# Vietnam's Communist Revolution

## *The Power and Limits of Ideology*

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# Introduction

## *The Vietnamese Revolution in World History*

The odds are stacked against revolutionaries in any society. Most have never had a chance to wield state power because even weak governments command sufficient forces to defeat them. Even if revolutions successfully overthrow the *ancien régime*, young revolutionary states from France to Russia have often faced powerful foreign enemies that make their survival even more remarkable. This book focuses on Vietnam as one of those rare exceptions in modern world history when revolution succeeded and endured.

In this study, I trace the worldview of Vietnamese revolutionaries over an eighty-year period, starting from the 1920s when they were a band of outlaws who dreamed of building a communist paradise; through the decades in between, when they struggled to seize power, build a new society, and defeat foreign interventions; and to the late 1980s when they attempted in vain to save socialism at home and abroad. The revolution effectively ended then, but its legacies are surprisingly resilient: the communist regime is under tremendous pressure for change but has stubbornly refused to abandon its widely discredited ideology. Thus, this book places ideology at the center of nearly a century of modern Vietnamese history. I argue that ideology helped Vietnamese communists persevere against great odds, but did not lead them to success and left behind dismal legacies.

In the popular image, Vietnamese revolutionaries appear as pragmatic nationalists who inherited strong patriotic traditions and whose heroism deserves great admiration. By closely examining their vision, this book shows them in a very different (yet not necessarily negative) light – as radicals who dedicated their careers to utopia. The story the reader

encounters here is less sanguine than that told in numerous accounts of this revolution: the deeply held belief of Vietnamese revolutionaries was the source of not only glorious triumphs but also colossal tragedies.

This book serves three goals. First, it aims to be a historical study of communist thought in Vietnam with a special focus on the worldview of revolutionaries. I am interested in how these Vietnamese imagined the world surrounding them and how Marxist-Leninist concepts inspired them. Few previous studies of this kind exist. Scholars of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese revolution have commonly dismissed Vietnamese communism as ideologically shallow.

Second, this book hopes to offer explanations for the foreign relations of the Vietnamese communist state. Unlike most existing accounts, the explanations I provide here are centered on the Marxist-Leninist ideology of state leaders. My central claim is that ideology was a primary factor shaping Vietnam's external relations. Because Vietnam is a country of growing importance in Southeast Asia, scholars, students, and policy makers must be aware of the robust legacies of ideology in Vietnamese politics today.

Third and finally, this book can serve as a case study about the significance of revolution in world politics. At one point, the Vietnamese revolution had a critical impact on the global order and became a beacon in the eyes of millions around the world. The light from that beacon ultimately led to nowhere, yet that fact reflected the inherent limits of radical politics in solving human problems, not the limits of Vietnamese leaders' revolutionary commitments. This book is the first study that traces those commitments over the entire length of the revolution, showing how they once turned Vietnam into the vanguard of world revolution.

For all that this book attempts to accomplish, I do not claim to offer a comprehensive history of the Vietnamese revolution.[1] Nor is this book

[1] For notable studies of particular periods or events, see Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A State Born of War, 1945–1954* (unpublished manuscript); Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1991); Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution, 1945–1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975* (New York: Armonk, 2003). For a rare comparative study that stresses the role of the communist ideology in the Vietnamese revolution, see Clive Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia 1900–1980: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001).



aimed to be a diplomatic history of communist Vietnam.[2] My primary objects of analysis are not particular events and policies but the evolving thoughts of revolutionaries about Vietnam's relations with the world. Major policies and historical events are discussed only if they were relevant to or reflected significantly in the worldview of revolutionaries. This Introduction will first present the puzzle about the Vietnamese revolution and the comparative scholarship on the role of radical revolutions in world politics. I will then discuss the Marxist-Leninist worldview of Vietnamese communists and its role in their revolution.

## THE PUZZLE ABOUT A MISUNDERSTOOD REVOLUTION

During much of the twentieth century, many anti-Western revolutions swept throughout Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[3] Embracing ideologies from communism to Islamism, those revolutions sought to overthrow or roll back Western domination. Revolutionary states, whether large (Russia and China) or small (Cuba and Nicaragua), might have deterred but were never able to defeat the West. Many have collapsed, including the once mighty Soviet Union. Most survivors have in fact made peace with their former Western enemies. Nevertheless, even small revolutionary states had tremendous impact on world politics in their heydays. For example, we now know that the attacks in June 1950 that started the Korean War were launched at the initiative of Kim Il-sung, who persuaded Stalin and Mao to go along.[4] Kim failed in his goal to conquer South Korea, but the war drew the United States back to mainland East Asia and escalated tensions between Washington and Moscow. The Cold War might have been confined to Europe if Kim had not made the move. China's participation in the Korean War accelerated

[2] Major studies that have been published in recent years include: Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and David Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] Of course, there were other revolutions that were not against the West such as the Chinese revolution of 1911. The term "the West" here can be understood broadly as the countries in the Western European-American bloc that are economically capitalist and culturally secular.

[4] Kathryn Weathersby, "Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives," in Christian Ostermann ed., *Cold War International History Project Working Paper 8* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 1993).

its own domestic social revolution, forced the indefinite delay of its plan to invade Taiwan, and deepened its conflict with the West.

In an endeavor even bolder than North Korea's, communist North Vietnam decided to orchestrate an insurgency in South Vietnam in 1959 against the wishes of not only the United States but also the Soviet Union and China, eventually drawing all three into the conflict. Despite committing about half a million troops to the conflict at one point, Washington failed to achieve its goal of defending its South Vietnamese ally. The conflict in Vietnam profoundly divided American elites, seriously damaged American credibility around the world, and lent moral support to many radical movements in Africa and Latin America. Some observers credit the conflict for inspiring "antisystemic movements" in the 1960s and 1970s in North America, Europe, Japan, and Latin America.[5] One source counts at least fourteen revolutions that ensued in the seven years following US withdrawal of troops from South Vietnam in 1973.[6]

Scholars of international politics have made the case that the great French Revolution introduced the mass conscripted armies and the practice of foreign interference into weaker states.[7] By contrast, the conflict in Vietnam contributed to the American move to abandon conscription and revert to the paid volunteer military of the eighteenth century (with some modifications). American failure in Vietnam led to its retreat from nation-building missions abroad in the subsequent two decades. This self-restraint was partially lifted only with the Al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, which, for the first time since 1814, brought war to continental United States.[8] Al-Qaeda was hosted by the Taliban state in Afghanistan, another revolutionary state that had earlier battled Soviet forces and accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union.[9] The Taliban state not only waged war on the United States indirectly through its support for Al-Qaeda but also drew Washington and its allies into a costly war that now stands as the longest in American history.

[5] Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989), 35–36.

[6] Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 178.

[7] Richard Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics; International Systems in Perspective* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 45–46.

[8] George Herring, "The War that Never Seems to Go Away," in David Anderson and John Ernst, eds. *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 346.

[9] For discussions of the Taliban's ideology as a fundamentalist movement, see William Maley, "Interpreting the Taliban," in William Maley, ed. *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1–28.



Given their limited military and economic capabilities, the ability and determination of small but radical states like North Vietnam and Afghanistan to inflict such humiliation on the superpowers pose a significant analytical puzzle. Their risky behaviors did not conform to the normal notion of rationality. The death of some states (Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, Afghanistan's Taliban) and the dire poverty of survivors (Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam until recently) suggested the steep price they paid for standing up against powerful external enemies. The puzzle is: What were the thoughts of revolutionary leaders in those states? How could they even think of challenging those much more powerful than they were?

