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Autopsy of a Massacre
On a Political Purge in the Early Days of the Indochina War (Nam Bo 1947)

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Abstract

This paper examines the history of an unknown "mass murder" perpetrated in 1947 in Southern Vietnam by the Viet Minh forces. It was organized in the outskirts of Saigon, mainly against Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious forces that were portrayed as "reactionary" during their political revolutionary trials. Before presenting and analyzing the data of nearly 900 victims, the paper briefly presents the social, political and military conquest and context of French Cochinchina, as well as explains the political and military ambitions of the Viet Minh forces after the advent of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi on September 2, 1945. The focal point of this article is the review of the data related to the massacre and its uses, i.e. what they can reveal about the course of the massacre, its actors and victims. Finally, the paper's last section assesses the official historiography of the massacre, which has been recognized by the current regime in a 'soft' mea culpa. In conclusion, this article discusses the issue of violence in Southern Vietnam and its consequences for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in a more long term perspective.

Keywords
Cochinchina; Mekong Delta; First Indochina War; Cao Dai; Hoa Hao; Viet Minh; Political Purge; Communism; Massacre; Civilian Victims

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Your mission is not killing men, but
Enemies. For the man is unknown.
We know that to kill is a task
But man is greater than his task
As long as the revolution has not won a sure victory
In the city of Witebsk as in other cities
We will not know what a man is.

(Heiner Muller, *Mauser*)

Introduction

In his book, Gaston Bouthoul engaged in an analysis of what he termed the 'war phenomenon' and suggested a methodology to help understand the morphology and nature of wars under an appellation scarcely employed today, that of 'polemology'.[1] For about fifteen years now, the phenomenon of 'massacre' has been considered the subject-matter of history to be studied, deciphered and understood on its own. An increasingly precise typology of massacre is emerging.[2] These studies were developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the aim of both confronting the horror of the Nazi extermination system and preserving, for future generations, memories of the acts of violence perpetrated during the war.[3] As Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan emphasise, after a particularly slow start mass crime and genocide studies expanded rapidly during the 1990s.[4] Likewise, studies on issues of violence in the twentieth century and their relationship to the onset of modernity deserve reflection and analysis.[5]

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1) Gaston Bouthoul, *Le phénomène guerre. Méthodes de la polémologie. Morphologie des guerres. Leurs infrastructures (technique, démographique, économique)* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 2006).

2) Jacques Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, Vol. 174, No. 4 (2002), pp. 483–492.

3) David El Kenz, 'Présentation: Le massacre, objet d'histoire', in D. El Kenz (ed.), *Le massacre, objet d'histoire* (Paris, Editions Gallimard, coll. Folio histoire, 2005), pp. 7–23; and Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide. Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 3–26.

4) Gellately and Kiernan, *The Specter of Genocide*, p. 4.

5) Bernd Hüppauf (ed.), *War, Violence and the Modern Condition* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, coll. European Cultures no. 8, 1996), pp. 1–29.

The Vietnam War has its own series of massacres of the twentieth century. Through direct American involvement in South Vietnamese territory, the war provided the world with a media-hyped image of a society 'brutalised' by war. To this effect, the My Lai massacre, which took place in a village in central Vietnam, remains the most striking and undoubtedly the most studied to this day.[6] However, the lengthy conflict that plagued Vietnam for over thirty years has to some degree overshadowed colonial massacres in French-occupied Indochina, during and after the violent conquest of Vietnamese territory by the French army.[7] For the historian, it is an arduous task to place clear milestones to describe massacres perpetrated in Vietnam throughout the twentieth century without attracting controversy. Some legitimise the violence accompanying revolution as a reaction against colonial or imperialist violence. Others tend to place the onus on a fratricidal confrontation and civil war born out of extremist ideologies and foreign intervention. There is a tendency to create a hierarchy of the horrors that have been perpetrated, either to diminish their scale or, on the contrary, to call for a partial indictment.[8] This is not about creating 'moral history', of which Charles Mayer has indicated the limits, but simply about analysing data brought to light through archives recently made available for public scrutiny.

After these historiographical remarks, a number of 'mass crimes' must be seriously considered, beginning with colonial times.[9] In the mid-nineteenth century, early massacres organised by educated Vietnamese resisting Western colonialists targeted Vietnamese Catholic village settlements in the central region of the country. These people were considered traitors to their country

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6) See Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre. Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

7) Yves Benot, *Massacres coloniaux. 1944–1950: la mise au pas des colonies françaises* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, coll. Textes à l'appui/série histoire contemporaine, 1995), pp. 69–96 and 97–113 (Haiphong).

8) The comparison between the Democratic Kampuchea of the Khmer Rouge and socialist Vietnam is often made as a measure of the 'blood bath' when power was being seized from communist forces in the two countries. See the essay by Charles S. Mayer, 'Consigning the twentieth century to history: alternative narratives for the modern era', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105. No. 3 (June 2000), pp. 807–831.

9) Jacques Sémelin, quoted by David El Kenz in D. El Kenz (ed.), *Le massacre, objet d'histoire*, p. 9; and see: Jacques Sémelin, 'Analysis of a mass crime. Ethnic purification in the former Yugoslavia, 1991–1999', in Gellately and Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide*, pp. 353–370, and in particular 'A definition of mass crime', pp. 354–357.

and emperor.[10] The chronological series of massacres in Vietnam took on a new dimension with French colonisation. In order to establish its authority, the colonial government deployed large-scale military action against hostile rebel forces. Between 1858 and 1913, the 'pacification' of Vietnam gave rise to several operations that aimed to eradicate a determined resistance and independence movement, which was embodied in the Can Vuong (Aid to the King) movement until the last rebel chief (Hoang Hoa Tham) capitulated in 1913. The period that followed saw no end to either rebellions or acts of repression of a greater or lesser degree. The year 1930 in particular saw the culmination of the repression of anticolonial forces, with the aerial bombing of villages in the northern and central parts of the country following large-scale uprisings orchestrated by the National Party of Vietnam (VNQDD) in February 1930 and by the Soviets of the Nghe Tinh up to 1931.[11] Witnesses have spoken of harsh repression against Vietnamese insurgents resulting in thousands of victims.[12] The year 1940 was marked by a massive repression against the insurgency forces, represented this time by nationalists from the Army for National Restoration (Phuc Quoc Quan) and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). This repression occurred after fresh armed insurrections broke out in the North and South of the country at a time when French Indochina was opening its doors to Imperial Japan.

Extreme Violence Among the Vietnamese

The Japanese overthrow of French colonial rule on 9 March 1945 momentarily marked an interruption in the repression of anticolonial revolt. However, the onset of the August revolution and the advent of the Viet Minh at the helm of power at the close of August 1945 did not put an end to assassinations or to the massacre of civilians.[13] The object of repression shifted to forces hostile

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10) Nguyen The Anh, *Monarchie et fait colonial au Viêt-Nam (1875–1925)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 36–37. On Vietnamese Christians, see: Philippe Devillers, *Français et Annamites. Partenaires ou ennemis? 1856–1902* (Paris: Denoël, coll. Destins croisés, 1998), pp. 179–181.

11) To Nguyet Dinh, *Tan pha Co-Am* (Devastated Co-Am) (Saigon: Nxb Tan Phat, 1949), pp. 108–112.

12) In their accounts of 1931 and 1935, Louis Roubaud and Andrée Viollis describe the repression that defeated the rebels, quoted in Jean-Luc Enaudi, *Viêt-Nam! La guerre d'Indochine (1945–1954)* (Paris: le Cherche Midi éditeur, coll. 'Document', 2001), pp. 15–28 (Ch. II).

13) This brings to mind the revolutionary fury in the Quang Ngai in 1945, subsequently

to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the founder and principal leader of the Viet Minh Front. The historian Tran Huy Lieu (1901–1969), a defector from the VNQDD to the ICP in 1936 and Minister for Information and Propaganda under the Ho Chi Minh governments 1945–1946, asserted that the objective of the revolution (*doi tuong cach mang*) had to be altered during the revolutionary process initiated by the ICP between 1940 and 1945. From a battle against French and Japanese forces, it turned into a fight only against the Japanese after the putsch of March 1945, followed by an attempt in the month of August to seize power from the pro-Japanese government and from 'reactionary forces', such as the influential National Party of Great Vietnam (Dai Viet Quoc Dan Dang) in the North.[14] The assassinations of opponents, as embodied by members of non-communist nationalist parties, rapidly grew in number. The assassinations of French nationals, persons of mixed race and 'Vietnamese traitors' (*Viet gian*) were regularly and scrupulously recorded by the French High Commissioner for Indochina (FHC) from late 1945. Witness accounts and narratives all testified to the extreme violence inflicted upon victims' bodies. In order to strike fear among the people, executions were often carried out in public.[15]

After the infamous massacre of Herault City on 25 September 1945 in Saigon, Vietnam slipped into a renewed cycle of violence fuelled by a long battle for independence. The *de facto* independence bestowed upon Bao Dai by the Japanese on 11 March 1945 and consolidated after 2 September 1945 by Ho Chi Minh was denied at the end of the same month by the French authorities. 'The Gaulois do not want to utter the word "independence",' recalled Jean Rouget, a civil service administrator.[16] The return of the French military to the North was carried out in the thunder of a well-planned and

called the 'Vietnamese Saint-Barthelemy', in which several thousand Cao Dai followers were executed when ICP cadres laid siege to the province and seized power (March/August 1945). See Truong Chinh, *Ecrits 1946–1975* (Hanoi: Editions en Langues Etrangères, 1977), p. 44.

14) Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su tam muoi nam chong Phap, quyen thu hai* (2. *Viec thay doi doi tuong cach mang*) (History of Eighty Years' Struggle Against France, vol. 2) (Hanoi: Van Su Dia), pp. 206–207, p. 218.

15) These abuses were recounted by a few rare survivors and political or military reports for the French information services from September 1945 in the South and throughout 1946 in the North of the 16th Parallel. See ordered declarations from direct and indirect witnesses (CAOM, Conspol. 113).

16) Jean Rouget, *Indochine, les dernières moussons. Un regard sur les rapports France–Vietnam* (Paris: Charles Lavauzelle, 2004), pp. 11–12.

particularly violent reconquest operation, as proved by the criminal bombing of Haiphong City in November 1946, a massacre of civilians that left an estimated 6,000 dead.[17] Caught in the death throes of a prolonged civil war and of a national territory torn in two between 1955 and 1975, the Vietnamese people paid a heavy price during the war. If we take into account the 'six wars' that broke out in succession between 1945 and 1988, the final tally is particularly heavy.[18] As for the internal conflict, in North Vietnam (DRV) during the agrarian reform of the 1950s, in the South (RVN) when Hue was briefly under the control of revolutionary communist forces in 1968, and during the purge operations by the FNL forces, similar to Operation Phoenix (1967–1973), a series of massacres has endlessly punctuated the history of this war.[19] The unleashing of this violence deserves further analysis. Some feel that the root of the Vietnam War lay in colonisation and the radicalisation of political forces when faced with France's incapacity to reach out.[20] The international context and especially the revolutionary developments in Russia and Asia had an impact on emancipation from the colonial yoke, through their sheer violence. For the historian Tran Huy Lieu, the August revolution, born from the process of a 15-year struggle, was assuredly an armed uprising (*cuoc bao dong vu trang*) in which violence was justified.[21] The extreme violence among the Vietnamese still remains to be fully studied. Yet its analysis broadens a historical vision narrowly split between colonialists and colonised. It allows us to go beyond the conventional opposition of the conflict and forces us to reconsider the interactions between the parties involved.

In order to contribute to this unfolding history of Vietnamese 'massacrology', the subject of this article returns to an historical event: an unprecedented 'mass crime' perpetrated in 1947 by Viet Minh forces just outside Saigon against religious forces or forces presented as 'reactionaries'. Before the presentation and analysis of the data, however, it is necessary to review the social,

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17) See Benot, *Massacres coloniaux*, p. 101; Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics. A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772–1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), p. 17. For the bombing of Haiphong, see the instructive account by Henri Martin in Enaudi, *Viêt-Nam!*, pp. 104–105.

18) R.J. Rummel, *Statistics of Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (Charlottesville, VA: Center for National Security Law, School of Law, University of Virginia, and Newark, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

19) Some examples have been accounted for in Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, pp. 235–238 ('Vietnam war atrocities').

20) Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su tam muoi nam*, p. 216.

21) Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su tam muoi nam*, p. 215.

political and military context of the French reconquest of Cochinchina. Second, we will expound on the political and military ambitions of the Viet Minh with the advent of the DRV in Hanoi on 2 September 1945 before critically reviewing the data and their use. Subsequently, we shall attempt to analyse the data so as to understand how the massacre occurred and to reveal the various actors and victims. Finally we shall return to the official historiographical reading of this massacre.

