo, supported by his close ally Le Duc Tho, whom a senior cadre characterized as “taciturn and chilly,” and who later became Henry Kissinger’s interlocutor at the 1972–73 Paris peace talks. Le Duan’s record, as a veteran who had suffered more for the revolution than almost any other comrade, conferred immense prestige. He famously said, “You can’t get anywhere reasoning with the imperialist gang; you have to take a hammer and bash their heads.” North Vietnam’s Party secretary had been sacked for his role in the shambles of land collectivization. Giap seemed the natural candidate to succeed him. Instead, however, in December 1957 it was Le Duan who got the job.

He was born Le Van Nhuan fifty years earlier in northern South Vietnam, a carpenter’s son who became a committed revolutionary long before Ho returned from exile. His force of personality was indisputable, but a coarseness of tone and language grated on more fastidious colleagues. Lacking social graces, he despised weakness, either ideological or human, which from an early stage he identified in Giap and probably also—though he would never have dared to say as much—in the aging Ho Chi Minh. His personal life remained an enigma until long after his death. Only in the twenty-first century did his second wife, former Vietminh courier Nguyen Thuy Nga, reveal her tragic story.

At Tet 1956—the Vietnamese New Year—while Le Duan was still in the South, Nga traveled outside Hanoi to visit his father, bearing gifts of honey, ginseng roots, and a few yards of Ha Dong silk. She found at his house her husband’s first wife, who collapsed in sobs on being confronted with Nga’s existence. A few months later, Party officials descended on Nga: a senior cadre, they said, could have only one wife, and in Le Duan’s case, it could not be her. As the mother of his two children she was stunned, but said she could agree to nothing until her husband himself came to Hanoi—as he did, soon afterward. He offered Nga no sympathy, merely impregnating her for a third time before handing her over to the Party’s Central Women’s Association, under whose auspices she was dispatched to China to “study.”

In her exile, Le Duan began to write Nga letters, sometimes passionate, including one which said, “I love you, I love you so much. Don’t let a few outward actions or a few unfortunate happenings give rise to any misunderstanding. My darling, love triumphs over all obstacles. If you love me, then you can solve all of your problems and difficulties.” They saw each other occasionally when he visited Beijing on state business, and once she met Ho Chi Minh. Le Duan took custody of their three children, and Nga sobbed desperately when she learned that they were thereafter to be reared by his other wife. After some years, she was granted permission to visit Vietnam briefly and see the children. She spent three days with Le Duan, who seemed “uncomfortable and unhappy,” as well he might be. In 1964 she was dispatched to the Mekong Delta to work as a propaganda cadre and did not see her children again until 1975. Here was a glimpse through a dark window of the man and the Party to which he devoted his life.

Radicalism in Hanoi was prompted by the rising conviction that peaceful reunification would not come. This precipitated the Party’s November 1958 Resolution 14, advancing the Northern revolution another dramatic step with agricultural collectivization. The following month, a large number of detainees in South Vietnam, including communists, died of food poisoning in a Diem detention camp. Early in the following year, the politburo received emotional complaints and pleas from Southern villages, such as this one obviously drafted by local cadres: “Uncle Ho! The

Americans and Diem have been wicked too much already—we ask your permission to cut off their heads.” Weeks of debate followed, at the end of which the Party Central Committee promulgated Resolution 15, an important step toward escalation. It authorized more aggressive action, in the familiar language of Party exhortations: “Only the triumph of the revolution can assuage the plight of the poor and wretched people of the South, [and] confound the evil policies of the American imperialists and their puppets who divide the nation and provoke war.”

Resolution 15 opened the way for “volunteers”—as the Chinese had earlier dubbed their troops who fought in Korea—to set forth for the war zone. During the months that followed, some 4,600 political cadres, technicians, and engineers headed into Diem’s territory, most of them Southern natives, former “regroupers.” Authorization was given to open “Strategic Route 559,” a secret path to the battlefield that ran through neutral Laos and evolved into the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Three-year military conscription had already been reintroduced. One of those who approved Resolution 15 said later that “only [in 1959] did we finally acknowledge that there would be no general elections, that Diem was massacring our people. There were signs that the US would continue to strengthen its presence [and therefore that] the only path to the unification of our country must lie through violence.”