These questions must be asked for all revolutions, but they hold special importance in the Vietnamese case because the nature of this revolution has been widely misunderstood.[10] During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese revolutionaries were commonly portrayed either as pawns in the game of great powers or as nationalists who inherited a tradition of patriotism and were motivated simply by national independence. The image of Vietnamese revolutionaries as minions for Moscow or Beijing was frequently put forward by US leaders as a reason for intervention. In this image, Vietnamese communists neither possessed their own belief nor were they capable of independent action. The then-Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk testified before a Congressional committee in 1951 that Vietnamese communists were "strongly directed from Moscow and could be counted upon ... to tie Indochina into the world communist program."[11] A decade later, when he sent American troops to Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson pointed to Beijing as the real culprit:

> Over this war – and all of Asia – is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Vietnam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.[12]

[10] For a full treatment of all perspectives in the debate over Vietnam in the United States, see David W. Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[11] Ibid., 97. For a recent analysis of early American arguments for intervention, see Andrew Rotter, "Chronicle of a War Foretold: The United States and Vietnam, 1945–1954," in Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds. *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 282–308.

[12] Lyndon Johnson, "Lyndon B. Johnson Explains Why Americans Fight in Vietnam, 1965," in Robert McMahon, ed. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1995), 210–211.

Whether Moscow or Beijing was behind Hanoi, the domino theory justified US intervention, as then-Senator Hubert Humphrey spoke in 1951, "We cannot afford to see southeast [sic] Asia fall prey to the Communist onslaught ... If Indochina were lost, it would be as severe a blow as if we were to lose Korea. The loss of Indochina would mean the loss of Malaya, the loss of Burma and Thailand, and ultimately the conquest of all the south and southeast Asiatic area."[13]

Not all Americans were persuaded by Rusk, Johnson, and Humphrey. In opposing American intervention, early critics harped on the nationalist myth about traditional animosity between China and Vietnam as if it were truth.[14] Senator William Fulbright claimed that

> Ho Chi Minh is not a mere agent of Communist China ... He is a bona fide nationalist revolutionary, the leader of his country's rebellion against French colonialism. He is also ... a dedicated communist but always a Vietnamese communist ... For our purposes, the significance of Ho Chi Minh's nationalism is that it is associated with what Bernard Fall has called "the 2,000-year-old distrust in Vietnam of everything Chinese." Vietnamese communism is therefore a potential bulwark – perhaps the only potential bulwark – against Chinese domination of Vietnam.[15]

Although admitting that "it is not meaningful to speak of the Viet Minh as more nationalist than communist or as more communist than nationalist," Fulbright believed that their belief in communism would not be sufficient to overcome Ho and his comrades' instinctive fear of China.[16] In his 1989 memoir, Fulbright disclosed that he had believed as early as 1965 that Ho "was a true patriot, like Tito of Yugoslavia."[17]

[13] William Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships: Part I: 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 96.

[14] Premodern relationship between China and Vietnam was fundamentally peaceful and periods of war were rare. In fact, the Vietnamese have historically fought against other Vietnamese or against other states on China's southern frontier far more often than against Chinese. See Keith Taylor, "The Vietnamese Civil War of 1955–1975 in Historical Perspective," in Andrew Wiest and Michael Doidge, eds. *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 18–22. Also, Tuong Vu, "State Formation on China's Southern Frontier: Vietnam as a Shadow Empire and Hegemon," *HumaNetten* (forthcoming).

[15] J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), 112, 114.

[16] Fulbright approvingly quoted Bernard Fall who speculated that "Ho is probably equipped with an instinctive Vietnamese fear of Chinese domination ..." Ibid., 112.

[17] J. William Fulbright with Seth Tilman, *The Price of Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 110.



In an influential book that has been touted as "the bible for opponents to the war in the 1970s,"[18] scholars George Kahin and John Lewis echoed Fulbright and claimed that "American support of France [in the early 1950s] forced Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh into an unwelcome dependence upon China and denied the movement the freedom to act in accordance with the historically conditioned, anti-Chinese proclivity of Vietnamese nationalism."[19]

Some war critics did notice, and in fact admire, certain revolutionary policies that went beyond traditional Vietnamese nationalism. In his famous address in 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. took issue with the US government for rejecting

> a revolutionary [Vietnamese] government seeking self-determination, and a government that had been established not by China (for whom the Vietnamese have no great love) but by clearly indigenous forces that included some communists. For the peasants, this new government meant real land reform, one of the most important needs in their lives.[20]

Although both sides in the debate had a point, this book suggests that many arguments by the antiwar camp do not stand up to scrutiny. The Vietnamese revolution was, at heart, a communist revolution, and Vietnamese revolutionaries as a group were internationalists no less than their comrades in the Soviet Union or China. Although Dr. King was correct that the government in Hanoi was led by indigenous forces, he underestimated its commitments to world revolution. While giving priority to their revolution, Ho and his comrades did not ignore revolutions elsewhere. As a Comintern representative for Southeast Asia, Ho presided over the formation of the Indochinese, Siamese, and Malay

[18] George Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Debate Continues," *The American Historical Review* 92: 2 (April 1987), 354.

[19] George Kahin and John Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Delta, 1969), 326–327. Kahin and Lewis's arguments were later repeated by many American diplomatic historians and prominent journalists whose works have profoundly shaped the popular perception of the Vietnamese revolution. For example, see George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 3–4; Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 2; Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), esp. 8; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), esp. 110; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Light: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 159–162.

[20] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," April 1967 in Marvin Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, et al., eds. *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 313.

communist parties in the 1930s. In mid-1949, he ordered Vietnamese units into southern China to assist Mao's army in defending its base from attacks by Chiang Kai-shek's forces.[21] Vietnamese troops helped establish communist regimes in Laos and Cambodia in 1975, and until the 1980s Vietnam directly supported communist parties in other Southeast Asian countries. Postwar Vietnam trained sappers for, and sent surplus weapons to Algeria, Chile, and El Salvador in service of revolutions there.[22] Significantly, the internationalist spirit of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is still alive today, a quarter century after the collapse of world communism. As recently as 2012, Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong journeyed across the globe to Cuba, where he preached about the merits of socialism and the evils of capitalism.[23] If not because of internationalist commitments, why would the Vietnamese leader want to thumb his nose at Washington? Why did he risk alienating the US government and American corporations on whose aid and investment poor Vietnam was dependent?

Dr. King's characterization that the Vietnamese had "no great love" for China cannot explain the awe and veneration Vietnamese communists showered on Chinese leaders in the 1950s and the slavish deference the Vietnamese leadership today expresses toward China.[24] It is true that North Vietnamese leaders implemented a "real land reform" by redistributing large amounts of land to landless peasants, but they also executed

[21] Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, *Cac nuoc Xa hoi chu nghia ung ho Viet Nam khang chien chong My, cuu nuoc* [Socialist countries' assistance to Vietnam's resistance against America to save the country] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2013), 53–55.

[22] Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Covertly Supplied Weapons to Revolutionaries in Algeria and Latin America." Cold War History Project e-Dossier No. 25, n.d. Available at www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-25-vietnam-covertly-supplied-weapons-to-revolutionaries-algeria-and-latin; Merle Pribbenow, "Vietnam Trained Commando Forces in Southeast Asia and Latin America." Cold War History Project E-Dossier no. 27, January 2012. Available at www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-27-vietnam-trained-commando-forces-southeast-asia-and-latin-america. Pribbenow collected the information from the PAVN history blog www.vnmilitaryhistory.net/index.php, where veterans posted comments, personal documents, and sometimes internal official documents.

[23] The text of the speech of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in Cuba in November 2012 is available at http://vov.vn/Home/Bai-noi-chuyen-ve-Chu-nghia-Xa-hoi-cua-Tong-Bi-thu-tai-Cuba/20124/205986.vov

[24] For the popularity and influence of Maoism from the late 1940s through the 1950s, see Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), esp. 39–41; for the enormous influence of China on Vietnamese politics today, see Alexander Vuving, "Vietnam: A Tale of Four Players," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1 (2010), 366–391.



about 15,000 landlords and rich peasants in the process.[25] For all that bloodshed and fanfare, barely five years later most peasants had been coerced into giving up their lands and joining Maoist-style cooperatives. By the time Dr. King made his speech, most farmland in North Vietnam had been collectivized for nearly a decade.[26] Forced to stay in cooperatives and denied any escape by a strict household registration system in the cities, the free farmer of North Vietnam was reduced to a modern serf. He and his family were chronically hungry and occasionally threatened by famines.

