

CHAPTER ONE

Hanoi's Long Century

STEIN TØNNESSON

The Vietnam War was “the quintessential conflict in the long history of warfare in our century,” says Gabriel Kolko, who thinks it was “virtually preordained” that the USA would try to attain a vital military success to compensate for its failures in Korea and Cuba. He concedes, though, that “it was mainly chance that designated Vietnam as the primary arena of trial” (Kolko, 1994, pp. 419, 436–7). Eric Hobsbawm, the great British narrator of modern history, thinks differently. He finds it “almost impossible to understand” why the USA came to embroil itself in “a doomed war” (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 244). Although the two of them differ, they also have something in common: the notion of a short and tragic century. Hobsbawm has even subtitled his book “The short twentieth century, 1914–1991.” Kolko and Hobsbawm’s century was full of suffering and lacked a meaningful direction, starting as it did when lights went out in Europe, and ending in bewilderment. “Darkness” is Hobsbawm’s last word, and Kolko’s final sentence reads: “. . . a dark night of despair will overcome our world” (Kolko, 1997, p. 168).

From an Asian perspective the twentieth century was long and progressive. The Chinese started their century in 1842, with the Opium War and the loss of Hong Kong, and approached the year 2000 as an almost unified nation enjoying rapid economic growth. The long Vietnamese century began sadly with the French seizure of Saigon in 1859, followed by the “loss of country” in the years up to 1884. After colonization, however, a new generation developed nationalist ideas, formed strong movements in the 1910s–30s, and utilized a favorable opportunity for national liberation in 1945. Yet

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thirty years of sacrifice and struggle were needed before the nation could be unified in 1975. “Mistakes” were later made (in the official, Vietnamese parlance), but reforms from 1986 opened a new progressive stage, this time marked by an attempt to catch up economically. Growth is expected to continue.

This essay is an attempt to see the twentieth century from Hanoi’s angle, with a “long-century approach.” It is a mixture of travelogue and historical introduction, not chronological, but looking at how some main global trends have manifested themselves in Hanoi and Vietnam.

Global Trends

Which are the century’s main trends? The long century was marked by population growth, urbanization and advances in science, production and communication. It saw the dissolution of empires and the construction of nation-states to serve as building blocks for a new global order. There were revolutions, and there were wars, and they were linked to a fundamental struggle over the nature of the world order.

Until 1989, the order was contested between proponents of liberal capitalism and state-directed socialism. Both used nation-states as building blocks, but while the former emphasized free markets, individual freedoms, limits to state authority, and electoral democracy, the latter aimed for social justice through rational economic planning, collective ownership and trade based on reciprocity or solidarity. Towards the end of the century, the liberal order triumphed. Many countries abandoned socialism and integrated themselves in the capitalist world. Thus the prevailing order was one of increasingly free markets both nationally and internationally, and of nation-states with elected governments.

The history of these global trends is marked by four economic and political turning points: 1930, 1945, 1950, and 1978–9.

Turning Points

The long twentieth century had two halves, one imperial and one multi-national. In the first half, many countries were colonized by Europeans and Japanese, who expected the century to be imperial. However, their empires were challenged by nationalist movements, and also by two federations: the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Both were increasingly powerful; both aimed for a world of nation-states. The imperial system suffered a first blow in 1930, the first turning point, when the great depression caused immense poverty, leading to revolts, not the least in Vietnam.

The second turning point was in 1945, when a Soviet–British–US alliance laid the foundation for a multi-national world by winning the first world war – often called “the Second World War” – and founding a number of new institutions with a global reach, notably the United Nations. The war’s immediate losers were Nazi Germany and militarist Japan, but in a longer perspective the main loser was the imperial

system. Japan was immediately relieved of its colonies, and the Europeans gradually gave up theirs. The USA and USSR took over as global leaders.

This global watershed is reflected in the history of Vietnam. The August Revolution of 1945 brought the Indochinese Communist Party – founded in 1930 – to power. The Nguyen dynasty's last Emperor – a French puppet – abdicated, and a Democratic Republic was formed. Despite this promising beginning it took 22 years before Vietnam gained UN membership, and 30 before it got normal diplomatic relations with the USA. By the mid-90s, the Vietnamese leaders had familiarized themselves with the main institutions of the capitalist order, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Still, as late as 1999, neither Vietnam nor China had gained membership in the World Trade Organization, the main multi-national embodiment of liberal capitalism.

Why did it take so long for Asia's two main socialist states to join the global system? The answer lies in the third turning point: 1950. The Chinese communists had just won their civil war and proclaimed the People's Republic. It signed a treaty of alliance with the USSR, and sought to inspire revolutions in other Asian countries. However, counter-revolutionary regimes had been formed in South Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Thus the cold war, which had developed between the Soviet Union and the USA, spread to Asia and divided the continent. In Indochina, the French had returned by late 1945, and after a period of truce with the Democratic Republic, war broke out and, a little later, a new French client state was installed under the former emperor. France hoped to defeat the army of the Democratic Republic, and construct a new nation-state, friendly to France and acceptable to the USA. 1950 was thus a watershed also in Vietnam, where the two camps in the cold war recognized two separate regimes – for the same nation. The two fought each other until 1975, when Vietnam was finally unified, on communist terms.