It was significant that Hanoi was slow to inform the Russians about Resolution 15, because Le Duan and his comrades knew how unwelcome it would be. Moreover, only on May 7, 1959, was word of the new mandate passed to COSVN, communist headquarters in the South. North Vietnam’s leaders remained morbidly fearful of provoking the Americans, perhaps even causing them to strike at their own land. The ideological divide between Russia and China was deepening apace and this was reflected by rival factions in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh and Giap leaned toward Moscow; Le Duan led those who inclined toward Beijing.

At the time of Mao Zedong’s catastrophic industrialization program, the Great Leap Forward, which cost the lives of at least fifty-five million of his own people, Le Duan may have been responsible for Hanoi’s inopportune expression of national ambition: “The China of today is the Vietnam of tomorrow.” Meanwhile he and his comrades still struggled to suppress domestic dissent. Catholics staged demonstrations at which they demanded a right to migrate South. Chants of “down with communism” prompted troops to open fire, inflicting casualties. Economic woes obliged Hanoi to slash defense spending, from 27 percent of the national budget in 1955 to 19.2 percent in 1958, and 16 percent in 1960. Factories languished, and falling agricultural production prompted a cut in the rice ration. The Czech ambassador reported home that much Soviet bloc aid was being wasted. In June 1959 the British consul in Hanoi reported that “the standard of living is sinking into ever shabbier and drabber uniformity. Even the poor are poorer. . . . No member of the Western community has ever met a Vietnamese who was in favor of the regime, except the members of the regime itself.”

In a mirror reflection of Diem’s advancement of loyalists at the expense of honest men, Hanoi promoted war veterans and ideological purists rather than its brightest and best. A French diplomatic observer reported that nine-tenths of the North’s population was “ready for an uprising if it had the means.” Yet Le Duc Tho, as head of Party organization, chose this moment to demand fresh purges of “undesirables,” meaning former landlords and “rich” peasants. In its preoccupation with ideological rectitude, the North Vietnamese politburo behaved more like Bolsheviks of forty years earlier than mid-twentieth-century socialists. A new Party statute, denouncing dissenters, was enforced by the Ministry of Public Security, whose chief, Tran Quoc

Hoan, became known to his critics as the Beria of Vietnam, a nod to Stalin's most notorious enforcer.

Meanwhile in the South, during the months following promulgation of Resolution 15, revolutionaries continued to kill government officials and launched a new round of attacks on the South Vietnamese Army, hereafter known by the acronym conferred by its US trainers: the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). A young Vietnamese told an American interviewer, "I hated the soldiers . . . because they were very haughty. The villagers were already very poor, and yet the soldiers commanded them to build roads and bridges. . . . The soldiers carried weapons to protect [Diem] and his regime." Symbols of American nation-building became favored targets. For instance, in the spring of 1959 near the Cambodian border, black-clad attackers blew up two John Deere tractors.

Many young country people, trapped in a relentless cycle of agricultural toil under the petty tyranny of local officials, discovered a romance in revolution. An eighteen-year-old told how an old man who had fought against the French exhorted the teenager to take up arms in his turn. "I got excited when he told me about Vietnamese heroes. He told me that Diem had asked the Americans to . . . help in their plot to put South Vietnam under their rule. He urged me . . . to perform the duty of a young patriot in fighting for the independence of the country to bring back happiness and prosperity." During the weeks of military training that followed, fifteen peasants in his group deserted, demoralized and homesick. He, however, stuck it out: "I only saw the glory and didn't think of the hardships."