Antiwar activists misunderstood the nature of the Vietnamese revolution, but proponents of intervention fared no better, as Vietnamese communists were no stooges of Moscow or Beijing. At the height of the war, Hanoi leaders scorned both their Soviet and Chinese comrades for not daring to stand up against US imperialism.[27] After their victory in 1975, they thought of themselves as the vanguard of world revolution and snubbed not only the United States but also China and the Soviet Union.[28] Hanoi attempted to defend the international communist camp even when its big brothers had abandoned it. In 1989, when Eastern European communist regimes were about to fall, the general secretary of the VCP prodded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to convene a conference of all communist and workers parties to discuss strategies for saving the socialist camp from the coming collapse.[29] When Gorbachev turned a deaf ear to the request, Vietnam asked China to create an anti-imperialist alliance (Beijing also said no).[30]

In the end, Vietnamese communism stopped short of exporting revolution beyond Indochina because its radical character had created enemies

[25] Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975* (Singapore: ASEAN Economic Research Unit, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 3.

[26] See Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Andrew Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry: Premature "Transition to Socialism" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1986).

[27] On their criticism of Khrushchev in 1963–1964, see R. B. Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, v. 2 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), chap. 13, esp. 227; for their criticism of China in 1971–1972, see Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 197–202.

[28] Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

[29] Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc* [The Winners], v. 2 (Los Angeles: Osinbook, 2012), 63–67.

[30] Tran Quang Co, *Hoi uc va suy nghi* [Memories and Thoughts] (July 2005). Published online; available at www.diendan.org/tai-lieu/ho-so/hoi-ky-tran-quang-co

everywhere around it, from Vietnamese peasants who resisted collectivization, to Chinese and Cambodian leaders who resented Vietnam's claims to be the vanguard of world revolution. The prointervention camp widely exaggerated the security threat of the Vietnamese revolution to the United States. Yet that threat never materialized, not because Vietnamese communists were not real communists as the antiwar camp claimed, but because their fanaticism was self-destructive and engineered their own demise. With all due respects for their intellect and conscience, both sides in the Vietnam War debate misunderstood the Vietnamese revolution because they failed to grasp its communist nature. As this debate continues today, the same misunderstanding is frequently found in scholarship.[31]

## REVOLUTIONS AND WORLD POLITICS

A study of ideology in the Vietnamese revolution is valuable not only for the enduring Vietnam War debate but also for the comparative study of revolutions. The voluminous comparative literature on revolutions has privileged factors such as social classes, state structure, and economic and political crises.[32] However, ideology tends to be neglected. Revolutions are generally treated as domestic events: although they may be influenced by international factors, their bearing on international politics lies outside the scope of most works.

A handful of studies that do address the international dimensions of revolutions nonetheless indicate their enormous impacts on world politics.[33] As Robert Jervis recently observes, "Revolutionaries rarely

[31] For recent reviews of the Vietnam War debate, see Andrew Wiest, ed. *America and the Vietnam War* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009); David Anderson and John Ernst, eds. *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

[32] For reviews, see Jeff Goodwin, "Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements," in Thomas Janoski, Robert Alford, Alexander Hicks et al., *The Handbook of Political Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 421; Jack Goldstone, "Comparative Historical Analysis and Knowledge Accumulation in the Study of Revolutions," in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds. *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 70.

[33] See Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*; Mark Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Robert S. Snyder, "The U.S. and Third World Revolutionary States: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 43: 2 (1999): 265–290; Stephen Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Patrick Conge, *From Revolution to War: State Relations in a World of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); J. D. Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Theda Skocpol, "Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization," *World Politics* 40: 2 (1988), 147–168; Peter Calvert, *Politics, Power, and Revolution: An Introduction to Comparative Politics* (Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1983); and Kyung-won Kim, *Revolution and the International System* (New York: New York University Press, 1970). Earlier works, such as Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, eds. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 81–94; Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics*; and James Rosenau, *International Aspects of Civil Strife* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964) discussed but not focused solely on the issue. For a list of studies on particular revolutions, see Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, 378–395. For a recent study of "renegade regimes" that include many revolutionary states, see Miroslav Nincic, *Renegade Regimes: Confronting Deviant Behavior in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).



have small ideas, and big ones are almost always disruptive internationally."[34] Martin Wight is more specific:

> A revolutionary power is morally and psychologically at war with its neighbours all the time, even if legally peace prevails, because it believes it has a mission to transform international society by conversion or coercion, and cannot admit that its neighbours have the same right to continue existence which it assumes for itself.[35]

With their messianic beliefs, revolutions not only brew tension and breed war with neighbors but also bring about fundamental changes in the international system.[36] Analyzing the evolution of the "international society" since the French revolution, J. D. Armstrong argues that the relationship between revolutionary states and the international society has typically been tense.[37] The main source of tension is ideological: "The belief system on which revolution was founded and which legitimized the assumption of state power by the revolutionary elite is certain to run counter to the prevailing political doctrines of most other states, many of which may represent the 'old regime' values against which the revolution was aimed." From the United States in 1776 to the Soviet Union in 1917, for survival reasons young revolutionary states have been forced to eschew part of their ideological beliefs to accommodate the Westphalian state system. At the same time, Armstrong shows that they have sought to change that system to make it suit their visions.

[34] Robert Jervis, "Socialization, Revolutionary States and Domestic Politics," *International Politics* 52: 5 (2015), 609–616.

[35] Wight, *Power Politics*, 90.

[36] Of course, misperception and uncertainty can lead to war involving revolutionary states. See Walt, *Revolution and War*; and Conge, *From Revolution to War*.

[37] Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order*, 9.

For example, the challenge from the French revolutionary state generated acceptance for nationality and popular support as new principles of legitimacy for states in the interstate system.[38] The Soviet state succeeded in making self-determination an international norm and in placing social issues such as labor and racial discrimination on the international agenda. Revolutionary states often provoked change indirectly, that is, through the reactions of their opponents and supporters. "Third World" revolutionary communist states encouraged the United States to undertake a hegemonic role in the postwar world. Although revolutionary states were often forced to accept certain international laws they despised, their challenges compelled established states to defend and show greater commitment to those laws than they would have otherwise.

In theory, Fred Halliday tells us, we should expect revolutions to impact world politics just by examining the beliefs of revolutionaries. Halliday points out that no clear separation exists between the domestic and the international spheres for revolutionary thoughts; whatever their particular national or internal origins, all past revolutionary ideologies not only called for a new domestic order but also claimed the salience of their vision for the international sphere.[39] Claims of global relevance by revolutionaries were not made arbitrarily but were based on a coherent logic. Revolutions legitimized themselves by appealing to abstract and universal principles such as freedom, independence, dignity of the people, and proletarian justice. These principles were obviously not limited by national boundaries. From the American to the Iranian Revolution, part of revolutionary discourses also evoked the fraternity and peace between nations and peoples. Enemies of revolutions were perceived not within national boundaries but on the global scale, whether as imperialists or infidels.

Given their definition of enemy, one should expect revolutionary states to export revolution abroad if they had the opportunity to do so. As Halliday argues, "much as revolutionary states may deny it and [their] liberal friends downplay it, the commitment to the export of revolution, i.e. to the use of the resources of the revolutionary state to promote radical change in other societies, is a constant of radical regimes."[40] Not only did revolutionary states provide substantial material assistance to

[38] Ibid., 111, 156, 198, 243.
[39] Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics*, 58–59.
[40] Ibid., 99.



their comrades abroad but also the creation of international organizations, such as the Soviet Union's Communist International (Comintern) or Cuba's short-lived Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL), were examples of revolutionary states' deep commitment to international solidarity.