Vietnam's national unification happened just as the communist movement reached its global apogee. Never before and never after did so many states and political parties base themselves on communist doctrines as in the second half of the 1970s. The tide turned in 1978–9, the long century's fourth turning point, when internal conflicts between communist states provoked open warfare both in Indochina and Afghanistan. International communism had started its decline.

The essay will now make four big sweeps, each looking at one of four significant contradictions: town–country, empire–nation, revolution–reaction, war–peace.

First Contradiction: Town–Country

Between 1900 and 2000 the world's population went from 1.6 to 6 billion. This was an unprecedented growth, and most of it happened in Asia. The shift from west to east is reflected in the balance between France and Indochina. At the time of colonization, there were at least three times more Frenchmen than Indochinese. In the colonial period, the French population stagnated, while the Indochinese doubled. During the two first Indochina Wars, 1946–54 and 1959–75, France baby-boomed, but Indochina boomed more. By 1975, Indochina had surpassed France, and in 1997, when

Table 1.1 Total population in millions (Indochina and France), 1875–1997

	1875/80	1913	1926	1936	1950	1960	1975	1982	1997
France	39	41.5	40.9	41.9	41.8	45.7	52.8	54.4	58.6
Indochina	12	16.4	21.1	23.0	31.4	39.4	58.5	66.3	91.9
Vietnam*	10.5	14.2	17.7	19.0	25.3	31.7	48.1	56.0	76.4
Cambodia	1.1	1.6	2.5	3.0	4.2	5.4	7.2	6.9	10.5
Laos	–	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.9	2.3	3.2	3.4	5.0

Sources: Maddison, 1995, pp. 104–5; Brocheux and Hémery, 1995: 248; 2001: 249; US Bureau of the Census (<http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg>); UNDP 1999.

*The figures for “Vietnam” 1875–1948 are totals for Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. 1960 combines South and North Vietnam (NVN had two million more inhabitants than SVN).

Hanoi hosted a summit of Francophone countries, Vietnam alone had far more inhabitants than France.

The Vietnamese today are young. Some 35 percent are under 15. Thus the vast majority have no personal memory of the wars against France or America, not even the Chinese invasion in 1979, but many remember that troops were away in Cambodia during the Third Indochina War, 1978–89. The three Indochina wars may have cost up to six million lives, and they drove other millions away as refugees. So much suffering. So many dead. Yet in the statistics their numbers drown in childbirth. Nativity was always much higher than mortality. The only exception was 1945, when a famine in the north took an estimated one million lives (Marr, 1995, p. 104). Population growth continued in Vietnam through all three Indochina Wars, and only slowed down when they were over. The annual population growth, which as late as 1960 was almost 4 percent and in 1970 remained over 3, in 1997 went down to 1.8. The fertility rate (number of children for each woman) declined from 5.8 in 1975 to 2.6 in 1997 (UNDP, 1999). Thus Vietnam follows the East Asian trend.

Rural families usually have more children than urban ones. Thus urbanization is caused primarily by migration, not by urban fertility. In the 1990s, for the first time in world history, more people lived in urban than in rural areas. Back in 1900 there were less than twenty cities in the world with more than one million inhabitants, and only three Asian ones: Tokyo, Beijing and Calcutta. By mid-century the number of cities with more than a million people had risen to 50. Indochina’s biggest city, Saigon, had passed its first million by then. French-occupied Hanoi had only some 200,000 inhabitants, but in 1971, the year before the US “Christmas bombing,” it reached its first million, if we include the suburbs. In the years 1950–85, the cities in the world with more than a million inhabitants quintupled to 250.

Throughout the century, Europe remained the most urbanized continent, with Latin America closely behind. However, the most rapid urbanization happened in Africa and Asia. And here it will continue well beyond 2000, since two thirds of the population still live in the countryside. Vietnam remains a nation of village-based peasants, with only one fifth of the population in urban areas. The main explanation for its late urbanization is poverty, but the exodus from southern cities after 1975 also

played a role, and the socialist government gave priority for many years to the countryside, keeping migration to the cities to a minimum. Hanoi long remained a small town in a densely populated delta.

Is Hanoi now on its way to becoming a mega-city? Probably, but not necessarily. The Red River Delta could be “urbanized” without a massive displacement. Through careful planning and investments in infrastructure, one could transform the network of villages into an inter-connected urban system, interspersed with rice-fields. Then people could stay in their villages while being urbanized. This may be desirable, but is unlikely to happen. More and more people are now moving into Hanoi, Haiphong, Da Nang and, above all Ho Chi Minh City – the new name for Saigon. By the late 1990s, it had 4.5 million inhabitants. In 1989, greater Hanoi officially passed 3 million.