Nam Bo: A Complex Context Marked by the French Reconquest

The situation in Nam Bo has always been among the most complex owing to the particular status of Cochinchina since 1862. For over seventy years until 1945, Cochinchina was administered by governor-admirals, and later by governor-generals of Indochina, as a French territory.[22] This territory came officially under Vietnamese control only much later, in June 1949, when the independence and unity of Vietnam under Bao Dai was officially recognised after a long process of negotiation with France initiated in 1946.[23] Interactions between the colonial power and local populations must not be underestimated. This new pioneering Vietnamese front, consolidated throughout the eighteenth century at the expense of the declining neighbouring Khmer kingdom, had always been an ethnic, social and political crossroads, a frontier zone open to the outer world, a melting pot and merchant enclave, a region abounding with new popular beliefs.

The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of two new religions deeply rooted in the Mekong Delta: Cao Dai in 1925, under the leadership of Le Van Trung, and Buddhism, renewed as Hoa Hao in 1939 with Huynh Phu So.[24] The development of these two religious forces, which rapidly gained popular favour, would eventually hamper the establishment of political parties,

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22) See Devillers, *Français et Annamites*, pp. 204–233 (Ch. 7).

23) Law of 4 June 1949 voted by French Parliament on the renunciation of France's rights on Cochinchina. See Phan Van Phi, *L'entrée d'un Etat nouvellement indépendant dans le concert des nations: l'exemple du Viêt-Nam*, University of Grenoble, Faculty of Law and Economic Science, doctoral thesis in political science, 1959.

24) See: Nguyen Van Tam, 'Caodaïsme et Hoa Hao', *Education*, 3rd year, No. 14 (January–February 1949), pp. 43–66. On the emergence of Caodaism, see: Le Anh Dung, *Lich su dao Cao Dai thoi ky tiem an, 1920–1926* (History of Cao Dai. The Beginnings of Early Cao Dai 1920–1926) (Hue: Thuan Hoa, 1996). For the Hoa Hao movement, see Pascal Bourdeaux, *Emergence et constitution de la communauté du bouddhisme Hoa Hao. Contribution à l'histoire sociale du delta du Mékong (1935–1955)*, doctoral thesis, EPHE, June 2003.

regardless of their leanings. A third force represented by the Binh Xuyen, a kind of armed brigand brotherhood, grew in strength after the Japanese occupation.

Any entity wishing to assume a political role in the southern delta had to contend with these three forces: in the best of situations allying with them or, in the worst, fighting against them. This problem marked the tumultuous relations between the French, the Viet Minh, the Vietnam of Bao Dai and later the national government of Ngo Dinh Diem from 1955 onwards. During this period, the Mekong Delta illustrated the particular features of the state's heightened fragmentation. This served to foster the emergence of these local religious and ethnic powers, thereby paving the way for numerous political battles and violence.[25] The integration of the delta into the national territory would thereafter be constantly troubled.

The historian Tran Huy Lieu stresses the fact that revolutionary developments were not uniform across the territory and that there was a significant disparity between regions, especially between the North and South.[26] In the latter, the communist movement was dismantled after the 1940 uprising and re-emerged only in 1943, while the Viet Minh movement was still far from being unified.[27] The independence movement began to accelerate only after 9 March 1945 and even then it favoured the paramilitary Avant-Garde Youths (Thanh Nien Tien Phong) headed by Dr Pham Ngoc Thach. Each of these religious movements developed between 1940 and 1945, benefiting from Japanese support and the defeat of the ICP after the failed Nam Ky insurrection. The political vacuum therefore led to the expansion of the two movements.[28]

When the French resumed their military presence in the South in September, the situation was most confused: with English forces backing them up, the French laid siege to Saigon by the end of September 1945. French prisoners were rearmed and newly landed Expeditionary Corps troops undertook the

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25) Shawn McHale, 'Understanding the fanatic mind? The Viet Minh and race hatred in the First Indochina War (1945–1954)', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 98–138.

26) Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su tam muoi nam*, pp. 213–214.

27) Tran Van Giau, 'May dac diem cua cach mang thang tam o Sai Gon—Nam Bo' (A few features of the August revolution in Saigon and the South), in Thai Nhan Hoa (chu bien), *Mua thu lich su* (Historic Autumn) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Tre, 1996), p. 21.

28) Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series no. 23, 1981), p. 48.

military reconquest of Saigon. The city was secured, although the periphery still remained under the control of a multitude of Vietnamese troops affiliated to the Viet Minh, nationalist parties or, deeper in the delta, to religious forces. Rival and non-unified Vietnamese forces formed a fragile nebula that constantly attacked French troops. Given the need for efficiency, the control of these disparate forces became a critical stake for the Vietnamese resistance. From April 1946, two potentially rival chiefs emerged: Nguyen Binh (Nguyen Phuong Thao), previously a member of the National Party (VNQDD), and Bay Vien (Le Van Vien), the main leader of the Binh Xuyen.[29] The two acted in concert during the initial phase of the resistance before going their separate ways in June 1948. The fearsome Nguyen Binh, dispatched by Ho Chi Minh in November 1945 to unify the resistance in the South, landed in Cochinchina.[30] Out of sheer necessity, he turned his attention towards the integration of the armed Cao Dai forces of Tran Quang Vinh within the Viet Minh.[31]

The Vietnamese resistance was unified under the control of the Viet Minh in 1946 and inflicted several debilitating strikes upon French military installations. Nonetheless, many forces affiliated to the Viet Minh began to break away, refusing to buckle under the leadership of ICP political commissioners or Nguyen Binh's violent methods. The French Expeditionary Corps forces now realised they had a role to play among the population in order to reconquer entire sections of the Mekong Delta, which gradually slipped away from the communist organisation. To accomplish this, a policy called 'rallying the sects' was implemented towards Cao Dai and Hoa Hao followers, as well as the important Binh Xuyen forces that had begun to withdraw from the resistance. After a period of negotiation with Tran Quang Vinh, an agreement was signed on 8 January 1947 between the armed Cao Dai forces and the French military authorities.[32] The Viet Minh reprisal did not take long. They

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29) A.M. Savani (battalion chief, chief of the 2nd office of the FTSV), *Visages et images du Sud Viêt-Nam*, (Saigon: unknown publisher, 1953), p. 130. On Nguyen Binh, see Christopher E. Goscha, 'A "popular" side of the Vietnamese army: General Nguyen Binh and war in the South', in Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (eds), *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti. Le Vietnam depuis 1945* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), pp. 325–353.

30) Tran Kim Truc, *Toi giet Nguyen Binh. Hoi ky cua tham muu truong Trung Doan 25 Binh Xuyen* (I Killed Nguyen Binh. Memoirs of the Chief of Staff of Regiment 25 Binh Xuyen) (Saigon: Dong Nai, 1972), pp. 39 and 239.

31) Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism*, p. 49.

32) *La guerre d'Indochine 1945–1954. Textes et documents français et Viêt-Minh. Vol. 2: Indochine 1947. Règlement politique ou solution militaire?* Documentation prepared by

launched an attack on the fief of Tay Ninh on 21 January, but on 29 January the Cao Dai violently counter-attacked against the Viet Minh, inflicting heavy losses on the latter.[33] In May 1947, Colonel Cluset, commander of the Western Zone, held talks with Nam Lua (Tran Van Soai), the chief of Hoa Hao armed forces.[34]

Finally, the Binh Xuyen, with an estimated strength of 2,500 well-armed fighters, were highly coveted for strategic reasons by both the nationalist chiefs and the Viet Minh executive committee in Nam Bo. The French military authorities regarded 'a full amnesty for all infractions and crimes, political and non-political' as a *sine qua non* for rallying the Binh Xuyen.[35] The Viet Minh politics in the delta must be understood against this tense climate. Caught in a quagmire, the predicament of the Viet Minh at this moment is summarised in an expression transmitted by official history, i.e. to 'lose neither population nor land' (*mat dan, mat dat*) and to try to 'save them' (*giu dan, giu dat*) by any means.[36]

The Political and Military Ambitions of the Viet Minh in West Saigon

After the revolution of August 1945, the Viet Minh never stopped trying to consolidate the power they had acquired under extraordinary circumstances in August 1945. To do so, they had to undertake a tricky political and military manoeuvre north of the 16th parallel with the non-communist revolutionaries of the VNQDD and DMH fronts. The plan was illustrated by a series of negotiations, transitory agreements and assassinations, ending with a general military offensive against underground anti-Viet Minh nationalists. In the South, the situation was far more sensitive. The Viet Minh had emerged victorious from the political manoeuvres organised in August to assume the control of the people's forces but 'their dictatorship' was con-

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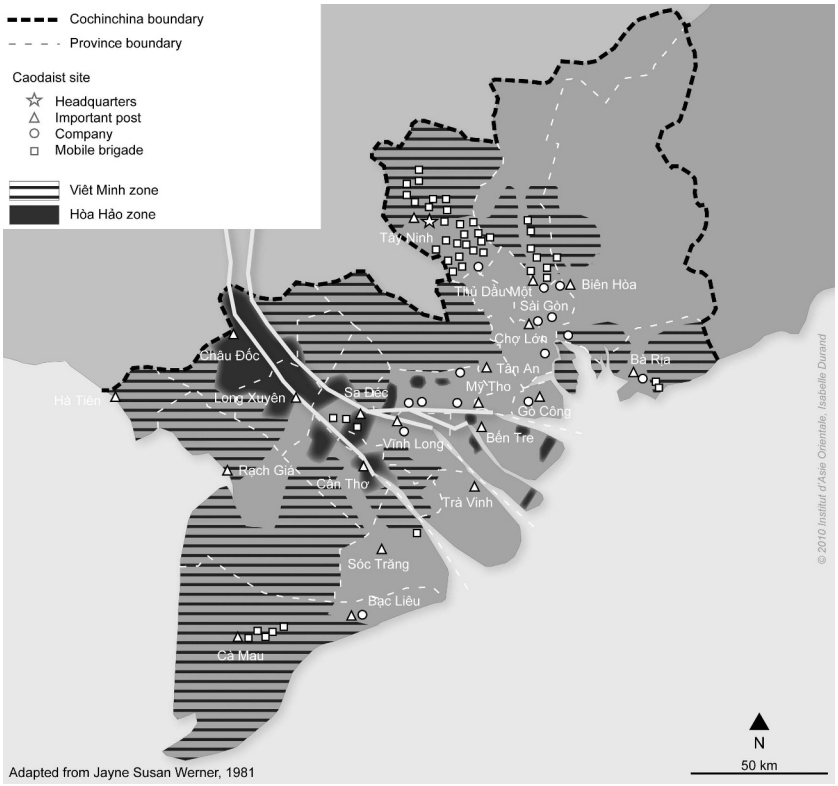
Commander Gilbert Bodinier (Vincennes: SHAT, 1989), pp. 459–462. (Hereafter cited as *Indochine 1947*.)

33) Bo Noi Vu, Tong Cuc 1, Cuc bao ve chinh tri III, *Luc luong chong phan dong. Lich su bien nien (1945–1954)* (Force against the Reaction, Chronological History) (Hanoi: Nxb Cong An Nhan Dan, 1996), p. 67.

34) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 463–466; A.M. Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao* (December 1951), p. 105 ff. (Annexe VI, 'Convention de ralliement (dite Cluzet—Nam Lua)').

35) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 469–471.

36) An expression used by Mai Chi Tho in his memoirs: Mai Chi Tho, *Hoi uc Mai Chi Tho. Tap 1: Nhung mau chuyen doi toi* (Memoirs of Mai Chi Tho. Vol. 1: Fragments of my life) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Tre, 2001), p. 130.



Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Viet Minh Zones of Influence (1952)

demned by the nationalists.[37] This fragility was acknowledged by Tran Huy Lieu, who recalled the Viet Minh's skilled political manoeuvres during this period:

> In brief, in Saigon-Cholon like in other provinces of the South (Nam Bo), the movement gained momentum only after 9 March. However, unlike the North and Centre, the Avant-Garde Youths held a predominant role here and the movement evolved into a wide front encompassing all classes of youth. If the Party [ICP] had not firmly spearheaded the movement and if the Youths of National Salvation [youth wing of the ICP] had not provided support, it would have been difficult for us to avoid a risky end, 'a double-edged sword' that could have been pointed toward the adversary as it could have been toward us. Fortunately, our Party clearly knew to exploit this weapon to its

37) SHAT, 10H 4201, ch. *Correspondances 1946*, document: Sesag no. 11.707, Saigon (18 December 1946). Source: Annamite; valeur: A/1; date 17-12-46. BR no. 11.706, *Proclamation des Partis Nationalistes du Viêt-Nam, rédigée à l'instigation des VNQDD*.