John Owen calls organizations such as the Comintern and OSPAAAL "transnational ideological networks," and argues that those networks have been a salient feature of world politics for centuries.[41] Such networks involve ideologues across states who share beliefs and interests in promoting their ideologies, whether it is Calvinism or democracy, communism or Islamism. Networks are independent from states, but they can offer incentives for rulers to intervene abroad to promote their ideologies during times of transnational ideological polarization. When rulers do so, they frequently do not separate self-interest or national security from ideology. As Owen explains, "state rulers who are members of an ideological movement will tend to see the interests of the ideology and of their particular state as complementary, such that in protecting the state they are advancing the ideology and vice versa."[42] For Owen, ideology and interests are mutually constituted, and ideologies are no less important than interests in explaining war and international alliance.

If the nature of the Vietnamese revolution was defined by the communist ideology, as I claim, Vietnam adds another case to the comparative literature, demonstrating the salience of revolutionary ideology in world politics. In this case, the size or the material capabilities of the country did not predict the potential impact of a domestic revolution on world affairs. Explaining that mismatch between domestic capabilities and international influence requires an appreciation for the radical worldview of Vietnamese revolutionaries to be discussed next.

## THE VIETNAMESE REVOLUTIONARY WORLDVIEW

Ideology and worldview are the most important concepts in this study. Ideology can be defined broadly as a set of systematic beliefs and assumptions about the nature and dynamics of politics, while worldviews are beliefs and assumptions more specifically about the nature and dynamics

[41] John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510–2010* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
[42] Ibid., 36.

of world politics.[43] Although ideology can be influenced by material interests, it often defines what those interests are.[44]

The Vietnamese communist movement emerged in the 1920s as an offshoot of Vietnamese nationalism. Modern national consciousness emerged in colonized Vietnam around the beginning of the twentieth century.[45] Anticolonial nationalism was not a uniquely Vietnamese phenomenon but a global trend across Asia at that time.[46] Most Vietnamese communists began their political careers being motivated simply by the desire to liberate Vietnam from French colonial rule, just like any other anticolonial activists. Over time, they became communists by joining these networks abroad or inside Vietnam. Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Josef

[43] For other definitions, see Alexander L. George, "The "Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making," *International Studies Quarterly* 13: 2 (1969): 190–222; Giovanni Sartori, "Politics, Ideology, and Belief Systems, *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 2 (1969): 398–411; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); John Gerring, "Ideology: a Definitional Analysis," *Political Research Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1997): 957–994. In the field of Foreign Policy Analysis, worldview and ideology are often studied from psychological perspectives under the concept of "belief system," or more narrowly, "operational code." For a brief review of recent scholarship on belief systems and operational code, see Jonathan Renshon, "Stability and Change in Belief Systems: the Operational Code of George W. Bush," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no.6 (2008): 821–828. For an earlier but more substantial overview of the literature, see Richard Little and Steve Smith, *Belief Systems and International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1988). In contrast, the literature in International Relations (IR) tends to avoid the concept of ideology and focuses instead on the broader concept of "ideas," defined in one version as "beliefs held by individuals." "World views" are regarded as ideas that "define the universe of possibilities for action" at the most fundamental level. Other, less important types of ideas are "principled beliefs" and "causal beliefs." Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3–11.

[44] Nigel Gould-Davies, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics During the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1: 1 (1999): 97–99; Nina Tannenwald, "Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7: 2 (2005): 20–22. The notion that ideas and interests are mutually constituted is of course the basic premise of the constructivist school in International Relations. See Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons, eds. *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Sage, 2013), 112–144.

[45] Unlike most scholars, David Marr and Huynh Kim Khanh avoid the term "nationalism" and do not distinguish between Vietnam's modern nationalism and traditional patriotism. See David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[46] For a broad discussion of the trend, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 3.



Stalin, and Mao Zedong exerted the greatest influence on the Vietnamese communist worldview. In its essence, this worldview portrayed international politics as essentially a life-and-death struggle of the oppressed proletariat against their capitalist oppressors regardless of nationalities. The proletariat was to triumph in this historic struggle because they were standing at the pinnacle of a historical trend. This trend would deliver to the human race the most materially advanced and ethically progressive society that it could ever have hoped for.

In the 1920s, Marxism-Leninism was not a dogma as it would later become. Back then, the theory was still basking in the aura generated by its scientific claims and progressive vision. That vision was still a new and unfolding reality in the young Soviet Union that held so much promise for communists worldwide. As Odd Arne Westad describes in the case of China, "[t]he European, pre-Soviet ideal of socialism had appealed to some Chinese because of its opposition to imperialism, but it was the practice of socialism in the Soviet Union that set their minds on fire."[47] One can get a flavor of the same excitement in the words of Truong Chinh, a leader and major theoretician of Vietnamese communism, who described what Marxism-Leninism meant to him as follows:

> Marxism-Leninism arms us with a revolutionary worldview, enlightens our hearts and minds, and helps us find our lives' mission and meaning. It helps us grasp the developmental laws of nature, or society, and of thought. It places us right at the center of the struggle between the antagonisms so that we can see all aspects of things and find truth. It helps us grasp the most essential, important, and significant things in this complex world.... It helps us understand not only the present but also the future, making us aware of our responsibilities to life. Thus, Marxism-Leninism does not make our hearts barren and unresponsive to the good and beautiful things in life as some people think; on the contrary, it makes us love life and humankind more passionately. It lifts our souls and gives us our dreams. It fires up our hearts with great communist ideals.[48]

Truong Chinh, whose pseudonym meant "Long March" in Vietnamese, exemplified the background and career of many Vietnamese communist leaders. He was born Dang Xuan Khu in 1906 into a local gentry family in northern Vietnam, was expelled from a vocational high school for

[47] Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 374. For the popularity of communist ideas in China in the 1920s, see Michael Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); for Indonesia, see Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965).

[48] Truong Chinh, "Bai noi chuyen tai Dai Hoi Van Nghe Toan Quoc lan thu III" [Speech at the Third National Conference of Artists and Writers], December 1962. *Hoc Tap* 12 (1962), 26–27.

joining a demonstration to honor the death of the nationalist intellectual Phan Chau Trinh, and became a communist in his early twenties while in colonial prison.

As Truong Chinh's biography suggested, Marxism-Leninism built on nationalist frustrations when it entered Vietnam. Unlike the common myth about the necessarily antagonistic relationship between nationalism and communism, Marxism-Leninism as a theory did not oppose nationalities.[49] Marx and Engels argued that the proletariat "must rise to be the leading class of the nation and constituting itself the nation."[50] In the same vein, Lenin asked, "Is the sense of national pride alien to us, Great-Russian, class-conscious proletarians? Certainly not! We love our language and our country, we are doing our utmost to raise *its* toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of *its* population) to democratic and socialist consciousness."[51]

Moscow's pledge of support for anticolonial movements certainly helped to convert young Ho Chi Minh and many other Vietnamese to communism. Their conversion in turn started a thought process that was long, muddled, and fraught with tensions for each individual and for the movement as a whole. A key question that the Vietnamese grappled with early on concerned the relationship between their and world revolution. Eventually, they settled on a worldview in which the Vietnamese revolution was imagined as an integral part of world revolution. A successful proletarian revolution in Vietnam was a step forward for world revolution, which was to occur country by country, region by region.

As a component of world revolution against capitalism and imperialism, the Vietnamese revolution was no longer concerned only with national independence. Vietnamese communists did not sacrifice national interests as their opponents accused, but identified such interests with

[49] As Martin Mevius argues, "From Cuba to Korea, all communist parties attempted to gain national legitimacy. This was not incidental or a deviation from Marxist orthodoxy, but ingrained in the theory and practice of the communist movement since its inception." Martin Mevius, "Reappraising Communism and Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 37: 4 (2009). See also David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 4.