In Tonkin – the French name for northern Vietnam – the only form of human habitation is the village, wrote the French geographer Pierre Gourou in 1931. One of his assistants in surveying village society in Tonkin was the young historian Vo Nguyen Giap. Later, as the first commander of the People’s Army of Vietnam and the strategist behind the victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, he made an effort to integrate Vietnamese villages in the larger framework of a struggling nation. Young teachers and poor peasants replaced conservative, elderly land-owners as village leaders, so they could mobilize the village communities in active warfare against the city- and garrison-based colonial army. The wars in Vietnam were decided in the villages. It was said in pre-colonial Vietnam that the power of the emperor stopped at the village gate. Each village was ruled by a self-nominated council of village elders, who negotiated the tax level (money, soldiers and labor) with the emperor’s *mandarins* (public officials). The power of the Emperor rested on his army, perhaps also on the need for someone to organize irrigation systems above the village level.

Hanoi was the administrative center for the northern region of an empire which from 1838 was mainly called *Dai Nam*, but also carried other names, like *Viet Nam*. The Chinese and Europeans called it *An Nam*. Present day *Ha Noi* already existed as a city with a fortress in the period when the Red River Delta was a part of China, and was capital for the independent Viet dynasties from the eleventh century onwards, under the name *Thang Long* (Soaring Dragon). The Nguyen dynasty, who ruled 1802–1945 from the southern city of Hue, chose the name Ha Noi for the former capital. Many of its edifices were torn down and the stones used for mausoleums in Hue.

The words *ha noi* mean “inside the river.” The city lies between three rivers, the *To Lich*, *Kim Nguu* and the big Red River (*Song Hong*). Much of Hanoi is under the water level and is protected by a long dyke. One of the most outrageous plans to be discussed by the Pentagon in the 1960s was to bomb the dykes of the Red River Delta. One of the worst corruption scandals of the globalizing 1990s involved the construction of private houses on top of the dyke, hence endangering it. From the dyke one sees a substantial part of the city, but to get a better view one can mount the tower of the Citadel, constructed in 1812. The Vietnamese flag with its yellow star on a red background has been flying from that tower since the French left in 1954.

Eighty years earlier, the colonizers had started the construction of a French concession under Hanoi’s dyke. This happened after French forces had conquered

the Citadel and declared free trade on the Red River. The French were compelled to withdraw after their commander was killed, and only kept the concession. This backlash led to acrimonious debates in the French National Assembly, paving the way for the assertive political climate that ensured French aggressiveness in Africa and Indochina during the 1880s.

Pre-colonial Hanoi had three separate parts: in the middle a Citadel with a long wall around it, in the south a Temple of Literature (*Van Mieu*) and “university” (*Quoc tu Giam*), and in the east, along the Red River, an agglomeration of commercial villages. The Citadel housed the mandarins with their horses and soldiers. Regular examinations to select mandarins were held on a big square where the National Library is now. In the Temple of Literature, which was dedicated to Confucius, those who successfully passed their exams got their names engraved on a stael mounted on the back of a turtle – a symbol of longevity. Three commercial villages or guilds (*phó phuông*) were inhabited by Chinese merchants, the rest by Viet artisans. Each *phó phuông* had its own specialty, be it silk, silver, hats or furniture, and each was separated from the next by a bamboo fence. Each had its village temple. Regular markets were held in front of the Citadel’s five gates. The Tô Lich River was Hanoi’s artery, with busy traffic of river boats.

The mandarins did not themselves trade, but the Viceroy depended on the river for communication with the provinces and the imperial court in Hue. The proximity to three rivers gave the Citadel an ideal, strategic position, but also made it vulnerable to attacks from ships mounting the Red River. The French captured the Citadel in 1873, and again in 1884. In 1883–5, the French defeated Dai Nam as well as China in war, and the court in Hue was forced to accept two separate French protectorates for the two remaining parts of the imperial realm, Tonkin and Annam. The southern region, Cochinchina, had been colonized 1863–7, and the King of Cambodia had accepted a French protectorate in 1863. These four entities – Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, and Cambodia – were made parts of the French Indochinese Union, founded in 1887. In 1893 a French protectorate was also established for the Lao principalities on the eastern fringe of the Siamese empire. They were merged into a new state, Laos, which became the fifth part of Indochina.

The French thus merged five lands into a Union, a number of principalities into Laos, and in Hanoi they fused the Citadel, the *phó phuông* and the French concession into an integrated city under a French mayor. Most of the Citadel was torn down and new French quarters constructed, with a big cathedral, broad avenues, and spacious villas. The walls between the *phó phuông* were torn down, and ditches were transformed into streets so Hanoi got its “native quarter,” close to the *Ho Hoan Kiem* (Lake of the Returned Sword).