> advantage, so taking power in Saigon-Cholon and the provinces occurred without any obstacles; especially in the concluding scenario: the Viet Minh front appeared with the yellow-starred flag (red) replacing that of the Avant-Garde Youths, a yellow flag with a red star.[38]

The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious forces as well as the leaders of the nationalist parties were hoodwinked by the audacity of the ICP and hardly inclined to support a communist stranglehold over the South. The nationalist parties were critical of ICP local cadres for having seized political power from them during a massive demonstration on 25 August 1945 and for exercising terror over non-communist forces. The nationalists accused the Viet Minh of not honouring the agreement on three points of consensus with respect to the united front.[39] As everyone claimed membership of the Viet Minh, the issue bore upon anti-French leadership and the creation of the Nam Bo Committee. The domination by the ICP over the Nam Bo Committee and the sheer disregard for basic democratic procedure scandalised nationalist leaders. The spiritual leader of the Hoa Hao, Huynh Phu So, stood as an open and direct opponent to Tran Van Giau, the communist leader and key organiser of the 25 August demonstration in Saigon.[40] Relations between the two men were tense.[41] Indeed, the arrest of 35 Hoa Hao followers, including the secretary of Huynh Phu So just after the Viet Minh seized power, had sent a clear signal about the intentions of the ICP cadres.[42] The secret agents (*trinh sat*) of the Viet Minh, constituted of small 'traitor firing squads' (*doi tru gian*) or 'assassination

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38) Tran Huy Lieu, *Lich su tam muoi nam*, p. 214. See also Bourdeaux, *Emergence et constitution*, Vol. 1, pp. 273–277, and on the August revolution see in particular pp. 283–292.

39) SHAT 10H 4201, ch. *Correspondances 1947*, pièce: Commissariat de la RF en Cochinchine, Sûreté fédérale en Cochinchine, Subdivision 1, no. 9380s. Objet: Brochure intitulée 'Fronts historiques', Saigon (23 July 1947). Translation of Viet Dau [Tran Van An], *Nhung mat tran lich su*, 1934–1947, Tu Dan (June 1947). The three conditions for rallying were: (1) total independence for Vietnam; (2) a democratic regime; (3) the taking of power by the Viet Minh (see p. 10).

40) Mai Chi Tho *et al.*, *Cong an Nam Bo trong khang chien chong thuc dan Phap xam luoc* (The Southern Police during the Resistance against French Colonialists) (Hanoi: Nxb Cong An Nhan Dan, 1993), pp. 112–113. (Hereafter cited as *Cong an Nam Bo*.)

41) Nguyen Ky Nam mentions on several occasions the conflicting relations between Tran Van Giau and Huynh Phu So since August 1945: Nguyen Ky Nam, *Hoi ky 1925–1964. Tap II: 1945–1954* (Memoirs, vol. II) (Saigon, Dan Chu Moi, 1964), pp. 27–30; see also 'Historic fronts', p. 11.

42) A.M. Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao* (December 1951), p. 18, note 1.

committees' (*ban am sat*), came into action. In particular, the nationalist leader Duong Van Giao, president of a national government (*Chinh phu Dan quoc*) free of communists and heavily infiltrated by the Dai Viet, was the main target of the Viet Minh Police.[43]

Even as the return of France seemed imminent in early September, the organisation of Tran Van Giau tried to do away with nationalist leaders through assassinations and in fact slowed down the united resistance against France. From October, Bui Quang Chieu, an important figure in the political sphere in Saigon, was arrested and assassinated in Cho Dem. Other leading nationalist personalities such as Vu Tam Anh (Nguyen Ngoc Nhan) or Duong Van Giao were also arrested.[44] Just like Ta Thu Thau, condemned and executed in the Quang Ngai, the main Trotskyist leaders and those linked to the Avant-Garde Youths were eliminated in October 1945.[45] For tactical reasons and to protect the still fragile communist organisation, Tran Van Giau recommended the dissolution of the four Vietnamese regiments (*su doan*) of Saigon, resulting in the splitting and weakening of the resistance. This sudden retreat from Saigon facilitated a quick resettlement of French forces.[46] The situation was chaotic. There was an explosion of score-settling between the real and fake Viet Minh (*Viet Minh thiec*, *Viet Minh gia*). Sent by Ho Chi Minh with a mission to quickly unite the resistance, Nguyen Binh began to organise military companies (*chi doi*) under the control of ICP political cadres as well as those of the Dai Viet or the Binh Xuyen.[47]

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43) *Cong an Nam Bo*, pp. 77–78. On the creation of this government, see Nguyen Ky Nam, *Hoi ky*, p. 32.

44) CAOM, Conspol 113, document: Sûreté de Cochinchine, Subdivision 1, Note no. 799s, *Crimes commis par le Viêt-Minh*, Saigon (15 December 1945) (*le chef local des Services de police, signé: Pauwels*). On the arrest of Duong Van Giao, see Nguyen Hung, *Thi tuong chien khu xanh (Chuyen Huynh Van Nghe)* (General of the Green War Zone: Stories of Huynh Van Nghe) (Hanoi: Nxb Cong An Nhan Dan, 2002), pp. 121–126.

45) Ngo Van, *Viêt-Nam 1920–1945. Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* (Paris: Nautilus, 2000), pp. 344, 359–361.

46) On the matter of dissolution of four popular revolutionary police regiments, see Nguyen Ky Nam, *Hoi ky*, pp. 218–219, 225–226.

47) Goscha, *A 'popular' side of the Vietnamese army*, pp. 336–337. For a general panorama of different *chi doi*, see: Le Hai *et al.*, *Nguyen Binh, trung tuong dau tien cua quan doi nhan dan Viet Nam* (Nguyen Binh, the First Divisional General of the People's Army of Vietnam) (Hanoi: Nxb Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2004), pp. 142–144; Nguyen The Truong, *Trung tuong Nguyen Binh* (The Divisional General of Nguyen Binh) (Hanoi: Nxb Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2002), in lan thu hai [second printing], pp. 108–109.

Between 1946 and 1947, the charismatic chief reorganised the resistance forces on several occasions. The objective was from now on to achieve political unification under the control of the ICP. In a triangle between Hoc Mon, Duc Hoa and Trang Bang, northwest of Saigon, the reorganisation aimed to give the Viet Minh total control of a region considered strategic and close to the capital city of the Cochinchina Republic.[48] With its bush land, forests, rice-fields and rubber plantations, the zone was rich in possibilities for military counter-attacks. It would continue to be so even throughout the course of the war against the Americans.[49] This axis linked the Cao Dai fiefdom of Tay Ninh to the community situated at Cholon. Having quite accurately gauged the military strength of the Cao Dai force and its stronghold over the peasantry, the Viet Minh made an attempt to close in during 1946.[50] A process was set in train, consisting of tacit agreements, rejected reconciliation and rejections of any consensus on a common strategy, which resulted in open conflict.[51] In their armed opposition to the French forces, the Cao Dai chose a personal strategy that would jeopardise Viet Minh ambitions in the region of Tay Ninh. The Viet Minh were convinced that the Cao Dai were engaged in territorial expansion towards Saigon through a three-phase action plan: 'military preparation, divide or spread discord within the resistance, and finally oust the revolutionary powers and install a Cao Dai power in the region'.[52] After major political changes in the Republic of Cochinchina following the suicide of Nguyen Van Thinh, the leader of the provisional government, and with the advent of

48) At the end of 1945, the Party Committee of the Gia Dinh (Tinh uy Gia Dinh) province formed an armed force to monitor the surroundings of Saigon. This united force was first called the Liberation Army of the districts of Hoc Mon, Duc Hoa and Ba Diem (*Giai phong quan lien quan Hoc Mon—Ba Diem—Duc Hoa*); Nguyen The Truong, *Trung tuong Nguyen Binh*, pp. 104–105. See also Nhieu tac gia (collective publication), *To Ky, vi tuong trung kien va nghiep hiep* (To Ky the Loyal and Chivalrous General) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Tre, 2003), p. 68.

49) A portion surrounding Cu Chi has gone down to posterity under the term 'iron triangle'.

50) A Viet Minh delegation led by Duong Minh Chau met the Cao Dai Pope at the sacred quarters of Tay Ninh. The Pope reproached the Viet Minh for surrendering territory to the French on the diplomatic plan during the signature of the Modus Vivendi of 14 September 1946 (*Cong an Nam Bo*, p. 118).

51) Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism*, pp. 48–50.

52) Dang Uy—Bo Tu Lenh Quan Khu 7, *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon—Ba Diem—Duc Hoa chi doi 12, Trung doan 312 (1945–1949)* (History of the Liberation Army of Hoc Mon—Ba Diem—Duc Hoa and the *chi doi* 12, Regiment 312) (Hanoi: Nxb Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2001), p. 80.

Le Van Hoach, a Cao Dai member close to the nationalists of the Dai Viet, the Viet Minh's fears appeared well-founded.[53]

The year 1947 was a turning point for the resistance. On the one hand Ho Chi Minh himself in January demanded the intensification of sabotage activities, which he endorsed with a historical dimension:

> Our troops being few in number, it is most essential that they contribute to the general work of destruction in Cochinchina. Ensure that neither a single grain of paddy nor a single hectare of rubber falls into enemy hands.
>
> Sabotage all routes of communication, bridges and roads.
> Sabotage the ammunition depots and enemy food supplies.
> Push the sabotage all the way to Saigon-Cholon.
> This zone shall take on the sector name of Ho Chi Minh. We must show the world that our resistance is competent.[54]

On the other hand, the two major military forces linked with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious movements broke away from Nguyen Binh permanently.[55] The Viet Minh thus lost two key allies and consequently the anti-French resistance was left weakened. Military agreements were signed between the French military and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao forces between January and May 1947. The French put these two military forces to anti-communist pacification. Faced with this perilous situation, the Viet Minh undertook a military reorganisation accompanied by precise political instructions to counter the political and military power of the two religious movements in the Mekong Delta.

At the close of 1946, the Command of the 7th Vietnamese military zone (Quan Khu 7) decided to end Cao Dai expansion and set up a joint force using companies (*chi doi*) 5, 6, 11, 15 and Hoang Tho troops (*boi doi*). This new force, led by Huynh Kim Truong, army chief of staff of the 7th Zone, was assigned to the Joint Assault Force (Lien Quan Xung Phong), whose objective was 'to repress reactionary Cao Dai members' (*dep loan Cao Dai phan dong*).[56]

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53) Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van kien Dang toan tap, tap 8 (1945–1947)* (Complete Collection of Party Documents, vol. 8) (Hanoi: Nxb Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2000), pp. 163–164.

54) *Indochine 1947*, p. 375 (CSTFEO, EM-2B, no. 2–3 / 2, Renseignements, source: A/1, date: 7 January 1947, *Circulaire de Ho Chi Minh au sujet des opérations au Nambo*, Saigon, 18 January 1947).

55) Nguyen Hung, *Nguyen Binh, huyen thoai va su that* (Nguyen Binh, Myth and Reality) (Hanoi: Nxb Van Hoc, 2000), tai ban co bo sung tai lieu [completed and new edition], p. 275.

56) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 80. See also: Nguyen Viet Ta (chu bien), *Mien Dong*

After a failed armed operation against the Holy See at Tay Ninh, the Viet Minh reorganised their forces as the Expeditionary Corps pursued their offensive in areas northwest of Saigon. This was especially the case during the military operations carried out on 24 January 1947 at Tan Xuan, Tan Thoi Nhut, Nhi Hoa and Vinh Loc.[57] On 17 February 1947, the French set up an Executive Committee for the Pacification of Cochinchina which gave the green light to the army to proceed with pacification. However, this turned out to be a fiasco.[58] Faced with these decisive advances and a possible liaison with the Cao Dai forces of Tay Ninh, the political services of the 7th Zone advised a vast 'purification' operation to purge reactionary elements from the Cao Dai followers.[59] The 7th Zone equipped itself with a new armed force which would enable 'joint military operations' (*tac chien hiep dong*). For the sector Hoc Mon—Duc Hoa—Ba Diem, situated in west and northwest Saigon, two joint special forces (*lien quan dac nhiem*) designated A and B were formed.[60] The scope of action of Force B covered the sector of Hoc Mon, Duc Hoa and Trang Bang, and its objective consisted in stemming the advance of Cao Dai troops towards Saigon.[61] Nguyen Binh launched a solemn appeal to the cadres and fighters of the Viet Minh to concentrate all their efforts on the battle 'against the reactionary army'.[62] On the ground, while the Cao Dai launched offensives on all fronts (military, political, economic), Force B was neither co-ordinated nor synchronised. Instead of concentrating its forces tactically on the Tay Ninh front, it scattered them over three areas, B1, B2 and B3, and was sent north of the Thu Dau Mot province.[63]

Nam Bo khang chien (1945–1975), tap mot (The Resistance in the East of the South (1945–1975), vol. 1) (Hanoi: Nxb Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1990), p. 124; Le Hai *et al.*, *Nguyen Binh, trung tuong dau tien*, pp. 147–148; Goscha, 'A 'popular' side of the Vietnamese army', p. 342.

57) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 81.

58) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 209–210 (HCF-IC, Etat-Major Particulier, 874/EMP, Fiche, Saigon, 18 June 1947) and pp. 233–234 (HCF-IC, Mémorandum. Objet *Pacification de la Cochinchine*, Saigon, 7 February 1947).

59) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 81. The term 'purification' (nettoyage) was largely used in French military correspondence on the reconquest of the South.

60) In total three forces, A, B and C, were created.

61) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 81.

62) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 81.

63) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 82. The text is based on a Viet Minh report, '*Bao cao van de Cao Dai—Binh Xuyen*', Chinh tri bo Khu 7. Ho so A59-LS/CCTQK7, see note 1.

The joint anti-Cao Dai forces were reinforced by the creation of Joint Force 15 (*Lien Quan 15*), which operated in the region of Hoc Mon and along highway no. 1 in north Saigon.[64] Undoubtedly for reasons of efficiency, in May 1947 Huynh Kim Truong was replaced by To Ky at the head of Joint Force B.[65] Two other joint forces were formed. The 17th Force, headed by Dao Son Tay, operated in the sector of Thu Duc in east Saigon as well as at Lai Thieu, Di An, Chau Thanh and Tan Yen. The 18th Force under the leadership of Nguyen Thuoc operated at Hoc Mon, Go Vap and Ben Cat.[66] The objective of the Viet Minh was to purge the Saigon belt of Cao Dai forces. These multiple reorganisations should not conceal the main objective of Nguyen Binh, revealed during the course of a meeting held in the jungle on 20 May 1947 with a view to creating a rear military base close to Saigon-Cholon. The chief of the southern resistance made a point of castigating Saigon, the administrative, economic, military and commercial centre of French colonialism and a concentration of all reactionaries, various autonomous groups of the Nam Ky and the Popular Front of Cochinchina. He urged a radical solution, 'regretting that the scorched-earth policy had not been applied since the start of hostilities':

> To destroy Saigon is to destroy the singular machine of exploitation of French and Indochinese colonialists, to snuff out the French colonialist.
>
> To destroy Saigon is to end hostilities, to stop bloodshed.
> To destroy Saigon is an action most legitimate and human.[67]

Shortly before this hateful declaration, in April 1947, the Country Committee of the Viet Minh in the South had sent a directive to the Command of the 7th Military Zone of Nguyen Binh and other provinces recommending that two approaches to be adopted vis-à-vis the Cao Dai: first, maintain the status quo

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64) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 83.

65) To Ky, the key figure in this military set-up, was close to Nguyen Binh, also formerly affiliated to the southern section of VNQDD (cf. Goscha, *A 'popular' side of the Vietnamese army*, p. 326). For biographical details, see his autobiography in Nhieu tac gia, *To Ky*, pp. 9–43 ('*To Ky tu thuat*') and pp. 63–77: Nguyen Tho Bung, '*Anh ba To Ky, con guoi va su nghiep*' (Brother 3 To Ky, the man and his work).

66) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 83.

67) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 363–364 (TFEO, TFIS, Etat-Major, 2B, No. 4420 / 2.S, Document on the organisation of rebel military commands in the Saigon-Cholon region). This regiment was headed by Sau Ham, collaborator of Nguyen Binh and commander-in-chief of the Assault Units of the Death Volunteers (*Bo Doi Xung Phong Cam Tu*), ibid., p. 122.

and gain the support and participation of the Cao Dai in the resistance; and second, resolve to severely punish troublesome elements, lackeys of the French and opponents of the resistance.[68] If taken seriously, the double rhetoric of Ho Chi Minh's directives of January 1947 and those of Nguyen Binh in May 1947 gave free rein to the local military and political Viet Minh chiefs who, at their own discretion, triggered a spiral of violence and hatred in May.

The Elements and Possibilities of Political Exploitation

From the time they landed in the South, the French resumed their control in Saigon. Very early on, their information services understood the need to organise counter-propaganda against the Viet Minh in anticipation of an eventual counter-guerrilla movement. In particular, it was necessary to exploit the violence festering in the South, of which the Viet Minh were the prime instigators. The FHC services began to record, in a near-consistent manner, all acts of violence perpetrated in Hanoi or Saigon and in reconquered provinces. However, the FHC wanted to go further in using victim accounts to politically discredit Ho Chi Minh. To this effect, a circular signed by Cédile, Commissioner of the French Republic in Cochinchina, and addressed to the Director of Information, stated: 'In my view, this would be an opportune moment to rally public opinion—both in France and in the world—and exploit the atrocities committed by the Viet Minh on the French as well as their own fellow citizens.'[69] This data-gathering on abuses by the Viet Minh had to be done with care, according to Cédile, so as to testify about barbaric acts, as stipulated in the new circular of 6 November 1945:

> I would be grateful to you if you could find and send me all personal accounts you might gather on these crimes—I want clear documents devoid of commentaries, but which expose facts with precision. It is indispensable to furnish these reports with all the exact information necessary (date and place, names of victims; witnesses and if possible the criminals). These texts will be disseminated by the services of the Commission of the Republic (Department of Political Affairs and Department of Information) and will be grouped together later in a collection which will testify to the barbarism of those who do not hesitate, in order to satisfy their personal ambitions, to plunge their own country into bloodshed and flames.[70]

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68) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 83.

69) CAOM, Conspol 113, HCF-IC, Commissariat de la République en Cochinchine, Direction des Affaires politiques, no. 1031, '*Note à M. le Directeur de l'information*', Saigon, 6 November 1945 (signed Cédile).

70) CAOM, Conspol 113: HCF pour l'Indochine, Commissariat de la République en

At the end of 1947, the dossier 'Viet Minh atrocities' appeared to be complete. It was merely a collection of scores of documents gathered from 1945, consisting of witness accounts, photographs, lists of convicts and reports seized from the Viet Minh.[71] In March 1948, the dispatch of convict lists was meant to be addressed to the French League of Human Rights, the Red Cross and the provisional government of South Vietnam.[72] Despite all the intentions of the FHC, documents relating to hundreds of assassination cases were scarcely examined. Only the local French press reported this Viet Minh 'terrorism' which had crippled the South for years.[73] This general lack of interest raises questions. A letter from Léon Pignon highlighted the lack of military resources and suggests tension between departments.[74] Perhaps it is based more simply in French military action, the military reconquest inflicting an equally violent reaction to the Viet Minh control over the countryside. Violence during wartime is never unilateral. War operations conducted by the Foreign Legion between August and October 1946 seemed to have been the most violent, according to Jeanne Cuisinier.[75] The reoccupation of Saigon and subsequently the prime highways of the Mekong Delta gave rise to a stream of brutal executions carried out against an enemy of indistinct identity.[76] The former commando René Chapotot narrates his experience of war violence and remem-

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Cochinchine, Direction des Affaires politiques, no. 1027, 'Circulaire', Saigon, 6 November 1945 (signed Cédile); Commissariat de la République en Cochinchine, Direction des Affaires politiques, no. 1425, 'Le Commissariat de la République en Cochinchine à M. le Conseiller politique (Haussaire)', Saigon, 13 November 1945 (signed Vallat).

71) See for example: CAOM, Conspol 113, document: Personnel et secret, Saigon, 8 February 1947, 484/CP-AP, Le Commissaire fédéral aux affaires politiques à Monsieur le Commissaire fédéral à la justice, objet: 'Documentation sur les atrocités Viêt-Minh' (two dossiers mentioned, one Cochinchina, one Tonkin), signed Compain.

72) CAOM, Conspol 294: RF, HCF pour l'Indochine, Affaires politiques, Saigon, le [x] mars 1948, no. [x], Le conseiller de la République, Haut commissaire de France pour l'Indochine à Monsieur le Président de la section d'Indochine de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, Saigon. (Unstamped, unsigned.) Identical letter for all three addresses.

73) As an example, see short notes: 'Les actes de terrorisme en Cochinchine', *Le Journal de Saigon*, 4 December 1946; 'Le terrorisme en Cochinchine', *L'Union Française*, 7 December 1946.

74) CAOM, Conspol 113, document: Secret, Le commissaire fédéral aux affaires politiques à monsieur le commissaire fédéral de la justice, Saigon, 19 January [194]7, 251/CP-CAB, signed L. Pignon.

75) See Ngo Van citing Jeanne Cuisinier (Ngo Van, *Viêt-Nam 1920–1945*, pp. 362–363).

76) Enaudi, *Viêt-Nam!*, pp. 32, 45, 60, 62, 68, 70, 89, 91, 98, 103, 110, 125. See also Christophe Dutrône, '1946, les dérapages de l'armée en Cochinchine', in '*Indochine 1947, la guerre coloniale*', *Batailles*, No. 7 HS (2005), p. 49.

bers a particularly gruelling baptism of fire when his lookouts (Vietnamese?) were found, one impaled on bamboo, the two others horribly mutilated. He says that this experience strongly changed his attitude towards the Viet Minh adversary: 'Gradually, I became like the ancients. I wanted to kill a maximum number of these scoundrels. Never in cold blood could I have done so. But always after discovering butcheries of this kind. And sadly, there were many of them.'[77]

On 29 December 1947, the Viet Minh resistance retreated deeper underground. The French Expeditionary Corps got its hands on exceptional Viet Minh documents during a military operation on the island of An Phu.[78] They revealed important handwritten lists of convicted persons prepared by the Viet Minh Police. A first document, entitled 'List of convicts', consisted of a list of 101 names (Photo 1). The cover of the document read: 'List of convicts by VM Police of Hoc Mon'. The second list, entitled 'List of accused', provided a list of 409 names (Photo 2). The French Troops for South Indochina (TFIS) renamed the documents, and a large amount of the information they contained was compiled into a new list of over 900 names, accompanied by a presentation letter dated March 1948 (Photo 3). This list has been provisionally deciphered as described below. It was established from three documents issued by the Viet Minh Police Service of Hoc Mon (pages 1 to 12), Tan Binh (pages 12 to 16) and Thu Duc (pages 16 to 21).[79] Of this reconstituted set, the 'List of death sentences by the VM Police of Hoc Mon' is by far the most important, with nearly 566 names or about 57.5 per cent of the total. The second and third documents group, respectively, 193 names (19.6 per cent) and 225 (22.8 per cent).[80] A French military study, based on Viet Minh documents seized in the

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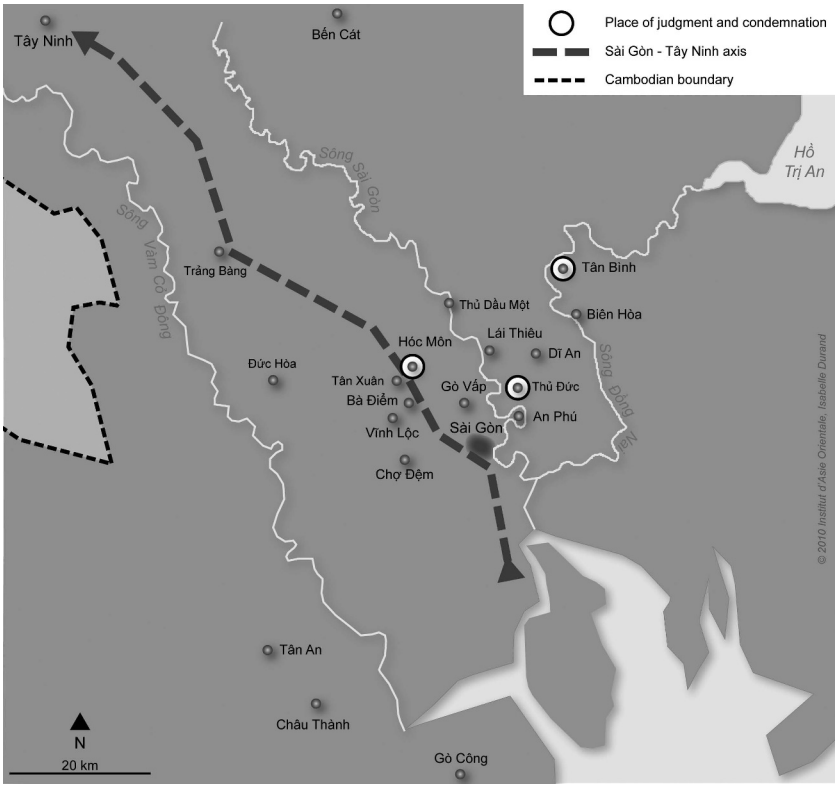
77) René Chapotot, *Un strapontin pour l'enfer* ([France], Albene, 1980), pp. 40–41.