[50] Quoted from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party." Martin Mevius, "Reappraising Communism and Nationalism," 382–383.

[51] V. I. Lenin, "The National Pride of the Great Russians," in V. I. Lenin, *The National-Liberation Movement in the East*, 2nd impression, transl. by M. Levin (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 86. Italics in original.



those of working classes in Vietnam and elsewhere. To them, national liberation was important but would mean little if class oppression and exploitation continued. Vietnamese communists claimed that their revolution could advance *both* sets of interests, and it was *the only approach* capable of doing so. The main question that confronted them throughout the revolution was not to sacrifice one set of interests for the other, but how to divide the revolutionary mission into smaller goals to gain tactical advantages at any particular point in time.

The term "national" to Vietnamese communists thus acquired an additional, specific content. Their definition of the nation was based on shared class interests as well as on shared language or ethnicity. In their view of national history, for example, Vietnamese communists were not proud of everything Vietnamese; rather, they embraced those traditions that could be claimed as created and sustained by "working classes" (such as "peasant uprisings"), and disowned those that were attributable to "ruling classes" (such as Confucian culture and the oppression of women).

In politics, Vietnamese communists viewed fellow Vietnamese of "exploitative classes" as a small minority in the Vietnamese national community. These classes did not represent the nation and ought to be eliminated even though they were ethnically Vietnamese. At the same time, even though French workers were French nationals, they shared the same interests with the Vietnamese masses as both were exploited and oppressed by French colonialists and imperialists. To Vietnamese communists, those who saw only the French-Vietnamese ethnic division but not the cross-national solidarity between French and Vietnamese working classes fell victim to a form of nationalism that was "bourgeois" and "narrow."

On becoming communists, Vietnamese revolutionaries did not have to give up their nationality while acquiring membership in the international brotherhood of fellow communist activists, parties, and movements. In their view, the brotherhood was much more than a security or economic alliance, although that was an important part of it.[52] Conceptually the camaraderie was understood to be the material form of a historical phenomenon called "the Age of the [Russian] October Revolution." Its

[52] Without the Soviet bloc, especially China, as their vast rear base, communists would not have been able to dominate Vietnam. Nowhere in Southeast Asia was any communist party able to take power even though Malayan and Philippine communist movements were stronger than their Vietnamese counterpart at the end of World War II. See Jeff Goodwin for an insightful comparison, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945–1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66–133.

moral foundation was proletarian internationalism [tinh than quoc te vo san] defined as the solidarity among working class parties across many national communities. In its ideal condition, members of the brotherhood shared a proletarian spirit and working class interests unencumbered by geographical barriers and unpolluted by narrow national sentiments.

Relationship with other socialist brothers has been the cornerstone of Vietnamese foreign policy throughout and beyond the revolution. Until the late 1950s, Vietnamese communists imagined the brotherhood in its ideal condition and displayed deep admiration and full trust in the Soviet Union. They viewed Soviet leadership of world revolution as a given historical condition, not as a contradiction to the principles of equality embodied in the brotherhood. Soviet leadership did not mandate the submission of smaller nations to Moscow, nor did it imply any inherent inferiority on their part. However, the attitude of key Vietnamese communist leaders toward Moscow changed in the wake of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the early 1960s. They rallied to Mao and condemned Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence as deviating from the mission of world revolution. Yet they also disapproved of Mao's attempts to create a new Communist International that would signal a formal split in the Soviet bloc. From idealistic they became more realistic in their attitude while still loyal to internationalism.

By the late 1960s, the outpouring of world support elevated the Vietnamese revolutionary spirit to the extent that Hanoi leaders began to imagine themselves being the vanguard of world revolution. Their attitude is best captured by the term "vanguard internationalism," which was a mixture of fervent national pride and fiery revolutionary ambitions. Their national pride sprang less from any patriotic traditions than from an exaggerated estimation of their lifetime revolutionary experience that had been gained in the particular context of Vietnam. That pride in their revolutionary achievements fuelled grand ambitions to shape the future of Southeast Asia and to lead the "tidal waves" of world revolution. After Hanoi's victory in the civil war, vanguard internationalism contributed to Vietnam's tensions with its brothers and wars with Cambodia and China in 1979. As their postwar foreign policy encountered colossal failures, Hanoi leaders abandoned their conceit of being vanguard while remaining committed to internationalism.

Although the relationship between communist Vietnam and its brothers was far from ideal, the remarkable thing was its steadfast loyalty to internationalism. Whether being idealistic, realistic, or self-centered, throughout the entire course of the revolution Vietnamese communists



never imagined breaking away from the brotherhood. Although they expected to be assisted by their brothers, to say they joined the brotherhood just for material aid would be an insult to them.

The depth of their commitment to the brotherhood is clear if it is contrasted to their attitude toward noncommunist developing countries. On the one hand, Vietnamese revolutionaries expressed solidarity and maintained ties with peoples and movements in other colonized and dependent countries. In their thought, the struggle against European colonialism and American imperialism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America constituted a major front of world revolution. They adamantly advocated decolonization and cultivated friendly and mutually supportive relations with former colonies, including those such as India where a "bourgeois" nationalist movement led decolonization. In turn, support for their revolution from other oppressed peoples around the world greatly emboldened the Vietnamese.

On the other hand, relations of revolutionary Vietnam with so-called "Third World" countries were neither as deep nor as wide-ranging as those with its communist brothers. The Vietnamese saw little benefit to learn from countries that were less revolutionary than theirs. China and the Soviet bloc, not other Third World states, were where they sent thousands of officials and students to study. In the first decade after their rise to power, Hanoi leaders copied quite faithfully Soviet and Chinese political institutions and models of economic development – from Stalin's 1936 Constitution to his cult of personality, from land reform to collectivization, and from central planning to the preoccupation with building heavy industry – down to the names of particular institutions such as *Su That* [Soviet *Pravda* or Truth], *Nhan Dan* [Chinese *Renmin Ribao* or People's Daily], *Doan Thanh Nien Cong San* [Soviet *Komsomol* or Young Communist League], and *ho khau* [Chinese *hukou* or household registration]. These borrowings should not be interpreted as indicating Vietnamese inability of independent and original thought. Rather, they conveyed their enthusiasm about the most advanced revolutionary ideas at the time and their ambition to realize those ideas in a historical context far less conducive to those ideas than was either the Soviet Union or China.

Without acknowledging full Vietnamese agency, it would be difficult to appreciate the richness of their thought and imagination which encompassed the meaning of life, the history of human society, new concepts of the nation and the world, and Vietnam's place in the global revolutionary struggle. The worldview of Vietnamese communist leaders did not come

as a package but evolved over time as their ideals encountered harsh realities. Individually, they were neither uniformly well versed in Marxist-Leninist theory, nor did they always achieve consensus over the interpretations of particular revolutionary concepts. As a group, their systematic and radical worldview profoundly distinguished them from others in the anticolonial movement, as well as powerfully shaped the trajectory of the Vietnamese revolution.

## ROLE OF IDEOLOGY IN THE VIETNAMESE REVOLUTION

Ideology played three broad roles in the Vietnamese revolution. Its first role was to serve as a guide or a compass. Ideology defined the mission of the revolution, which was not just national independence but also social changes and contributions to world revolution. Ideology offered Vietnamese revolutionaries a tangible vision of the future in the form of a society modeled after the Soviet system. That vision helped them keep a long-term perspective and survive short-term challenges. Ideology provided a set of lenses for them to interpret and explain world events thousands of miles away with little direct impact on Vietnam. Throughout their revolution, ideology informed Vietnamese communists' assumptions about the nature and trends of world politics and about the behavior of foreign states such as the Soviet Union, China, or the United States. In addition, the Leninist ideology viewed war as an extension of revolution. In some situations, this suggested particular war strategies that placed as much emphasis on mass mobilization as on the deployment of main force units. Without the Leninist concept of correlation of forces, Hanoi might well have been deterred by massive American firepower.