Hanoi was conceived as a Eurasian amalgam, in a century believed to be imperial. The French laid streets and a tramway, built a long bridge over the river, a row of piers, installed telephones and, eventually, an airport. The city-planner Ernest Hébrard fashioned out a new “Indochinese architecture” from a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Southeast Asian and European styles. Many immigrants settled down, not only Viets, but Chinese, Indian Muslims and European Christians. Yet Hanoi preserved much of its village atmosphere. In 1943 it had only 120,000

inhabitants, of whom 5,000 were Europeans and 5,000 Chinese. The statistics from 1943 do not include the Japanese garrison, which was modest most of the time. The Japanese Army was present, but the French continued to rule.

Construction work continued until 1945, but then there was decay. A brief Japanese–French war in March, Revolution in August, the First Indochina War 1946–54, mobilization of North Vietnamese resources for sustaining insurgency in South Vietnam 1959–75, US bombing 1966–8 and 1972, and a lack of priority for urban development until the late 1980s, were factors contributing to Hanoi's dilapidation. Buildings were damaged in street fights and bombing. Frenchmen, Indians, and many Viet Catholics left the city when the communists took over in 1954. The Chinese disappeared in 1978, when some 200,000 Chinese were chased out of northern Vietnam in connection with the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Both in 1955 and 1978, new families moved into the deserted or confiscated houses. In big villas, each family was allotted only one or two rooms. One house could thus provide shelter to many families, sharing a kitchen and a rest room. The buildings were poorly maintained. Few new buildings were built after 1954, except for some apartment blocks on the city's southern outskirts. During the 1960s and early 1970s the Vietnamese leaders saw no reason to invest in Hanoi since it might well be bombed to pieces. Plans were made for a modern, socialist capital in a more suitable adjoining area once Hébrard's colonial city had been leveled by US bombs. But central Hanoi was not destroyed. The Americans mainly bombed industries on the outskirts of the city, and even left the vital bridge intact.

During the war, the population of Hanoi grew almost as rapidly as in the countryside, so the multi-generation houses were crowded. In 1954 each person in central Hanoi had an average of 5.1 square meters living space. By 1982 this had gone down to 2.3, in 1991 to 1.2. This does much to explain the private building boom in the 1990s. In the last decade, many peasants have moved into the city. Some live in guest houses where each room can accommodate 10–30 people, sleeping at intervals.

After the Chinese left in the 1970s, Hanoi became almost purely Viet. Only small groups of East European and Swedish advisors, who mostly lived in seclusion, disturbed the picture of national conformity. Trade and crafts were concentrated in state-owned stores and workshops. Loudspeakers woke people up at 5 a.m. to healthy exercise and news. The buildings remained the same, but the atmosphere had changed. It was gentle, but uniform and thoroughly unfree. The streets smelled from mould and garbage. Noisy East European trucks spewed black exhaust. Old, sinewy and dead-eyed women drew garbage carts through the narrow streets. But crowds of children were laughing, and waves of smiling cyclists gave the impression of a city on the move. People in white shirts, conic hats and green helmets learned how to live closely together and keep their virtue. By 1987–8 Hanoi started to free itself from the chains of the surveillance state. Amidst the decay the Hanoians were able to revive a street life which could not but seduce a visitor. Hanoians who had grown up earlier would later feel nostalgia for the conviviality of the frugal 1960s, 70s and 80s.

War, revolution and socialism saved Hanoi from the capitalist destruction of Asia's other colonial towns. Little has survived of Singapore's Chinatown, although there is a model on the museum island Sentosa. Colonial Hanoi survived. US bombing and

communist rule were less destructive, from an architectonic point of view, than transitions to capitalist modernity. There was decay, but not destruction. Even the French streetcars ran in 1989, although they moved so slowly that one could almost walk as fast. In the 1990s the tramway was scrapped. The destruction of the imperial legacy began.

Second Contradiction: Empire–Nation

World history in the long century was a history of rise and fall of empires. Europeans tried to tie up their colonies in relationships of mutual dependence, but failed. In the 1950s–60s, most colonies gained independence. Europeans turned inwards, concentrating on their own modernization and building the European Union. When France left Vietnam in 1954–5, Western Europe ceased to play a role in the country, but some of the French role was taken over, in the north by China and Russia, in the south by the USA.

Was there anything left of the colonial project, apart from the buildings? Yes, such obvious features as frontiers, infrastructure and administrative culture. Just as in Africa the European empires had outlined the modern state system. They mapped territories, initiated wars and negotiated treaties to define borders, and they linked up cities through modern infrastructure. Or to be precise, the Europeans decided, planned and administered; the work was done by Asians, sometimes forcefully recruited.