In the course of 1959, Vietcong attacks grew steadily in intensity. On the evening of July 8, American advisers with the Southern 7th Infantry Division near Bien Hoa were watching the opening credits roll at a screening of *The Tattered Dress*, starring Jeanne Crain, when six VC launched a gun and grenade attack in which thirty-eight-year-old Maj. Dail Ruis and MSG Chester Overnand, forty-four, were killed. These were the first Americans to die at communist hands in what became known as the Second Indochina War. The tempo of guerrilla attacks increased nationwide: in early morning darkness one day in December, a VC platoon stopped a bus on Highway 4 in the Delta. They ejected the passengers, clambered in with their weapons and forced the driver to take them to a government fortified post. They arrived at dawn, to find the gates opened to allow soldiers to visit the market. When the attackers stormed in, a policeman and several defenders were quickly shot down; the rest of the garrison surrendered. The guerrillas collected weapons and wrecked the post before disappearing into the jungle with the village chief, whom they killed.

The VC objective was to show an ability to strike at will. A cadre proclaimed exultantly, "The Tiger has awakened!" Villagers found themselves obliged to make ever more perilous calculations about the local balance of power, in which a misjudgment cost, at best, all that they owned; at worst, their lives. Almost all paid secret taxes to the communists, whose imaginative propaganda much exaggerated their reach and power. Cadres cited proverbs beloved of Vietnamese, such as "Better the head of a rat than the tail of an elephant" and "No matter how hard you try to shed your horns, you will always remain a water buffalo." They staged rallies that sometimes mustered a thousand peasants, under varying degrees of compulsion, accompanied by a cacophony of gongs, megaphones, and "wooden fish"—the clackers of temple bells. Government flags were torn down and tree trunks plastered with posters and slogans. Reports were spread about the VC's supposedly mystical powers: their magic rice cookers, inflatable boats carried in knapsacks, "sky horses," and guns that could kill fifty men with one shot.

Credulous peasants embraced such fairy tales. Guerrillas sometimes paraded through villages in daylight, merely to show that they could.

Some of the many murder victims of 1960 were tried and dispatched with machetes in front of village crowds, just as in the Vietminh era. One woman was hacked to death because she had two sons in the ARVN. A man being buried alive shrieked repeatedly, “I’m going to die! I’m going to die!” before his cries faded beneath a rising mound of earth. Another was killed merely because he drank with the local policeman. For every peasant who backed the communists out of belief, two did so from fear. Yet real support also existed, partly because the revolution offered the poor a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves: it conferred pride on humble folk. Prudence was a factor, too—a growing belief that the communists represented the future, Diem the past.

By the beginning of 1960, it was claimed that VC armed propaganda units had killed 1,700 government officials, village chiefs, teachers, and hospital workers, and to have seized another 2,000. Uprisings took place in the Central Highlands. Diem’s troops fought back, recapturing lost ground. Under the terms of a draconian new treason law, thousands of dissidents and members of religious minorities were rounded up, along with communist suspects. The guillotine was reintroduced as the preferred tool of government executioners.

Many Vietcong were frustrated by the refusal of COSVN—and ultimately, of Hanoi—to authorize escalation to full-scale open warfare. Local cadres made renewed appeals for weapons to resist Saigon’s “cruel terrorism.” Without the stimulus of action, many men found intolerable the boredom and privations of a covert existence. A fighter with a unit based in the Mekong Delta spoke later of the awesome, sinister silence of the wilderness, broken only by its wild creatures: “Because of the jungle vastness, the polluted waters and malaria, it was sad all the time.” A company commander exploded before senior officers, pounding his chest and saying, “I’d rather die than live like this! Let’s start the armed struggle!”

At last, in September 1960, COSVN gave the order that its supporters had waited so long to receive: there were to be coordinated uprisings against government forces. Thereafter, the revolution’s territories expanded with remarkable speed. One-third of South Vietnam’s population, an estimated six million people, were soon estimated to be living under open or secret communist control. Cadres embarked upon energetic land redistribution. Guerrilla activity increased steeply, especially in the Delta, where insurgents exploited local people’s intimate knowledge of river and tide conditions. Ambushes were set on bends of streams and canals; underwater mines were buoyed with driftwood and wired to electrical detonators ashore. While North Vietnam was now a fiercely disciplined, regulated society, in response to terrorism the South became an oppressively militarized one. Nine-tenths of US aid was spent not on economic or agricultural development, but instead on arms to sustain the regime. The American advisory group focused on creating a conventional army, capable of resisting an invasion from the North such as South Korea had faced. Meanwhile, in one province of six hundred thousand inhabitants there were six hundred police, nine Civil Guard companies, and twenty-four militia platoons manning thirty fortified posts and guarding 115 villages. Yet still the communist tide rose.