Ideology did not always point Vietnamese revolutionaries in the right direction, and one can even argue that it frequently caused them to make wrong interpretations of world events. Their interpretations of US behavior, for example, were often too dogmatic and negative. Their use of Leninist concepts in devising war strategies caused gross miscalculations and grave losses of revolutionary forces during the *Tet* Offensive. In the post-1975 period, they completely misread the world situation. Ideological loyalty unnecessarily created enemies for them left and right. Their belief in the Stalinist model had disastrous consequences for the Vietnamese economy. The regime today has lost its legitimacy because the Party clings to an outdated doctrine. The point is: Ideology influenced and explained many decisions made by Vietnamese revolutionaries but did not determine their success or failure in any particular endeavor. The



intense ideological belief that history and justice were on their side simply gave revolutionaries the courage (or foolhardiness, from another perspective) to stand up to powerful – real or imagined – domestic and external enemies, whereas ideological concepts offered them some tools to operate, but the outcome was decided by numerous other factors.

The second role of ideology was to serve as the bond linking members in the communist movement domestically and internationally. Domestically it was the glue that kept the Party together most clearly during the prepower phase. As long as they truly believed in it, the ideological mission enthralled Party members and helped them to persevere in the face of extreme hardship and danger. Ideological principles deeply informed the organization of the Party, its membership policy, its standard operating procedures, and its communication to the masses (propaganda). Externally, ideology linked Vietnamese revolutionaries to a transnational network of states and movements sharing belief in the same ideology. In the prepower phase this network provided information, training, support, and sanctuaries from French police. This network rescued the Vietnamese movement after it had been nearly destroyed by colonial suppression in 1931 and in 1940. This network gave incentives to revolutionaries to coordinate their strategies with the world communist and worker movement to take advantage of the available resources.

Again, ideology was not always helpful, and created problems for the Vietnamese revolution as much as it helped. Throughout the 1940s, Vietnamese communists received little or no support from the transnational network of worker and communist movements. The network simply ignored Indochina and left it at the mercy of imperialism. If the Soviet Union had lost to Germany, the Vietnamese revolution would have been doomed to fail. In the same vein, it would have faced tremendous challenges if Chinese communists had lost the civil war on mainland China. The collapse of the network in the late 1980s contributed to the effective end of the Vietnamese revolution.

During the 1960s, ideology was a source of bitter factional conflict in Hanoi and between North Vietnam and its allies. Ideology fostered factionalism because Marxism-Leninism was broad enough to be interpreted in more than one way. Ideological disagreement with Moscow and Beijing created a significant headache for Hanoi, which felt that the revolution needed support from both brothers. Brutal ideological discord within the Vietnamese communist leadership in the 1960s could have destroyed the revolution. Again, the larger point is: Ideology embedded in the organization of the Communist Party and in the transnational

network was useful to Vietnamese revolutionaries in some aspects, but eventually did not help them succeed.

The third role of ideology in the Vietnamese revolution was to be a crucial tool for building a cohesive state. "The dictatorship of the proletariat" justified the concentration of power within state organs and the relentless and systematic violence carried out against counterrevolutionaries. Ideological principles were deployed to restructure society according to the Stalinist vision that Vietnamese revolutionaries cherished. The land reform, for example, used ideological principles to categorize the rural population and turn villagers against each other; in the process the Party was able to extend its control down to the village level. Ideology offered justifications for *complete* state control of the economy. Robust or creative ideological arguments, whether produced locally or borrowed from the transnational network of communist and worker movements, provided the content for effective state propaganda. Ideological indoctrination was a *systematic* tool for creating long-term loyalty to the state.

However, ideology assisted state building at the expense of the economy, society, and culture. As the state expanded its bureaucratic control, the economy suffered. Each wave of radical agrarian and capitalist reform (1953–1956, 1958–1960, 1976–1978) was followed by a grave economic crisis. The systematic and persistent efforts by revolutionary authorities to promote and enforce a dogmatic belief in Marxism-Leninism severely inhibited the development of science, thought, and culture. When the leadership reluctantly abandoned central planning and rural cooperatives in the late 1980s, Vietnam was the third poorest and one of the most oppressive countries in Southeast Asia.

In terms of Vietnam's particular foreign policies and general orientations of external relations, ideology played a central role in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)'s decision to join the Soviet bloc in 1948. If Vietnamese revolutionaries had not been communists, they would not have made that decision. Ideological considerations subsequently contributed to the DRV's decision to accept the Geneva Agreements. Ideological reasons further explained why the DRV sided with China in the Sino-Soviet dispute, but did not support Beijing's bid to form a new Communist International during 1963–1964, despite Beijing's offer of substantial aid. Ideological belief in the unity of the socialist camp led Hanoi to denounce efforts by Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia at various times to pursue their own paths to socialism. The same belief motivated Hanoi in its attempts to save the Soviet bloc on its deathbed. Ideology was a key factor in Vietnam's normalization of relations with China in 1990 and its deference to China since then. Inductively derived evidence thus indicates that ideology was critical throughout the Vietnamese revolution and is indispensable for explaining key foreign policies and the general orientation of Vietnam's external relations. Those policies could have been far-sighted or mistaken, and those external relations could have benefited or harmed Vietnam's national interests, but the influence of ideology is undeniable.



Of course, that influence waxed and waned. In the entire course of the revolution, the 1940s and the 1980s were two periods when that influence ebbed. During both periods, the revolution was fragile domestically and isolated internationally. In the 1940s, the Party disintegrated following its failed revolt in 1940. In that decade, it was for the most part isolated from the world revolution. In the 1980s, Vietnam experienced a protracted and severe economic crisis, and was economically embargoed by the West and diplomatically isolated by most countries in the United Nations. If international and domestic events gave the impetus for pragmatism, leadership changes facilitated ideological moderation in both periods. A new central leadership of the Party was formed in northern Vietnam in 1941, with the return of Ho Chi Minh. The 1980s similarly saw a gradual transition from Le Duan and Le Duc Tho to Truong Chinh and Nguyen Van Linh. In both periods, it should be noted, the Vietnamese revolution by no means veered away from doctrinal orthodoxy directed from Moscow. In the 1940s, Ho and Truong Chinh were following standing Comintern policy that communists cooperated with nationalists to struggle against fascism. In the 1980s, Vietnamese reformers like Truong Chinh and Nguyen Van Linh were following the lead of Gorbachev up to 1988. Nevertheless, when they realized that Gorbachev had deviated from orthodoxy, they labeled him a traitor and supported the (failed) coup against him.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1, I show how communism arrived in Vietnam and how early Vietnamese communists developed their understanding of the concept of revolution. Chapter 2 traces developments of Vietnam's communist movement through the 1930s, at the end of which a revolutionary vision crystalized. The achievement of unity over that radical vision within the leadership of the movement indicates that ideological conflict, especially between Nguyen Ai Quoc and his comrades, has been much exaggerated in existing scholarship.

The 1940s was a critical period when Vietnamese communists seized power, organized a state, and became a member of the Soviet bloc. Chapter 3 will show that, even while pursuing diplomatic recognition

from the United States and negotiating for peace with France, they tried desperately to attract the attention and support of their initially uninterested Chinese and Soviet comrades. The evidence presented in this chapter specifically refutes the "missed opportunity" hypothesis popular in the Vietnam War literature.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the 1950s and discuss how ideological loyalty might have shaped key decisions of the Party. Chapter 5 focuses on the ideological debate among Vietnamese leaders in the late 1950s and early 1960s in response to the Sino-Soviet split. The events of the late 1960s to the end of the Vietnam War are analyzed in Chapter 6. In this period, Vietnamese thoughts and policies began to reflect what I call "vanguard internationalism." Hanoi leaders remained deeply committed to internationalism while becoming more self-centered and displaying an unabashed national pride in Vietnam as the vanguard of world revolution.