The two foremost state builders in Indochina were Governors General Paul Doumer (1897–1902) and Albert Sarraut (1911–14, 1916–19). Government revenue derived from state monopolies on opium, salt and alcohol, and was used to build a system of “colonial roads,” a north–south railway, and two railways to China. Roads were also built to Laos and Cambodia, and the French encouraged Viet migration to these countries, where the Viets functioned as merchants, artisans, fishermen and officials. In 1900 Hanoi became the capital of all of Indochina. A number of monumental buildings were constructed: The Governor General’s Palace, the Palace of the Superior Resident for Tonkin, a theater modeled after the Paris opera, a main post office, new military headquarters within the Citadel, a hospital, and a Pasteur Institute to fight malaria. Albert Sarraut founded the Hanoi University.

Why was Hanoi selected as the capital? The Nguyen dynasty, who continued to rule Annam and Tonkin in name, had its court in Hue. Saigon, which was Indochina’s capital in the period 1887–1900, was by far the largest city, including many European settlers (*colons*). Those factors were used as arguments for choosing Hanoi. An impartial administration was needed, at safe distance from the reactionary court in Hue and the self-interested *colons* in Saigon. A more important reason was Hanoi’s proximity to China. The French purpose in colonizing Tonkin was to cultivate markets in southern China. This was why the railroads to China were built. They never returned the French investments, but proved useful for the transportation of arms to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Because of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, the railways were closed in 1978, but reopened in 1996.

It should be noticed that the French did not make Hanoi the capital of a country matching the territory of today’s Vietnam. Hanoi was given a double function. First,

it was capital of Tonkin. This put it on the same level as the capitals of the four other Indochinese countries (Hue, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Saigon). Second, Hanoi became capital of French Indochina, including Laos and Cambodia.

Like the other colonial powers, the French encouraged a double set of native identities, thus causing ambivalence among local nationalists. On the one hand France based its rule on the pre-existing states. Thus the monarchs in Luang Prabang, Phnom Penh and Hue were left on their thrones, stimulating separate Lao, Khmer and Viet identities. On the other hand the French shaped an overarching Indochinese identity. The expectation was that the Union, from 1945 called Federation, would be gradually democratized. The populations would elect representative councils, operating under French leadership. Plans were discussed, and councils were formed, but the Vietnamese Revolution and the ensuing war forced the French to give up their plans of federation. This is a paradox, since the Indochinese Communist Party actually shared the federal ambition. In the war between the French colonialists (who wanted a French-led federation with five parts) and the Viet communists (who preferred a Viet-led federation with three parts), both felt a need to appeal to local national sentiment. Thus they gave up their federal ambitions and endorsed separate nationhoods for Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Indochinese Communist Party became the *Vietnamese Workers Party* in 1951, and independent parties were formed for Cambodia and Laos. (In 1976 the Vietnamese *Workers Party* changed its name to Vietnamese *Communist Party*.)

The term Indochina survived only as a geographical notion, an integrated military theater and, eventually, a set of so-called “special relationships” between the independent nation-states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Third Contradiction: Revolution–Reaction

World politics in the twentieth century was shaped by communist revolutions. They provoked repression and containment, and led to ill-fated experiments in centrally planned economies. Can they still, today, form part of a meaningful historic trajectory? Perhaps, if they are integrated in a tale of national liberation and unification. This, of course, is easier for historians of China and Vietnam than for those who write about Russia.

The two main revolutions were the Russian and the Chinese, the former a city-based coup, the second a country-based People's War. Vietnam's August Revolution in 1945 resembled the Russian more than the Chinese, although many rural villages had joined the Viet Minh before the revolution. The August Revolution was a swift sequence of revolts in a number of towns and cities, ending with the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2 1945. Just as in Russia, the revolution led to war. The leaders of the Democratic Republic were forced to leave Hanoi in December 1946, and spent eight years away from the capital. Only after winning the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 could they return.

Revolutions are conceived by intellectuals, carried out by fanatics, and taken advantage of by scoundrels, claimed a bitter veteran in a letter to the party leadership in 1996 (La Van Lam, 1996). The intellectual phase in Vietnam lasted until 1945.

Thirty years of fanatic warfare followed. Le Duan, who was secretary general of the party from 1960–86, was not perhaps a scoundrel, but he wet-blanketed all economic, cultural, and intellectual life while letting cliques and opportunism grow. When he died, the party loosened its grip. This helped unleash economic growth and cultural creativity, while at the same time making it easier for scoundrels to trade influence for black dollars. In the late 1990s, the Communist Party was torn by factional struggles between market-oriented reformers, disappointed veterans, and worried military officers with security and budgetary concerns.

Back in the intellectual phase, the would-be national leaders had been subjected to severe French repression. The clandestine parties and the French security police indulged themselves in a drawn out, cynical power struggle, learning from each other, recruiting agents within each others' ranks. Le Duan was one of the victims in the 1920s–30s. The young historian Vo Nguyen Giap was also arrested, but the French interrogators were so impressed by his intellect that they set him free, perhaps in a vain hope that he would moderate his views.