78) See: Tran Hai Phung and Luu Phuong Thanh (chu bien), *Lich su Sai Gon—Cho Lon—Gia Dinh khang chien (1945–1975)* (History of Saigon—Cholon—Gia Dinh in Resistance) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb TP. Ho Chi Minh, 1994), pp. 82–83 (http://maps.google.fr/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=fr&q=ph%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng+28,+Binh+Thanh,+Ho+Chi+Minh+City,+Vietnam&sll=46.75984,1.738281&sspn=10.643544,14.238281&ie=UTF8&cd=1&geocode=FechpQAdKclcBg&split=0&hq=&hnear=ph%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng+28, +Binh+Thanh,+Ho+Chi+Minh+City,+Vietnam&z=14).

79) See: Goscha, *A 'popular' side of the Vietnamese army*, p. 345 and note 80; François Guillemot, '*Au cœur de la fracture vietnamienne. L'élimination de l'opposition nationaliste et anticolonialiste dans le Nord du Viêt-Nam (1945–1946)*', in Goscha and Tréglodé (eds), *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti*, pp. 207–208 and note 186. The source documents of the massacre, released from archives of ANOM (Conspol 294) and communicable since 2007, are the subject of the present study.

80) See diagram 'Source documents: list of convicts'.

operation, raises the same issue in almost the same proportions: 'The Viet Minh Police of Gia Dinh delivered nearly 1,000 death sentences between May and November 1947: 555 at Hoc Mon, 187 at Tan Binh and 226 at Thu Duc.'[81]



Strategic Places around Saigon during the Viet Minh Political Purge (1947)

Deciphering the Lists of Death Sentences

These archival documents do present a number of problems and potential pitfalls. As regards the nature of the documents, two of them consist of original lists seized during operations and have been clearly identified. The list proposed for study here is a reconstituted one established from the two original lists and others which apparently have disappeared, been lost or filed in another archival

81) *Indochine 1947*, p. 126; 57.34 per cent for Hoc Mon, 23.35 per cent for Thu Duc and 19.32 per cent for Tan Binh.

dossier. The reconstituted list of 21 typewritten pages underwent several cross-verifications against the two original documents mentioned earlier.[82] This list was finalised using documents that had gathered together the names, ages, places of origin, grounds for accusation, sentence and date of execution of persons arrested by the Viet Minh Police of Hoc Mon, Tan Binh and Thu Duc.

The compilation raises a number of questions. Was it a list prepared on a weak documentary basis? Was the existence of duplicated names important and required? In short, was the reconstituted list contrived? To the final last question, it may be said that the author of the reconstituted list had made a selection, noting down only death sentences. The analysis of the handwritten list 'List of convicts' has shown that the majority of those individuals who were arrested and tried were sentenced to death, while a minority received only a fine.[83] The care taken in the writing of these original documents appears to show that they were prepared by educated cadres. The register entitled 'List of convicts' is dated 14 December 1947 and signed by Le Van Ren, the second-in-command of Public Security of Hoc Mon district.[84] It was intended for the chief of Public Security of Gia Dinh (Truong ty cong an Gia Dinh).[85] The second original document, also a carefully written logbook, bears the code 'Z III' on its cover. It belongs to a 'Z' series comprising other packet lists (*goi*) numbered from Z5A to Z9.[86]

The list we have chosen for its length is of an altogether different nature because it is a typewritten document set out and duplicated in several copies using carbon paper. This list must have been subjected to several preliminary verifications on the number of entries inscribed. A research of homonyms

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82) The rate of overlap of information divulged concerning the two lists is as follows: nearly 100 per cent of the information of the list containing 101 names ('List of convicts') was present on the typed list. However, the overlap rate of the list containing 409 names ('List of accused') is lower. A total of 255 names (duplications and doubtful entries included, 21 names) out of 409 were present on the reconstituted list, roughly a little over 60 per cent.

83) The percentage of death sentences on the 'List of death sentences' prepared by the Viet-Minh Police of Hoc Mon is about 80 per cent.

84) According to one biographer of Nguyen Binh, the Chief of Police of Hoc Mon was a certain Rau Gio (cf. Nguyen The Truong, *Trung tuong Nguyen Binh*, p. 162).

85) The Public Security of Gia Dinh province was placed under the Public Security of Nam Bo (So Cong an Nam Bo). The Deputy Director of the Southern Police at the time was Cao Dang Chiem, alias Sau Hoang, also Chief of Police of Saigon-Cholon (cf. a clear presentation of the Southern Police in *Cong an Nam Bo*, pp. 114–115).

86) These numbered 'packets' appear to indicate that other lists of accused may have been prepared.

detected nearly 130 possible duplications in a list of 984 names. However, going by cross-checks and eliminations, the proportion of duplications is reduced to 9.76 per cent of the overall total.[87] The treatment of these lists consisted in processing the data for each individual. The table on the numbers of convicts provides information on their place of origin, charges, religious or political affiliation, social status, the name of the people's court or local police and the date of judgment which, depending on individuals, matches that of the date of execution.[88] Other documents also provide the age of the convict and details of his parentage. We have added gender as and when the information was identifiable.

The distribution of the places of origin provides an insight into the geography of this listing. Most of the localities from which the convicts hailed were villages surrounding Saigon in a triangle around Hoc Mon, Duc Hoa and Trang Bang. However, other names give the impression that the round-ups may have been carried out by the Viet Minh in reoccupied localities far away from French Expeditionary Corps forces.

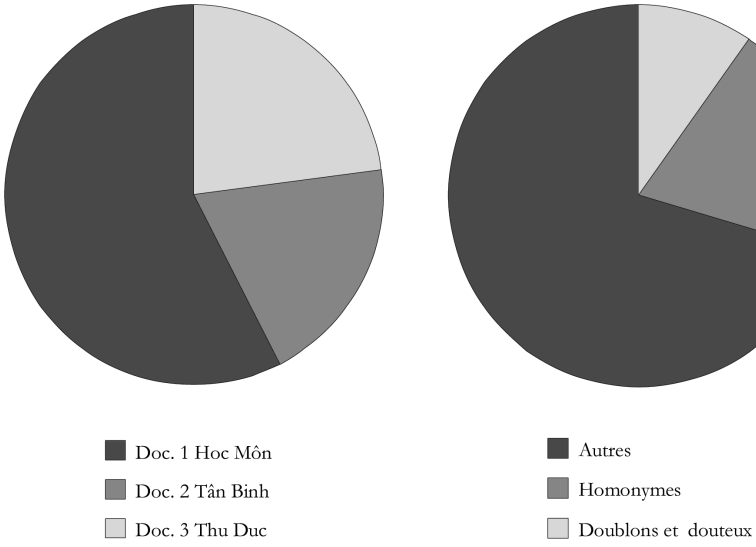
An analysis of charges yields results that are somewhat surprising. While military operations by the Viet Minh in this region largely targeted the Cao Dai, the victims tagged 'Cao Dai' or 'Cao Dai reactionaries' were not the most important. In this affiliation category are listed 88 names (the 'purified list') or 8.9 per cent of the total.[89] Despite an apparent variety of charges, 65 per cent are centred on three principal 'crimes' (reactionaries, spies and traitors).[90] The most frequent charge is that of 'reactionary' (*phan dong*) with 281 occurrences, nearly one-third of the total (28.5 per cent of the purified list), thereby exposing the political nature of this purification. This proportion increases when one adds the categories 'Cao Dai reactionaries' and 'Hoa Hao reactionaries'. The different charges emphasise the eminently political character

87) See diagram 'General configuration'.

88) This is what note 1 on page 21 of this document mentions. In addition, note 2 indicates that the names of people sentenced to death marked with an asterisk (handwritten in black ink) have their dossier enclosed. Verifications were done using these dossiers conserved in the archives.

89) We provide these percentages based on a list containing 866 names, with genuine and supposed duplications removed, as well as sentences without a subject (22 occurrences). See diagram 'Charges (reduced list)'.

90) In order of importance, one may cite the following assembled categories: reactionaries, espionage and intelligence with the enemy, traitors and collaborators, Cao Dai followers, informers and police agents of the Police, Hoa Hao, subversive agents, pirates and hoodlums, partisans or enemy soldiers.



List of convicts General configuration

of the operation. It was not so much about hunting down Hoa Hao and Cao Dai followers in the region, but rather eradicating the 'reaction' of these communities to submission. A Viet Minh directive dated 30 June and signed by Ung Van Khiem, Commissioner for Internal Affairs of the Nam Bo Executive Committee, confirmed this approach:

> After a few months of fighting the invaders on the outside, and traitors to the nation from within, we have seen that:
>
> … During purification operations against the traitors, the VQD [Police], the armed services and self-defence troops have exposed, with praiseworthy clairvoyance, the gang of dangerous traitors to the future of the Fatherland. The superstitious population has thus been duped by them: this act of purging of traitors who incite a revolution, we do against our will, with the intention of defending the nation, and not out of personal vengeance.
>
> … we must know at all times that among the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, there are always sincere and innocent people without a single treacherous thought. They have acted without discernment, ensnared by the insidious words of their leaders …
>
> The experience shows us yet that several Cao Dai and Hoa Hao followers acknowledged that they had been misled and abandoned their ranks to return to the resistance.[91]

91) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 471–472 (SESAG, BR du 9 août 1947, Directives politiques

The names from people's courts provide a general idea of the localities concerned, all of which were located in the periphery of Saigon. Of the 44 names, three stand out from the set of 735 occurrences or 74.7 per cent of the total (list before purification).[92] The name of the Hoc Mon Police (*Cong an Hoc Mon*) near Saigon ranks first. This name alone accounts for 44.6 per cent of the total. The Police of Tan Binh (17.6 per cent), also in the outskirts of Saigon, come next and finally the Thu Duc Police (12.5 per cent), in the eastern part of the city.

Is a typology of victims possible? Judging by the charges and places of origin, a majority of the victims seemed to belong to the ordinary people and local peasantry. Very few names were affiliated to the councils of notables and similarly very few hailed from Saigon City. There are few political affiliations to be found (only one member of the Social Democrat Party and a handful belonging to the Cochinchinese Front).[93] It has been alleged, although verification is arduous to undertake, that entire families accused of being reactionaries were arrested and executed. A number of people hailing from the same locality were tried and executed, leaving one to surmise that they may have been members of one and the same family.[94] Lastly, the matter of date of execution merits further attention because these dates reveal significant disparities.[95]

An analysis of the evolution of executions for the year 1947 shows that the months between May and November were particularly lethal.[96] October 1947 reveals a sharp increase in the number of executions. Should one concentrate on the passage of this particular month, what might one observe? A disturbing peak of executions took place on 13 October 1947, with 300 executions in a single day, or about one-third of the total number of executions in 1947.[97]

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no. 5/NV du Comité exécutif du Nam Bo, en date du 30 juin. Objet: 'Expériences tirées de la répression contre les Hoa Hao et les Caodaïstes. Méthodes à employer actuellement à l'égard de ces religions'), document VM translated following (SHAT, 10H 4145).

92) See diagram 'Judgment and execution'.

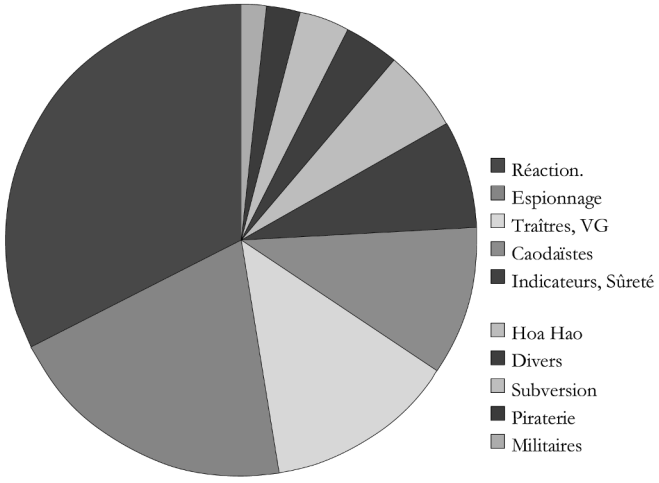
93) The affiliates of the Cochinchinese Popular Front (Mat Tran Binh Dan Nam Ky) are perhaps slightly more important because certain excessively lengthy information from the 'List of accused' was not transferred on the typed list.