During the postwar period, triumphs faded and tragedies accumulated. In Chapter 7, I argue that vanguard internationalism was responsible for Vietnam's failure to take advantage of the favorable postwar world order after the communist victory in 1975. Chapter 8 examines the 1980s, which witnessed the growth in Soviet-Vietnamese ties. Gorbachev's rise to power in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s helped a faction led by Truong Chinh to galvanize support for economic reform. Yet the Tiananmen protests and the imminent collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989 frightened Vietnamese leaders. They denounced Gorbachev and sought an alliance with China to save world socialism.

The Vietnamese revolution effectively ended in the late 1980s when the Stalinist model was abandoned at home, the Soviet bloc crumbled, and several top leaders of the Party died within a few years. Nevertheless, the legacies of ideology have proved quite durable. As discussed in Chapter 9, the two-camp view of world politics remains powerful in Vietnamese politics today despite the emergence of other worldviews. The central role of ideology throughout the Vietnamese revolution conveys many implications for scholarly debates that will be discussed in the epilogue. These debates concern the Vietnam War, and revolutionary and postrevolutionary politics.

## NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

In this book I used the inductive method and discursive analysis to interpret the worldview of Vietnamese revolutionaries. The main task I set out to do was to trace their thoughts over time through various sources,



with particular attention to how key concepts were employed to explain reality and assert foreign policy positions. Throughout this study I link ideology to specific policies, but the focus is really on broad external relations. Not all foreign policies can be explained directly by ideological loyalty, nor can they be linked to ideological debates.[53] Where possible, I sought to demonstrate what ideological issues were at stake and how they were debated before policies were made. Over time, it was possible to observe a clear pattern suggesting that Vietnamese communists were not only loyal to Marxism-Leninism but were also acting under its guidance despite and besides their concerns for other factors.

I lived in socialist Vietnam during 1975–1990 and was heavily exposed to state propaganda from middle school through college. Propaganda penetrated the lives of Vietnamese young and old not only at school and in the workplace but also through the ubiquitous public address system which blasted out revolutionary news and songs everyday from dawn to dusk. Although I did not have a choice back then, this exposure immersed me in Vietnamese political discourse at the height of the revolution, taught me its codes and structures, and trained my ears to be sensitive to subtle shifts in it. The experience also was valuable in the sense that I *lived* the discourse *in current use* together with millions of other Vietnamese, as opposed to merely accessing it through archived texts. If the discourse today may sound archaic to most Vietnamese speakers, it was live at the time, still bubbling with raw passions and vigorous authority. Living, or one might even say breathing, the revolutionary discourse everyday through its ebbs and flows for fifteen years gave me confidence in my ability to appreciate its power as well as its limits in Vietnamese politics.

Of course, the experience cannot substitute for documented evidence. As my interest in the subject grew over the last decade, I have made numerous visits to Vietnam, a few weeks at a time, to carry out interviews and collect materials for this project. More specifically, I conducted research at the National Archive III in Hanoi over the course of a year in 2002–2003 and again in 2013. I also read a broad range of newspapers published from the 1920s to 2000s at the Revolutionary Museum and the National Library in Hanoi.

[53] For a nice review of an earlier literature that employed decision-making models to explain Vietnamese foreign policy, see Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnamese perspectives on international security: Three revolutionary currents," in Donald McMillen, ed. *Asian Perspectives on International Security* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 57–76.

Without the new sources emerging from Vietnam since the 1990s, this study would not have been possible. The most important source for this book was the fifty-four volumes of *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [Collected Party Documents] published by the Vietnamese Communist Party during 1998–2007. This source includes about 40,000 pages of documents produced by central and local Party organs and covering seventy years of Party history, from 1924 to 1995. Although some documents in these volumes had been released before in less complete forms, most became available to researchers for the first time. A major strength of this source is the broad scope and wide variety of the documents, which covered not only central Party policies and analyses but also local implementation, and not only politics but also economy, propaganda, and culture. Another key strength of the collection is the length of its coverage; earlier collections typically covered a particular period of the revolution. The resolutions and political reports of almost every Central Committee plenums prior to the 1980s were included, allowing me to trace the thoughts of Party leaders through time without breaks. For the colonial period when the Party operated in secret, the collection included many documents acquired from Russian and French archives.

The collection undoubtedly represents only a small portion of the Party archive, which remains off-limits to most researchers. Another limit of this source is the formal character of the documents it contains. In general, it is not a place to look for information on informal interaction within the top leadership, nor does it say much about the differences in the viewpoints of individual leaders on particular policies. However, my intention was not to write an event-driven history of the Vietnamese revolution. To the extent that we were interested mostly in Party leaders' collective and formal thoughts about the world, including their self-images and their images of other countries, this limitation was not debilitating.

There is no question that the documents in the collection had been edited before publication. The level of editing varied: pre-1975 documents appeared to have been edited only lightly; those before 1945 were hardly edited at all. As I have explained elsewhere, the publication of these volumes was unprecedented in the history of communist Vietnam.[54] The decision to publish them reflected the fears and anxieties among the second generation of Vietnamese leaders who did not participate much

[54] Tuong Vu, "Van Kien Dang Toan Tap: The Regime's Gamble and Researchers' Gains," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5:2 (Summer 2010), 183–194.



in the revolution and who needed to borrow the legitimacy of their predecessors by disclosing, as much as possible, the seven decades of Party records for public view. The publication of the volumes, as the Politburo explained in its decision, was to demonstrate not only the revolutionary past of the Party but also its contributions to the nation, not only the Party's successes but also (some of) its failures. The volume for 1940–1945, for example, included a special section with numerous documents issued by the Viet Minh front to mobilize national solidarity, not to launch class struggle. The volume for 1948 contained a document that, for the first time, showed that the Politburo authorized a quota of landlords to be executed (one per 1,000 people) for the land rent reduction campaign.[55] This document is significant because it makes clear that the mass killings were premeditated. Top Party leaders knew what was going on, and the excesses on the whole cannot be blamed on zealous local peasants. These examples suggest that, to some extent at least, editors of the volumes were committed to the multiple goals of the project and did not edit them merely to exaggerate the communist beliefs and credentials of Party leadership.

The second kind of source that directly informed this study includes a very wide range of Vietnamese newspapers, journals, books, personal diaries, and memoirs published over the last seven decades in Vietnam.[56] These publications are rich in all kinds of information, from high politics to everyday life. The newspapers published in the 1930s or earlier were useful for gaining a sense of how communism was portrayed and received in French Indochina. From 1945 to 1946, the communists did not yet control the media and I was able to access a dozen newspapers published by groups of various political affiliations. Scholars have scarcely used some communist newspapers, such as *Viet Nam Doc Lap* (Independent Vietnam) and *Su That* (Truth), even though these were the primary newspapers for the crucial decade of 1942–1950. During this decade when the central purposes of communist policy were to support

[55] See Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam [Vietnamese Workers' Party], "Politburo's Directive Issued on May 4, 1953, on Some Special Issues regarding Mass Mobilization," transl. by Tuong Vu. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5:2 (Summer 2010), 243–247.

[56] The most notable among these are Le Van Hien, *Nhat ky cua mot Bo truong* [Diary of a minister], 2 vols. (Da Nang: Da Nang Publishing House, 1995); Nguyen Huy Tuong, *Nhat Ky* [Diary] (preserved by Trinh Thi Uyen and edited by Nguyen Huy Thang), 3 vols. (Hanoi: Thanh Nien, 2006); Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995); Tran Quang Co, *Hoi uc va suy nghi*; and Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc*. Some valuable memoirs or documents are posted by PAVN veterans on the blog "Quan Su Viet Nam" <www.vnmilitaryhistory.net/index.php>.

the Allies (1942–1945) and to mobilize for national unity and independence (the entire period), the promotion of communist ideals found in these newspapers in both subtle and overt forms was telling evidence of deep commitments.