At that time the Vietnamese debated intensely how to achieve their liberation, and there were many rival parties, with varying degrees of support in different regions. The revolutionary struggle also transcended colonial borders, using modern communicative networks in a wider region (Goscha, 1999). Inside Indochina, Saigon was the main center of revolutionary politics, but the communists were solidly entrenched in some rural regions of south and central Vietnam. The Red River Delta was the main area of recruitment for a Chinese-inspired nationalist party which attempted a revolt in 1930 that was crushed by the French. Abroad, the main leader was a veteran by name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, who later changed his name to Ho Chi Minh. He took part when the French Communist Party was founded in 1920, presided over the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party in Hong Kong 1930, and also played a leading role in creating the communist parties of Thailand and Malaya. In 1931 he was imprisoned in Hong Kong, and given a prison sentence. After he had served his term, the British did not expel him to Indochina where a death sentence was waiting, but sent him, in January 1933, to China. Not long after, he arrived in the Soviet Union where he barely survived Stalin's purges. Meanwhile, in Indochina, the French Popular Front Government instituted political freedoms so the local communists could emerge from clandestinity. It was then that Giap examined the conditions in the villages, as assistant to Pierre Gourou. By 1938–9, the French had reverted to harsh repression.

In 1940, when Indochina was under threat from Japan, the communist leaders in Saigon attempted a revolt, but their comrades in the north refused to take part. The French drenched the revolt in blood, thus virtually destroying the south-based communist party. A sectarian Buddhist movement, the Hoa Hao, took over formerly communist strongholds. From 1941 to March 1945 the Communist Party survived mainly in the colony's jails – and in exile. Ho Chi Minh left the Soviet Union in 1938, and traveled through China to Yunnan, near the Indochinese border. Some activists, including Giap, came across the border from Hanoi. Together they formed a national liberation front: Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, *Viet Minh* for short, and at the same time, a new communist leadership was established in the north. A guerrilla army was also formed, under Giap's command, to join the Allied struggle

against Japan and the French Vichy regime. Despite French attempts to wipe it out, the Viet Minh survived with secret headquarters among the minority peoples in the border region.

In March 1945, well after the fall of Vichy and the formation of de Gaulle's French government, the Japanese removed the French regime in Indochina. Since Japan was not really able to take over the administrative and repressive functions of the French, an opportunity arose for the Viet Minh and other nationalist movements to expand their influence. A new nationalist government was installed in Hue, and political prisoners were set free. Amidst the terrible famine of 1945, the Viet Minh became a mass movement in north and central Vietnam. In the south another movement was formed, the Vanguard Youth, also under communist control.

The two weeks from August 15 to September 2 1945 mark the proudest moment in communist Hanoi's long century (Sidel, 1998, p. 307). Under the leadership of cadre coming in from the nearest villages, Hanoi rose up first. Shortly after, Ho Chi Minh arrived to lead a provisional government. Revolts followed in all the other Vietnamese towns, including Hue where the emperor abdicated, but there was little response in Laos and Cambodia, where the kings remained on their thrones, and non-communist governments were formed. They felt no urge to join the Viet Minh. Thus Ho Chi Minh's government gained authority only in the three Viet lands, not the whole of Indochina.

A mass rally was held on Hanoi's Ba Dinh square, in front of the Palace of the Governor General, on September 2 1945. Ho Chi Minh quoted from the French declaration of the rights of the citizen and from the American declaration of independence, and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. President Ho, who was standing on a stage, in simple cloths, but under a royal parasol, gazed at the masses and asked softly over the microphone if they could hear him. "We hear," the masses replied. Thus the bond was made between leader and people. With the meeting on Ba Dinh Square the capital of French Indochina was transformed into the capital of Vietnam. The revolutionary leaders in Saigon recognized the authority of Hanoi, but never forgot their frustration at being surpassed by the northern comrades. The meeting on Ba Dinh is represented by a painting on the end wall of Hanoi's Historical Museum. The simultaneous rally in Saigon ended in an ugly incident, and is rarely referred to.

The August Revolution became a national icon. When the war against France was over, the Ba Dinh square was redesigned to look more like the Red Square in Moscow and Tian An Men in Beijing. On the southern side, in 1945, lay the Palace and Residence of the Governor General, a park, and two pagodas – including the famous one-pillar pagoda. Hébrard's Eurasian buildings were in the north. When Ho came back in 1954, he refused to live in the Governor General's Residence. Instead a tiny house was built from precious wood, in the park outside, with a conference table downstairs, a sleeping chamber and a study upstairs. It was made in the style of one of the ethnic minorities whom Ho had got to know as a guerrilla leader. A conspicuous office for the Communist Party was set up north of the square, and later a National Assembly. In the last decade of the century a Ho Chi Minh museum and a war memorial were added to the buildings surrounding the national *lieu de mémoire*.