94) Such is the case with the Huynh family, who followed the Hoa Hao faith, leaving the impression that the cause for their arrest (and subsequent execution) was the result of a patronymic identical to the Hoa Hao leader, a charismatic community chief executed in May 1947.

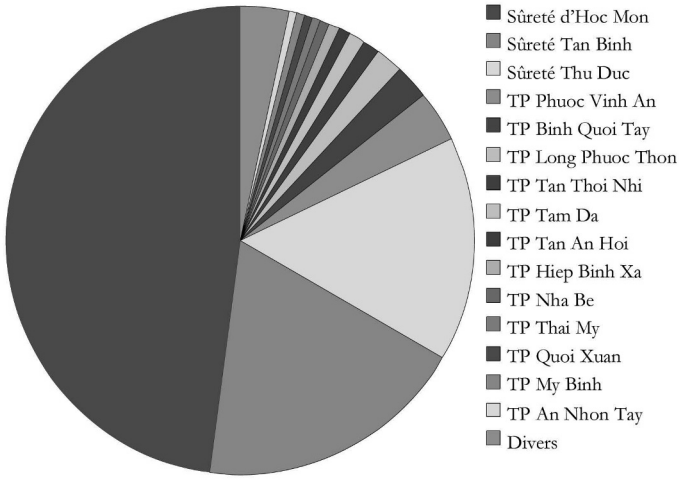
95) For a certain number of convicts, differences in the dates of execution appear between the typed list and the original list entitled 'List of accused'.

96) *Indochine 1947*, p. 126. See diagram 'Dates of execution 1947'.

97) See diagram 'The place of the date 13 October 1947'.



Charges (reduced list)



Judgment and execution

What happened on this dark day? A year earlier, the French Expeditionary Corps forces, specifically the 3rd Colonial Infantry Division (3e DIC), had carried out a violent anti-Viet Minh 'purging operation' at Hoc Mon and in its surrounding areas. The account by Jeanne Cuisinier mentioned earlier reports of what a legion officer had said about a 'purging' operation: 'We suffered losses, but we also responded well and inflicted a lot of damage. Within a 6-kilometre

radius, nothing remains: from ducks to cattle, women and children; we have purged everything.'[98] Jeanne Cuisinier also highlights: 'During the nights of 13, 14 and 15 October [1946], particularly "rewarding" pillages at Hoc Mon, Ba Diem and Go Vap by colonial soldiers.'[99]

Was the choice of 13 October 1947 as the date of execution influenced by these events? This is a hypothesis.[100] It could have well been a counter-attack by the Police of Hoc Mon faced with a deteriorating military situation or a political operation using terror as its instrument: a lesson to be borne in mind by the undecided. The fact that those arrested were identified, organised into social classes and given political labels tells us that we are in the presence of a terror, based on a revolutionary logic intended to force a recalcitrant population into submission.

The ICP cadres, although forming a minority within the resistance, aimed to organise, structure and purify it. The profusion of documents issued by the Viet Minh during the war explains this political drive and simultaneously highlights a bureaucratic culture learned in Moscow in the service of revolution. The lists established show that the DRV machinery in the South with its two regulatory bodies, the Cong An (Public Security) and the army, had already entered into a bureaucratic process in which it was necessary to record all information on the enemy, within or without. The nationalist parties, to our knowledge, did not produce as much administrative documentation.[101] For their part, during their confrontation with the Viet Minh, the Hoa Hao cadres did not take the trouble to prepare lists of their victims. The victims were eliminated by the military before being hurled into the river, as battalion leader Antoine Savani described.

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98) Cited in Ngo Van, *Viêt-Nam 1920–1945*, pp. 362–363.

99) Ibid., p. 363.

100) On 10 October 1947, the Saigon press reported the death sentence of Nguyen Dinh Chinh, alias Chinh Heo, leader of Action Committee No. 1, one of the committees charged with terrorism in Saigon (he was later sent to the penal colony in Poulo Condor). According to Nguyen Hung, Nguyen Binh was badly affected by this death sentence (cf. Nguyen Hung, *Nguyen Binh*, p. 325). The date of 10 October also corresponds to the date of the assassination attempt on Nguyen Van Sam, a leading political figure in the South during this period (one of the founders of the Dan Xa and leader of a nationalist front), after which Nguyen Van Sam died (*Cong an Nam Bo*, p. 130).

101) The only noteworthy exception, when it was reorganised and participated in the Vietnamese state of Bao Dai, was the Dai Viet Party, which had the ambition of linking the destiny of the party to that of the nation. But then again, the ambition to form a covert party-state of Bao Dai, secretly governed by the Dai Viet, failed. See François Guillemot, *Dai Viet, indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam. L'échec de la troisième voie 1938–1955* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, forthcoming).

The question of a bureaucratic culture is perhaps more important than it appears. This is because the preparation of paperwork requiring such heavy administration shows a ready willingness on the part of DRV representatives of the South to act as watchdogs of a society to be revolutionised, as arbitrators of state law for the DRV at war, as upholders of the nation's legitimacy. It means asserting national law over the territory which indeed escaped the DRV. This is because constituting legality with the establishment of the Republic of Cochinchina (June 1946) and its structuring over southern territory was an enormous challenge, perhaps even a provocation, for the resistance members of the ICP staking their claim to the DRV.[102]

Justifications for the Violence and Historiographical Mea Culpa

We now turn to examining the unleashing of violence in Nam Bo in 1947 through the most emblematic conflict in the delta, which opposed the Viet Minh against the Hoa Hao. Jacques Sémelin suggested grasping the rational and irrational aspects of the massacre: 'which may be attributed to cold calculation and the sheer madness of men'.[103] The revolutionary war, led in the delta by Nguyen Binh, organised and implemented terror, as the following account recalls:

> In Cochinchina, Nguyen Binh … brilliant and bloodthirsty, faced a never-ending phase of regression. Having lost the Plain of Reeds and its rice granary, he began to resettle in the forests far north of Tay Ninh. The duplicitous game of the Cao Dai was as repulsive to him as to us. At this time, a battalion of regular combatants, the *chu-lucs*, laid siege to a Cao Dai post and impaled on bamboo men, women and children who were supposed to take care of defence.[104]

The aim was to make a striking impact on minds regarding the revolutionary intransigence throughout the Nam Bo in the battle for independence. Nguyen Binh, a former member of the VNQDD who later converted to Communism undoubtedly nurtured high ideals on the patriotic struggle. The antagonistic vision of the Ho Chi Minh government was adamant in refusing any

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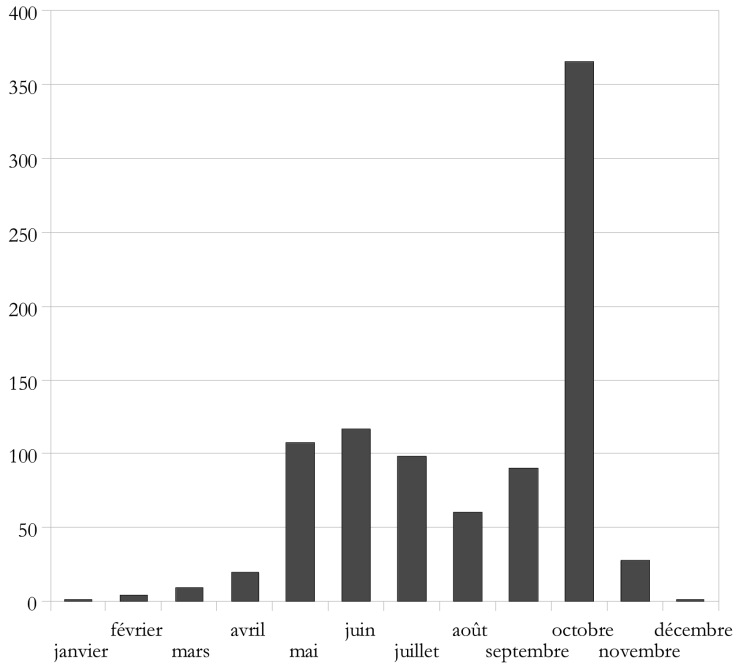
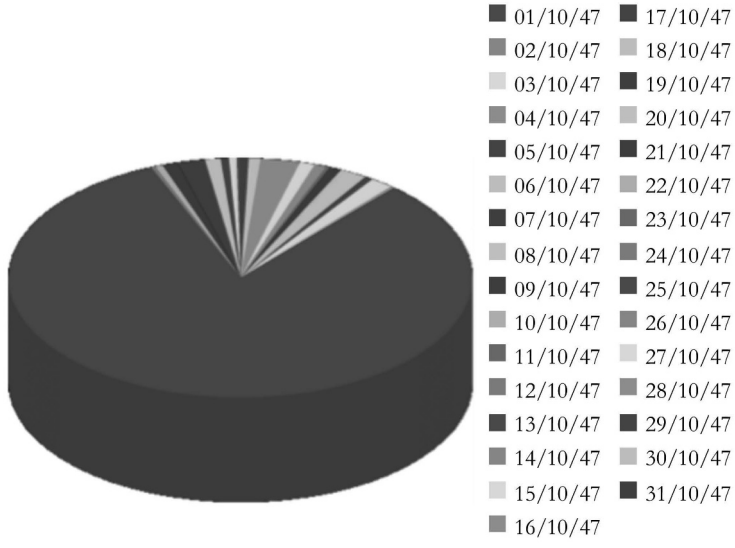
102) There are no detailed studies on the existence and achievements of the short-lived Republic of Cochinchina between 1946 and 1949. The archives are conserved in Ho Chi Minh City at Centre no. 2 of the National Archives of Vietnam.

103) Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', p. 487.

104) Dominique de La Motte, *De l'autre côté de l'eau. (Indochine 1950–1952)* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), p. 103.



Dates of execution 1947



The place of the date 13 October 1947

compromise on this issue.[105] Nguyen Binh had clearly articulated and justified the war stakes during a meeting on 20 May 1947:

> Act, so that the colonialists, like the traitors, eat without any appetite and sleep in anxiety. Act such that they cannot export our rice and our rubber in exchange for arms and tanks. And to this end, a single means: sabotage, assassination, repression of traitors.[106]

However, in the peculiar situation of the South, the revolutionary process of 'destruction/submission' came up against the religious sentiments of the peasantry—a messianism, which also aimed to be unrelenting. In another account of the Police of Nam Bo, the authors recall the fanaticism of the Cao Dai in battle, feared even by *bo doi* warriors of the Viet Minh.[107] Among the Hoa Hao, violence against Viet Minh supporters seemed to be the rule. The two factions were filled with hatred, as emphasised by Nguyen Long Thanh Nam in his impressive monograph on the Hoa Hao and by Mai Chi Tho in his memoirs. If the former cautiously mentions the presence in West Cochinchina 'of many brawls between the Hoa Hao and the Viet Minh, creating a tense atmosphere which could lead to a grave incident',[108] Mai Chi Tho unhesitatingly recalls the state of mind of the Viet Minh during this period vis-à-vis the Hoa Hao:

> Our people and our army were concentrating their force against the French when we were stabbed by a poisonous dagger in the back; this is why with indignation and rancour, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, we deliver blows with all our strength. The massacre was really terrifying. We had fallen into the very trap set earlier by the French imperialists, just as our forefathers did.[109]

He justified the violence of the Viet Minh as a response to the violence of their adversaries and implied that the Viet Minh were finally no better than

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105) As the passage of the directive dated 22 May 1947 from the Central Committee stipulates: 'All the persons who try to pass as representatives of the people, who assume the responsibility to negotiate with the French are considered Vietnamese felons, and shall be judged by the Government for crimes of high treason, intelligence with the enemy and shall be punished by the law', in *Van Kien Dang toan tap, tap 8*, p. 209.

106) *Indochine 1947*, p. 366.

107) *Cong an Nam Bo*, p. 119.

108) Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat giao Hoa Hao trong dong lich su dan toc* (Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Course of National History) (Santa Fe Springs: Duoc Tu Bi, 1991), p. 394.