In 1960 Cold War tensions increased throughout the world. In April the South Korean dictatorship of Syngman Rhee collapsed, prompting exultation in Hanoi, with hopes that this was the precursor of a similar fate awaiting Diem. A week later, the Russian shoot-down of an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft blew apart East-West détente. The Sino-Soviet split was



ever more visibly reflected in North Vietnam's politics, with Ho Chi Minh making a vain attempt to mediate. Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and their pro-Chinese faction achieved dominance in the politburo. For Hanoi, the political imperative to support the Vietcong's armed struggle had become irresistible. The only issue was how much aid should be provided, how quickly: Le Duan faced the prospect of supporting the war that he wanted almost entirely from his own country's resources.

Meanwhile in Saigon, on April 26, 1960, eighteen prominent anticommunist South Vietnamese met at a well-known hotel, after which they issued the **Caravelle Manifesto**, signed by "a group of patriots," calling on the government to change course. Later that year, US ambassador Elbridge Durbrow submitted a memo to Diem that itemized reforms Washington considered essential: publication of government decisions and budgets, scrutiny of all branches by elected representatives, liberalization of press laws and improved relations with the foreign media, radio "fireside chats" with the peasantry, and more generous credit for farmers. These were all sensible, perhaps indispensable measures for a functioning democracy, but they were wholly unacceptable to Diem. Just as he ignored the Caravelle Manifesto, so he received this shopping list as a manifestation of American condescension. He might also have responded to Durbrow by asking how much of his liberal wish list was fulfilled by the Northern politburo.

The US remained overwhelmingly preoccupied with the armed struggle. Washington responded to the Vietcong upsurge by dispatching several hundred additional military advisers, raising the total number from 342 to 692, in breach of the limit on such personnel set by the Geneva Accords. Their commanders, notably including Gen. Sam Williams of the Military Aid and Assistance Group, viewed the guerrillas solely as a security problem, to be addressed from the business end of a gun.

At the end of 1960, the communists formally rebranded the Southern resistance movement as the National Liberation Front (NLF). It is important to note that, though all its leaders were communists, it sought to project itself as a nationalist coalition. Here, incoming US president John F. Kennedy would be told, was a political force that constituted an unacceptable threat to freedom and democracy in Southeast Asia. The avowed objectives of the NLF were to bring social unity to the South, overthrow Diem, evict the Americans, impose land redistribution, and unify the country by negotiation. This prospectus admitted nothing of Le Duan's unswerving intention to create a Stalinist society.

In the years that followed the Geneva Accords, it was the misfortune of both Vietnams to fall into the hands of cruel and incompetent governments. Had Southern peasants known the plight of their Northern brethren, they might have thought less harshly of their own: at least few of Diem's people went hungry. His American sponsors entirely misjudged the attitudes of Moscow and Beijing, supposing their leaderships guilty of fomenting the rising insurgency. Instead, until 1959 resistance to the Saigon regime was spontaneous and locally generated. For some time thereafter, it received only North Vietnamese rather than foreign support.

**Le Duan was the principal personality driving renewal of the unification struggle: it is hard to exaggerate his personal role in what followed.** As for his politburo comrades, it seems legitimate to speculate that some favored war in the South as a means of escaping acknowledgment of the failure of their policies at home and instilling a new sense of purpose in Ho Chi Minh's threadbare people. It was their good fortune that the "imperialist" foe, indispensable to such a

regime as their own, had harnessed its fortunes to Ngo Dinh Diem, a dead donkey if ever there was one. The war that now gained momentum was one that neither side deserved to win.