However, the main new building was to be a mausoleum. Ho Chi Minh died on September 2 1969, exactly 24 years after his proclamation of independence, and the year after the Tet offensive had failed to fulfill his hope of national unification. The unmarried President, often just called “the Uncle,” had written one of the century’s loveliest political testaments. All peasants were to be exempted from tax for a full year as soon as the war was over. Ho wanted his body to be cremated, and the ashes should be divided in three, one pile for each of the regions. Suitable hills should be selected, where trees could be planted around the grave, and a small shelter be built so visitors could have a place to rest.

The party ignored Ho’s wishes, removed all of the above from the testament before its publication, and had the body embalmed by Soviet experts. Then they replaced the Governor General’s Residence with a small-scale copy of the Lenin mausoleum. Thus they did their best to distort the peculiar myth that Ho had constructed around himself. He had known Lenin, Stalin and Mao, but wanted his own kind of legacy. Ho’s shortsighted lieutenants had other plans. By having the mausoleum ready for the victory parade in 1975, they wanted to demonstrate Hanoi’s precedence as capital, as well as its alignment with Moscow. The mausoleum is still in place, so the will of Ho Chi Minh remains to be fulfilled (Boudarel and Nguyen, 2002, pp. 142–4).

Fourth Contradiction: War–Peace

Like many other centuries, the twentieth was a century of war: international wars, wars of national liberation, civil wars. One often hears that there was more suffering in the twentieth century than in any other century. This is true in a numerical sense. Since there were so many people in the world, there were also more who suffered. But the number of people living long and peaceful lives also grew tremendously, not the least in Vietnam. The widespread western view that the twentieth century was particularly tragic, and also without a meaning, does not seem right from an Asian perspective.

The Vietnam War was tragic. Did it still have meaning? Some say that even though America lost in Vietnam, it did prevent the further spread of communism. Thus the war was meaningful from an anticommunist perspective. This is hardly convincing. Vietnam was one of the countries in the world where the communists had the strongest popular following, the best leaders, the most effective organization, and the least effective adversaries. To much of the world, Vietnam became a symbol of national resistance, an example of how a poor people could withstand the onslaught of the world’s mightiest power. Such a place was a poor choice for America to take a stand. No polls or votes were taken to measure public opinion, but it seems likely that a clear majority of the Vietnamese, although they did not share the communist vision, identified themselves with their leaders in the struggle for national independence and unification. For the communist leaders, the war was full of meaning, and the victory was worth all the suffering. But could they have reached their goals with less sacrifice?

In 1995 and again in 1997, the former defense ministers Vo Nguyen Giap and Robert McNamara met in Hanoi to discuss the war they had waged. In the 1960s, McNamara had loaded the Pentagon’s computers with figures showing that the

adversary was taking unsustainable losses. This, he thought, would force Hanoi to the conference table. His calculations were proven wrong. McNamara lost faith, and was relieved of his duties by President Johnson, but the war continued. McNamara came to Hanoi in 1995 with three purposes in mind: confess to his mistakes, find the truth about the other side's calculations, and ask Giap to admit his mistakes. To McNamara the behavior of the Vietnamese had been irrational. When you take unsustainable losses, it is rational to seek a way out. Instead the Vietnamese had just continued to fight. There must have been misunderstandings. If they had been avoided, millions of lives could have been spared.

Neither Giap nor any other Vietnamese leader would confess to any mistakes, or share the US responsibility for the suffering inflicted on their people. "We did not attack your country," they exclaimed. "You came to our country. We had to resist." For the Vietnamese communist leaders, national unification was worth almost any sacrifice. They had a nation to unify, a revolution to defend, a history of national subjugation to avenge, and they were thinking of themselves as in the vanguard of a global wave of national liberation.

Fifty years earlier, Giap had been asked McNamara's question by Abbot Low Moffat, head of the Southeast Asia Division of the US State Department. He visited Hanoi in December 1946, just before the outbreak of the First Indochina War. Moffat ventured a question about the loss of civilian life which would inevitably follow if general warfare broke out. Giap's reply, according to Moffat, was that there "must be sacrifice, sacrifice." The local US Consul then suggested that sacrifice should be for a definite end, but what end could it serve? Giap only repeated the need for sacrifice, and added that the Vietnamese might not win, but that in any event the French would not win either (US Senate, 1972, p. 40). This was the kind of attitude that led Vietnam to its victories. The Vietnamese did not "win" in a strictly military sense. Neither did they expect to do so, but they wore their enemies out by sacrificing lives. Giap planned it. He said it. And he did it. Giap was the main brain behind the construction of an army and a state so thoroughly organized that the population could be motivated, or compelled, for thirty years, to endure the unendurable. And the population continued to grow. Children born during the First Indochina War sacrificed their lives in the Second. A heroic, patriotic tragedy. Again, was it meaningful?