109) Mai Chi Tho, *Hoi uc*, p. 141.

their opponents at the start of the conflict. In his view, the Viet Minh were ensnared by violence, the conventional weapon of imperialism.[110] For his part, Savani did not mince his words when referring to the violent conflict that began in September 1945 between the Viet Minh and the Hoa Hao: 'The formal massacres of the Hoa Hao were organised and drowning ended in countless victims, creating a climate of violence and hatred that was not likely to vanish.'[111] If Savani is to be believed, the siege of western provinces by Expeditionary Corps forces put a temporary end to Viet Minh's atrocities and reversed the situation:

> The followers of Nam Lua, a gang of trouble-makers, would carry out reprehensible acts of revenge. The collective massacres of the Viet Minh and its sympathisers were organised. The procedure used was mass drowning, otherwise known as 'shrimping'—one saw them (the VM) then, tied to one another, hands behind their backs, like trains of abandoned junks, passing before your *cai-nha* drifting with the current and ebbing tide.[112]

On this issue, Mai Chi Tho painted a horrendous picture of abuses committed by loyalist Hoa Hao and Cao Dai members:

> Many Hoa Hao and Cao Dai followers were guilty of barbaric crimes such as setting houses on fire, assassinations, disembowelling people, ripping out the innards of our compatriots, our combatants. There were posts like Phu My (My Tho) where the flesh of the combatants was chopped up for sale. All the boats that passed by were stopped and forced to buy it. If you refused they would terrorise you with savagery. Not knowing what to do, once the purchase was made and they had gone far away, our compatriots left the human flesh adrift in the water, burnt incense, and invoked the Manes as a mark of respect, completely horrified by this clique of ignoble barbarians.[113]

In reality, relations between the ICP and the Hoa Hao had been steeped in conflict since the early days of August 1945. On 8 September 1945, at Can Tho, the capital of the Kingdom of the West according to Hoa Hao loyalists, an armed confrontation took place between Viet Minh partisans and Hoa Hao loyalists, ending in the arrest and execution of three Hoa Hao members, including Huynh Phu Mau, the brother of Huynh Phu So.[114] The notable

110) Mai Chi Tho, *Hoi uc*, pp. 142–143.
111) Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, p. 19.
112) Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, p. 21.
113) Mai Chi Tho, *Hoi uc*, pp. 141–142.
114) Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, p. 18.

Lam Tam Truong, close to the Hoa Hao, provides a bloodier description of this incident:

> They had come, nearly 10,000 of them, believing themselves to be invincible, armed with bamboo spears, iron knives and their peasant tools. The others, having been informed, lay in wait for them. They decimated the crowd with their machine-guns. For several days, the river carried corpses out to sea. When the French returned, our peasants sought their revenge. Many Vietnamese left in turn, going with the tide. The Hoa Hao said it was just.[115]

The reporter Nguyen Ky Nam referred to a 'fratricidal war' (*cot nhuc tuong tan*).[116] In time, hatred between the two factions escalated and several abuses were committed by both sides. Huynh Phu So, the charismatic religious leader of the Hoa Hao movement, intended to play a political role within the anti-French resistance which was being organised. With other nationalists he founded the Social Democrat Party (Dang Dan Chu Xa Hoi) on 21 September 1946.[117] His ambitious programme of a triple revolution (human, national and social freedom) competed directly with the Viet Minh.[118] The bloody conflict persisted and led to the death of Huynh Phu So, who was arrested by the Viet Minh during a reconciliation meeting, after which he was tried and finally executed on 16 April 1947.[119] After his execution, the dismemberment of the Hoa Hao spiritual leader's corpse was probably ordered, as mentioned by Savani.[120]

The disappearance of the Pontiff (*Giao chu*) instantly provoked an uprising of Hoa Hao loyalists. The Executive Committee of Nam Bo decided to set up conciliation committees in each province in the west to find solutions to the conflict between partisans of the Viet Minh and Hoa Hao.[121] However, a directive dated 21 April 1947 was addressed 'to all bodies of the administration, army and police force' and hardly supported dialogue. The urgency lay in

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115) Raymond Muelle, *Bérets rouges en Indochine. La demi-brigade SAS, février 1946–juin 1948* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, coll. 'Troupes de choc', 1986), pp. 209–210.

116) Nguyen Ky Nam, *Hoi ky*, p. 212.

117) Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat giao Hoa Hao*, p. 403.

118) Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat giao Hoa Hao*, p. 405; Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, pp. 100 ff. (Annexe no. 1, '*Proclamation du Parti Social-Démocrate Vietnamien*').

119) *Indochine 1947*, doc. '*Comité exécutif du Nam Bo. Procès de Huynh Phu So*', p. 467; Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, pp. 103 ff. (Annexe no. IV). On the conduct of this matter, see: Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat giao Hoa Hao*, pp. 430–434.

120) Savani, *Notes on Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, p. 29.

121) *Cong an Nam Bo*, p. 122.

the military takeover of the situation, complete disarmament and political neutralisation of Hoa Hao partisans affiliated to the Social Democrat Party. Clear orders had been given to 'enforce martial law' on opponents 'without having to bother about appearing before the courts'.[122] To discredit the Hoa Hao, the Viet Minh propaganda accused Buddhist followers of cannibalism and bloody barbaric acts. Nguyen Long Thanh Nam referred to this phenomenon, which he described as a skilfully devised slander operation.[123]

While general descriptions of the conflict between Hoa Hao and Viet Minh forces are commonplace, very little archival material has been exploited. Yet it seems evident that terrorism was for some time the weapon deployed by both camps. As for the Viet Minh, under the aegis of Nguyen Binh, the resistance did not hesitate to use this fearsome weapon to subjugate local populations.[124] Similarly, abuses by the Binh Xuyen were equally frequent, judging by police reports prepared at the end of 1945. Among Hoa Hao, Cao Dai or Catholic partisans, the defence of their 'holy' land was an absolute priority. Politico-military strategy versus the logic of defending religious strongholds, the *political* use of violence, deliberate and organised, by the Viet Minh, began to create problems because it quickly proved to be counterproductive.

The return to archival documents allows us to better identify the balance of power imposed by the Viet Minh in the South. A directive from Ho Chi Minh, president of the DRV, dated 10 April 1946 and sent to political cadres of the movement, recommended an urgent return to unity to prevent desertions. It was the opportune moment to 'reduce the campaign of terror immediately', a necessary condition to restore the population's faith in the Viet Minh resistance.[125] The orders of directive 5/NV on the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, dated 30 June 1947, complied with this approach. Hereafter it meant handling 'repentant' Hoa Hao and Cao Dai and not punishing the

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122) Savani, *Notes sur le Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, pp. 101 ff. (Annexe no. II, '*Soulèvement des Dan-Xa*').

123) Nguyen Long Thanh Nam, *Phat giao Hoa Hao*, pp. 514–518, citing an article by Minh Duc in *Ngay Nay* (Houson). See also the extract by Mai Chi Tho quoted earlier. For more information on this topic, see Shawn McHale, *Understanding the fanatic mind?*

124) See Christopher Goscha, '"La guerre par d'autres moyens": réflexions sur la guerre du Viet Minh dans le Sud-Vietnam de 1945 à 1951, Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains', no. 206 (2002), pp. 29–57.

125) CAOM, INDO NF 1207, document: CS TFEO, EM/2B, no. 2186/2, Confidentiel, 'Extraits de télégramme décryptés'.

'innocent religious'.[126] Systematic revolutionary violence, as a driving force of action and history, had to stop. Despite this degree of awareness, we have seen that the 'repression of traitors' throughout 1947 had struck the peasantry indiscriminately, and communiqués from one month to the next could often take opposite directions. To cite an example, a communiqué of 19 June 1947 issued by the Police of Duc Hoa recommended assassinations as a coercive practice: 'If an assassination is committed every day in the city, the people who still live there will gradually come toward our government.'[127]

In 1947, the zeal of the people's courts was denounced by the Viet Minh authorities themselves, as they realised the dangers of the population turning. In particular, the composition of the people's courts was hasty and slip-shod, as stipulated in an observation note by Nguyen Van Luong, commissioner of the military tribunal in Gia Dinh.[128] However, the move to end abusive executions was not monitored by the local committees, as shown in a French note based on Viet Minh documents seized during operations:

> Of the extracts of judgments (seized on the island of An Phu) pronounced for the three months of July, August and September 47 by the sole people's tribunal of the VM at Gia Dinh, there were 91 death sentences, of which 9 were suspended sentences; this is an average of one per day.
>
> 51 were pronounced for belonging to traitorous parties and spies, 24 for collaboration with the French; 16 for various reasons (wearing French decorations, reactionaries, trade with the enemy).
>
> It is interesting to note that the total number of daily sentences (for Gia Dinh) is very similar for three months while on 9 August 1947, the Director of Legal Services in the Nam Bo, Tran Phong Que, had sent out a circular to magistrates and Commissioners of the Government calling them to order.
>
> He called to attention that the verdict was too often made in a superficial manner or even contrary to the rules, and that thenceforth any person who appealed to the Tribunal of the People illegally would be taken to Court.[129]

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126) *Indochine 1947*, p. 472.

127) *Indochine 1947*, p. 431 (RDVN, Sûreté Région Ouest du Nam-Bo, Délégation de Duc Hoa, no. 368/CA, 'Communiqué adressé aux diverses sûretés, aux troupes de défense nationale et au comité d'action no. 2', signed Nguyen Duc Gia, Duc Hoa, 19 June 1947).

128) CAOM, Conspol 294, document: RDVN, Tribunal militaire de Gia Dinh, Cabinet du Commissaire du Gouvernement, no. 62/UV, Objet: 'Observation', adressé au Tribunal du peuple du village de Binh Quoi Tay (sous couvert du Comité exécutif de la délégation de Thu Duc), Gia Dinh, 25 November 1947, signed Nguyen Van Luong.

129) CAOM, Conspol 294, document: RF, HCF pour l'Indochine, Bureau Fédéral Doc-

If there seems to have been a debate on arbitrary practices and violence, the onset of 'revolutionary violence' was no longer within the control of the Central Committee of the ICP. It was only in 1950 that the Viet Minh would understand the importance of religion in Nam Bo and take a moderate stance with the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai communities. Having understood the importance of a necessary alliance, the Expeditionary Corps forces and Viet Minh went ahead to organise possible joint action with 'sects' while granting them some autonomy. On the French side, liaison missions were constituted with the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai and Binh Xuyen. The Viet Minh, for their part, also set up the *Cao Dai van* and the *Hoa Hao van* (special propaganda committees with the forces). For the two parties, this also meant not fighting religious forces firmly rooted in Nam Bo, but rather finding common ground to jointly lead the guerrilla or counter-guerrilla forces.[130] On the Expeditionary Corps military front, 1947 was marked by the creation of specialised commando companies 'completely reserved for dealing with rebel gangs'.[131]

Vietnamese monographs published since the 1990s on the anti-French War in the South often raised the problem faced by the ICP concerning the presence of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao communities. The documents clearly refer to acts of repression undertaken in an attempt to limit the influence and instrumentalisation of these movements by French military forces. However, the terms used to refer to judgment proceedings conducted in Viet Minh military courts on Cao Dai or Hoa Hao loyalists accused of massacres were succinct, to say the least. A regional monograph focused entirely on the iron triangle configured by Hoc Mon, Duc Hoa and Trang Bang reveals that directives from the Nam Bo Executive Committee to resolve the Cao Dai problem were misunderstood: 'Because they did not sufficiently grasp this directive, a number of cadres in the

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umentation, no. 822/D6, Note a/s 'de la Juridiction sommaire des Tribunaux populaires V.M.', Saigon, 8 November 1947 (tampon du Capitaine Faucon, signed Larroque).

130) If the ICP directives available for the year 1947 are to be believed, it was only in December that the Viet-Minh authorities showed any interest for the agit-prop of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, although for the Khmer community or the Catholic religion the committees of agit-prop operated well before. See 'Resolution of representatives at the conference of the country Committee, 16–20 December 1947', in *Van Kien Dang toan tap, tap 8*, pp. 351–352.