Many personal diaries of contemporaries, from communist leaders to writers and soldiers, have been published posthumously within the last decade and are particularly revealing about the thinking of people at the time. Diaries of dead communist soldiers in South Vietnam spoke to their ideological commitments beyond patriotism.[57] Remarkably, some authors of these diaries such as Dang Thuy Tram and Nguyen Van Thac came from suspect class backgrounds in communist North Vietnam, and their ideological belief and personal sacrifice for a regime that frequently belittled their service stood as unquestionably authentic testaments to the power of ideology in society.[58] Their diaries did not discuss any foreign policy decisions, but the external relations of communist Vietnam were not created simply by its top leaders. On a broader level, those relations that involved savage wars over decades were built on the sweat and blood of millions.

Memoirs by participants in major events were another important source for this study. Some memoirs of high-level officials such as those by Tran Quynh and Tran Quang Co have hardly been used by scholars before, even though they have been around for years in online form. These memoirs offer valuable information about particular policies although they require a careful assessment to discount authors' possible justifications of past policies. The majority of the memoirs that informed this study are of a different kind: they belonged to mid-level officials and former revolutionaries who never held power or have long fallen out of favor in the regime. Examples of these include Tran Dinh Long, Dao Duy

[57] See, for example, Dang Kim Tram, ed., *Nhat ky Dang Thuy Tram* [Diary of Dang Thuy Tram] (Hanoi: Nha Nam, 2005), 39, 68, 256; Dang Vuong Hung, ed., *Tro ve trong giac mo: Nhat ky cua liet si Tran Minh Tien* [Return in a dream: Diary of martyr Tran Minh Tien] (Hanoi: Hoi Nha Van, 2005), esp. 233–234; Dang Vuong Hung, ed., *Mai mai tuoi hai muoi: Nhat ky cua liet si Nguyen Van Thac* [Forever twenty: Diary of martyr Nguyen Van Thac] (Hanoi: Thanh Nien, 2005), esp. 198–199; Tran Van Thuy, *Nhat ky Thanh Nien Xung Phong Truong Son, 1965–1969* [Diary of a Youth Assault Brigade Cadre in Truong Son] (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Hoa Van Nghe, 2011); Do Ha Thai and Nguyen Tien Hai, eds. *Nhat Ky Vu Xuan* [Diary of Vu Xuan] (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2005).

[58] For a similar argument in a recent study of diaries written by Soviet citizens, see Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).



Anh, Tran Van Giau, Nguyen Kien Giang, Tran Dinh, Nguyen Van Tran, Tran Thu, Bui Tin, Hoang Huu Yen, and others. Again, the main purpose was not to search for information about particular foreign policy decisions although some memoirs did contain such information. Rather, the memoirs were useful to gain a sense of how others besides the top leaders thought and talked informally about ideology and politics.

Although not directly useful for this book, a significant new source from Vietnam deserves mention. This is the millions of pages of archival documents from government agencies of the DRV for the period of 1945 to 1975 that are housed in National Archive III in Hanoi. Documents specifically on foreign policy are generally not available from this archive, although documents on foreign relations are. Nevertheless, the available collection reveals beyond dispute the commitments of Vietnamese leaders to developing socialism at home despite repeated setbacks.[59] This collection alone shows that they were *bona fide* revolutionaries dedicated to building utopia no less than were Stalin and Mao. This archival resource on the whole validated and reinforced what I found in other sources.

Most arguments in this study were crafted by juxtaposing various sources. An example is useful here to show how the combined sources help to assess certain controversial statements or issues. In 1958, the DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong sent a diplomatic note to his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai in which Dong essentially concurred with China's sweeping territorial claims in the South China Sea. It is not clear from the note that Dong was acting out of his own will and not under Chinese pressure.[60] Nevertheless, Dong's true intent can be probed by cross-checking three other sources. First, *Nhan Dan*, the Party's newspaper, translated and published in full Zhou Enlai's announcement on China's claims two days after it was made, whereas Dong's note was published eight days later, together with news of huge mass rallies in Hanoi

[59] Examples of works that exploit this source are Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*; Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam*, transl. Claire Duiker (Singapore: NUS Press in association with IRASEC, 2012); Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *Kerkvliet, The Power of Everyday Politics; Ninh, A World Transformed.*

[60] For opposing views on this note by Vietnamese scholars, see Pham Quang Tuan, "Co can phai thong cam cho ong Pham Van Dong?" [Should we have sympathy for Mr. Pham Van Dong?], *Bauxite Vietnam*, June 15, 2014, http://boxitvn.blogspot.com/2014/06/co-can-phai-thong-cam-cho-ong-pham-van.html; Cao Huy Thuan, "Cong ham Pham Van Dong: Gop y ve viec giai thich" [Pham Van Dong's Diplomatic Note: How to Interpret it], *Thời Đại Mới* [New Era], July 31, 2014), www.tapchithoidai.org/ThoiDai31/201431_CaoHuyThuan.pdf.

in support of China.[61] It would be difficult to argue that these prompt and public gestures were made under pressure. The second source that offered useful context to Dong's note was the recently published personal diary of Le Van Hien, the Minister of Finance and a high-ranking leader of the Party until the 1950s. In his diary, Hien expressed joy on hearing that Chinese communist forces seized parts of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea from the French in May 1950 (the Paracels were also claimed by China). Hien thought that the Chinese takeover would help the Vietnamese revolution advance in central and southern Vietnam; he did not raise any sovereignty issues.[62] Still another source: the *World Geography* textbook used in the DRV in the 1950s was translated verbatim from a Chinese textbook that included maps showing in full a nine-dashed line of China's sovereignty claim over most of the South China Sea.[63] The three sources did not completely rule out the possibility that Dong acted merely out of solidarity or that some subtle diplomatic pressure was exerted. Still, *together* they pointed to the greater likelihood of Dong and his colleagues trustfully viewing Chinese as brothers and accepting Chinese claims without any reservation.

[61] T.T.X.V.N. [Vietnam News Service], "Chinh phu nuoc Cong hoa Nhan dan Trung hoa ra tuyen bo quy dinh hai phan cua Trung quoc," *Nhan Dan* [The People], September 6, 1958.

[62] See the entry dated May 14, 1950 in Le Van Hien, *Nhat Ky Mot Bo Truong*, v. 2, 318.

[63] See Nhan Dich Khanh and Chu Quang Ky, *Dia ly the gioi* [World Geography], transl. Nguyen Duoc and Nguyen An (Hanoi: Bo Giao Duc, 1955), 202–203.

# 1

# Revolutionary Paths through the Mind, 1917–1930

Ho Chi Minh, the man who came to symbolize Vietnamese nationalism and communism, was one of the first Vietnamese to convert to Leninism. As he later reminisced,

> At first, patriotism, not yet communism, led me to believe in Lenin, in the Third International. Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery. There is a legend, in our country as well as in China, of the miraculous "Book of the Wise." When facing great difficulties, one opens it and finds a way out. Leninism is not only a miraculous "Book of the Wise… " it is also the radiant sun illuminating our path to final victory, to socialism and communism.[1]

Born Nguyen Sinh Cung (or Con) around 1890, Ho received limited formal education as a child and became a political activist by the end of World War I while living in France.[2] His path from patriotism to Leninism was a common experience shared by many Vietnamese communists, as in the case of Truong Chinh. As Ho admitted, acquiring a belief in Leninism was not the end but just the beginning of a new path. It took time and

[1] Ho Chi Minh, "The Path That Led Me to Leninism," in Prasenjit Duara, ed. *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.

[2] Ho studied Chinese classics at home and may have attended a Vietnamese-Franco elementary school. His formal education was disrupted many times and appeared limited. See Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, transl. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2–7; Thuy Khue, *Nhan Van Giai Pham va Van de Nguyen Ai Quoc* (Online publication, 2011), 595–597; available at http://thuykhue.free.fr/stt/n/nhanvan15-2.html