131) *Indochine 1947*, pp. 34–35. Decision of the CSTFEO of 24 February 1947. An overview of the severity of combat of commando units is given in Henri de Brancion, *Commando Bergerol, Indochine 1946–1953* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, coll. 'Troupes de choc', 1989) and Muelle, *Bérets rouges en Indochine*.

politburo in the Zone were too radical both in their knowledge and management of the problem.'[132]

The accusation falls upon the political cadres of the army and the leftist faction of the Viet Minh.[133] Recent studies on the army acknowledge that, during joint force operations, 'errors were committed in political work concerning the populations'.[134] The general monographs on the southern resistance are more explicit but not necessarily more accurate:

> In a certain number of regions at Hoc Mon, Trang Bang, Duc Hoa, a certain number of sections in the joint force B, during its confrontation with reactionary Cao Dai armed forces, had even wiped out a certain number of loyalist Cao Dai compatriots, leading to serious consequences, such that many loyalists no longer had any faith in the resistance, a certain number abandoned it to return to the temporarily-occupied Zone or followed the enemy to counter the revolution once again.[135]

Another extract written in identical terms using the expression *mot so* ('some', 'a certain number') to mean the actors in this tragedy, states that the purging was carried out 'indiscriminately on Cao Dai loyalists and reactionaries of the religion resulting in damage within the community'.[136] According to the authors of the history of the 7th Military Zone, 'this error had serious consequences' in the long run and was subjected to harsh self-criticism. It took a long time to recover from the negative impact of these errors.[137]

How did this new official history, tentative yet offering new avenues, assert itself from the 1990s? The answer is undoubtedly political. The advent of the Doi Moi (Renewal) in 1986 allowed for freer discussion on sensitive subjects. A prosaic, rather than political, reason might explain this retrospective regret

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132) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 84.

133) Tran Hai Phung and Luu Phuong Thanh (chu bien), *Lich su Sai Gon—Cho Lon—Gia Dinh khang chien*, p. 130.

134) *Lich su giai phong quan Hoc Mon*, p. 84.

135) Nguyen Viet Ta (chu bien), *Mien Dong Nam Bo khang chien*, p. 126. See also Tran Hai Phung and Luu Phuong Thanh (chu bien), *Lich su Sai Gon—Cho Lon—Gia Dinh khang chien*, p. 130. For the new revised edition of 2007 (Nxb Lao Dong), see p. 84.

136) Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam, Bo Tu Lenh Quan Khu 7, Ho Son Dai (chu bien), *Lich su Bo Tham muu quan khu 7. Mien Dong Nam Bo (1945–1975)* (History of the Staff of the 7th Military Zone. East of Nam Bo) (Hanoi: Nxb Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1994), p. 42.

137) Ho Son Dai (chu bien), *Lich su Bo Tham muu quan khu 7*, p. 42. In September 2009, the television channel of Ho Chi Minh-City (HTV9) telecast a documentary in two parts on the Viet Minh resistance in the triangle consisting of Duc Hoa, Bao Diem and Hoc Mon west of Saigon. Ref.: Phim tai lieu, *Giai phong quan Hoc Mon—Ba Diem—Duc Hoa* (Documentary film: The Liberation Army of Hoc Mon—Ba Diem—Duc Hoa).

and self-criticism. The presence of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao communities with their own cultural, economic, religious and even political specificities in the Mekong Delta are nowadays acknowledged as a factor of cohesiveness in this part of the country. In addition, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religions that emerged from a Buddhist renewal process in the 1920s and 1930s are endogenous 'grassroots' religious movements (*noi sinh*), which is of interest to researchers.[138] With the rapid growth of tourism during the last decade, the Cao Dai temples, so peculiarly adorned, are must-see sites in the Mekong Delta. The return of folklore and its commercial trail, the reinvention, rediscovery and affirmation of an authentic southern tradition, has allowed these communities to reoccupy a visible place in the social and mental space of Nam Bo. Yet, while these two religious communities officially recognised by the Committee of Religions no longer represent any potential danger, their leaders and cultural manifestations are nonetheless tightly controlled by the state. An example is the difficulties encountered with the Hoa Hao community since 1999 following the official recognition of an association as its representative.

Conclusion: Provisional Considerations

The restitution of historical facts is a challenge for the historian working on the history of Vietnam. It still weighs heavily on the official historiography, a 'positivist' and political reading of the war and revolution. As with all historical processes that achieved independence through violence and civil war, Vietnam was no exception to the rule of bloody transgressions. It was shaped by decades of war during which mass exterminations were perpetrated. While recent research has facilitated the study and analysis of the massacres of colonised Vietnam and during the Vietnam War, very few studies have been devoted to this phenomenon between the Vietnamese themselves and the way it overlapped in different social spheres. The phenomenon on the endogenous front deserves greater attention because it provides key insights into the nature of human relationships in this country. Several provisional conclusions emerge:

– The importance of the geographic, social and mental sphere of this region invites questions. Politics of territory and identity intertwined and confronted

138) Nguyen Manh Cuong and Nguyen Minh Ngoc, *Ton giao—tin nguong cua cac cu dan vung dong bang song Cuu Long* (Religions—Belief Systems of Populations in the Mekong Delta) (Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Phuong Dong, 2005), p. 9.

each other before they could co-operate and live in harmony.[139] The importance of the political context: the year 1947 was a decisive turning point in Franco-Vietnamese relations, amid negotiations, the search for a national alternative to Ho Chi Minh, and the conduct of war. In particular, the Mekong Delta was the crucial stage where the 'rice battle' took place, thus affecting the popular mind-set and hence affecting the course of the war. This was a paradoxical space where 'the breakdown in social trust' was mixed with a patchwork of small zones with divergent interests. This formed a terrain that favoured the rise of diverse belief systems and violence in situations beset with conflict. From the nineteenth century, the growth of local messianisms and millenarianisms heightened as imperialist structures crumbled.[140] Moreover, the rebels' successes were not solely due to a geographic configuration that favoured ambush. One had to consider the particular 'atmosphere prevalent in Cochinchina'. Since Viet Minh power in the South was short-lived, the failures and abuses of the ICP were not as easily perceived as in the North and the attraction of a 'resistant' ideology was more enduring.[141]

– The history of massacres, which lasted nearly an entire year in 1947, must not be disconnected from the context of violence that characterised Nam Bo in wartime. More specifically, the tactical alliance between an ideologically driven Viet Minh, upholder of law and modernity, and a striking force assembled with underworld elements, supporting violence, merits further studies in order to better understand how violence was organised along with the mechanisms leading to its rapid rise. The 'dynamic of fanaticism', described by historian Claude Gautier, and its 'double tier', referring to the collusion of an exacerbated politico-religious context with aggressive and arbitrary political decisions, might explain how a process of violence unfurled.[142] This micro history of the surrounding areas of war-torn Saigon cannot be generalised. However, the example of this 'excessive' repression against religious forces is instructive. It involved first a vast political operation aimed at subjugating the population

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139) Bourdeaux, *Emergence et constitution de la communauté du bouddhisme Hoa Hao*, pp. 42–123.

140) Nguyen The Anh, *Parcours d'un historien du Viêt Nam* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2008), pp. 575–583.

141) *Indochine 1947*, p. 216 (HCF-IC, EM Particulier, 1074/EMP, Fiche, Objet: 'Situation politique et militaire de l'Indochine', Saigon, 20 July 1947).

142) Claude Gautier, 'Quelques problèmes de définition de la violence en politique: l'exemple de la fanatisation', *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, Vol. 4 (2002), pp. 515–523.

to the Viet Minh revolution under the iron hand of the ICP cadres. In this sense, it went beyond the regional level and embraced the national level: for the DRV leaders, thereafter retreating to the bush; the loss of the South meant the beginning of the end. The directive of January 1947 to intensify combat, issued by the president, Ho Chi Minh, legitimised the use of violence. The process of 'destruction/submission', suggested by Jacques Sémelin in his analysis of the massacres, applies perfectly to the southern policy of the Viet Minh during the year 1947.[143]

This evidently did not mean the collective elimination of religious communities hostile to the ideology of the resistance, which would have been impossible, but rather implementing organised murder on a daily basis to impact the entire community. The use of 'legal' ideological violence instituted by the Viet Minh to confront the challenge of the Republic of Cochinchina raises questions about the political modernity that the movement was claiming to establish.

These civilian massacres also question the relative failure of the Viet Minh in Nam Bo in their partisan policies. Following Stalin, who 'had succeeded in combining the strong potential of the national resistance rooted in native soil (i.e. the essentially defensive and telluric force of patriotic self-defence against a foreign invader) with the aggressiveness of the global and international communist revolution', the movement under Ho Chi Minh was aimed at this double perspective.[144] However, the unleashing of violence, under the aegis of Nguyen Binh, discredited the Viet Minh among local populations. At the same time, a strong peasant base prevailed in a context of loyalty linked to an extraordinary crony relationship between dignitaries and the masses. Thus, patriotism backed by messianism in the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious movements largely contributed to fighting the Viet Minh on this field of action. In his memoirs, Mai Chi Tho does not hesitate to draw parallels: 'their deep-rooted belief was not any less inferior to the faith of the communists' ideal'.[145] Last, France's intervention in Vietnamese affairs was decisive because it helped topple Viet Minh power in the South. When the political veneer

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143) 'The goal here is to cause civilian deaths to partly destroy a collectivity so as to completely subjugate those who remain. By definition, the process of destruction is hence partial but in its impact it is intended to be global.' See Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', p. 488.

144) Carl Schmitt, *La notion de politique—Théorie du partisan* (Paris: Champs Flammarion, 1992), p. 261.

145) Mai Chi Tho, *Hoi uc*, p. 141.

slips and ambitions of revolution shrink drastically in contact with crude and constraining realities, the simple and brutal scheme of war is revealed with its cortege of horror, sacrifice and absurdity. It is worth recalling that the character 'A' from Heiner Muller's *Mauser*, broken by the executions he had carried out in the name of the Party, was judged by his organisation for these acts of weakness and then faced the same fate as the enemies of the revolution.[146]

– This wide-scale politico-military operation at the regional level may have been led through the mediation of people's tribunals, the very tool for revolutionary coercion and terror. Regret for murderous transgressions, shared by various authors of official history, is neither the first nor the last in the complicated history of the DRV. The excesses of revolutionary justice initiated by the ICP machinery and later by the Labour Party (Dang Lao Dong) have been described *a posteriori* as unfortunate 'revolutionary blunders'. They were obviously much more than that. We have discussed the horrific plight of Cao Dai villages in Quang Ngai during the days of August 1945, but this tactic of political purification also reminds us of the terror-stricken years of agrarian reform during the 1950s. These histories of extreme violence between Vietnamese people seem distant today. However, a watchful eye over the handling of recent political affairs shows that the SRVN has not completely broken away from a process that continues to be routed through political tribunals. The binary logic of supporting or opposing the regime has not yet been abandoned, as recalled in the last instances of the declared dissidence, branded with the same accusation charges since 1945: 'reactionary', 'espionage', 'subversion'. This raises a painful question: Was the logic of revolutionary antagonism, applied to the war in the twentieth century, with massacre as a dimension to hasten capitulation of the adversary, an essential driving force behind the cohesion of a socialist nation built at an accelerated pace and constantly seeking to assert its identity?

– This discussion questions the societal model which the ICP intended to enforce in Nam Bo, which resulted in a reunified Vietnam, at peace today. By conducting a 'purification' of the society, the elimination of 'troublesome elements' with a view to favouring a 'revolutionary' product, we are confronted by the local representation of the totalitarian process which beleaguered Viet-

146) Heiner Muller, *Hamlet-machine, Horace—Mauser–Héraclès 5 et autres pièces* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979/1985, 2001 edition), pp. 43–64. See also the analysis of *Mauser* in Wolf Kittler, 'Laws of war and revolution: violence in Heiner Muller's work', in Hüppauf, *War, Violence and the Modern Condition*, pp. 349–350.

nam for decades. Nam Bo saw two belligerent entities with different social, spiritual and political ambitions. On the one hand, educated revolutionary cadres were clear about the legitimacy with which the DRV's ascension to power provided them. They were inclined to a certain political arrogance in the promise of a new law. On the other hand, there was a peasant population considered 'dangerous' or 'suspicious' because it was still steeped in supernatural belief systems and had to be led, by will or by force, towards the creation of a new society, revolutionary and totalitarian in nature in the sense that it would rule and encompass all human needs and thoughts. New society versus traditional society, national-communism versus localism-pluralism in the context of a colonial war and exacerbation of political or religious fanaticism: conflict seemed inevitable. In the end, however, it generated a certain consciousness on the one hand and called for a necessary adaptation of 'national law' over 'local tradition' on the other. The march towards totalitarianism was confronted at the grassroots level by daily politics of religious communities firmly rooted in their territories (a territoriality that is today acknowledged), feet anchored in the muddy delta and bearers of another kind of humanism, of another world vision (Cao Dai, Catholic, Hoa Hao universalisms), other values, from this fertile mental humus in quest of the supernatural.[147] If the war served to foment the growth of Vietnamese totalitarianism, the seeds of this totalitarianism were detectable in the roots of this absolute, iniquitous belief system, that out of civil war, class war, freedom war, and here the messianic war (communism versus millenarianism) would emerge a more just, egalitarian, civilised society, a vector of scientific modernity incarnated by the ultimate catchword 'socialism'.

147) See: Thien Do, *Vietnamese Supernaturalism: Views from the Southern Region* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).