The question should be related to the wider history of Hanoi's and Vietnam's experience with war and nation-building. When the European War broke out in 1914 (and Europe's "short century" began), the Vietnamese were a colonized people. Perhaps a hundred thousand young men were sent to Europe, to serve the French war effort. Many never returned, while others gained precious knowledge about war and modernity. Revolts in the 1920s–30s were futile, but in 1942, the Japanese demonstrated the fundamental weakness of the European empires, and in March 1945, they demonstrated it locally by conquering the French-held Hanoi Citadel within just 24 hours. For more than a year after the August Revolution, revolutionary Hanoi gained a respite, so it could prepare itself for the long resistance struggle. A French expeditionary corps, after having seized control of south Vietnam, landed in Haiphong and marched into Hanoi in March 1946, but only after having signed

an agreement with Ho Chi Minh. However, Franco-Vietnamese relations soon deteriorated, and the First Indochina War broke out in Hanoi on December 19 1946, only days after Moffat had left. By then the government had already evacuated a significant part of the population. During the subsequent fighting, Hanoi was almost emptied. The government urged people to stay away from the city and take part in the resistance struggle. Patriots and leftists followed up, but the majority of Hanoi's citizens returned. After some time there was an influx of newcomers, people who found it difficult to live in villages controlled by the communists. Thus Hanoi became a spawning garrison and merchant town with relatively few Viet Minh supporters. The enthusiasm in Hanoi when Giap's Army came back in October 1954 was not overwhelming. Business people, officials and Catholics left the north for the south, where they would form the main foundation for the South Vietnamese regime. In Hanoi, party leaders and public institutions took over the best French villas, and streets were named after communist martyrs.

The French had made Hanoi an integrated city with a mayor and modern administrative services. The Democratic Republic was more ambitious and instituted a system of districts, subdistricts, wards, blocks and cells. This made surveillance easy. Instructions went down and reports came back up. The system stood its test when the US bombing began in 1966 (Logan, 2002, p.149). It generated a natural sense of solidarity, thus reinforcing social discipline. The main impact of the bombing was probably to facilitate the government's efforts to motivate the citizens for further sacrifice, but the bombs also destroyed the industries which had been built with Chinese and Soviet help. Relatively speaking, US bombs did not kill many people in the Red River Delta. The worst aspect of the war for the northern families was to send their sons south, and never see them again. There was enormous relief in 1975, when the war was over, and the surviving sons could return.

In his book about the conquest of Saigon in April 1975, General Van Tien Dung tells how he, on victory day in Saigon, received a phone call from "the heart of the Fatherland": "Hanoi, the capital of the whole country, heroic Hanoi, home of Uncle Ho and our party, had accomplished this victory, along with the entire country. Forests of people, seas of people, flooded the streets singing" (Van Tien Dung, 1977, p. 246). Thus spoke the general who had commanded so much sacrifice. To him, the war had been full of meaning.

The tone was different when, many years later, one of the surviving conscripts, Bao Ninh, published the novel *The Sorrow of War*. It tells about the soldier Kien who came back to Hanoi, after taking part in Saigon's conquest. He and his friends had not called themselves Hanoians, but "Thang Long soldiers," thus proudly reviving their home town's long lost dragon name. (The idea that the Vietnamese had a long tradition of fighting foreign [Chinese] domination was a strong motivating force during their wars). Now, in the autumn of 1975, most of Kien's friends were dead, and the Hanoi that greeted him, was not as he had expected: "The streets revealed an unbroken, monotonous sorrow and suffering. There were joys, but those images blinked on and off, like cheap flashing lights in a shop window. There was a shared loneliness in poverty, and in his everyday walks he felt this mood in the stream of people he walked with" (Bao Ninh, 1994, p. 138).

This was what Bao Ninh's figure felt in post-war Hanoi: A grayish sadness, and under the sadness the longing and sorrow that the war had left behind. While Kien was working on his traumas, a new generation of boys went out to fight, in Cambodia and at the Chinese border, where white-painted grave markers with dates from January 1979 form endless rows. The Sino-Vietnamese war was brief and dramatic. The war in Cambodia was a protracted counter-insurgency, with the Vietnamese Army in the unfamiliar role of repressing guerrillas and propping up a client state. The Third Indochina War was harder and harder to make meaningful.

In the 1980s, Hanoians privately realized how much their country had lost through all its wars. The party had thought that the stamina with which the long wars had been won could be channeled into fulfilling Ho Chi Minh's hope of "building the country a hundred times more beautiful." But industries and infrastructure had been shattered. War veterans were rewarded with positions for which they were not competent, and resources were diverted to imposing the central planning system on the south. Peasants reacted to the collectivization of land by working more slowly. They only started to work hard again around 1990, when the land was given back to the households. While socialist Vietnam slowed down, the neighboring capitalist tigers enjoyed a period of fabulous growth. China also joined the tigers in 1979. Hanoi noticed that the world was changing, and that something had gone badly wrong. A sense of crisis had emerged when Le Duan died in 1986. A reform policy was proclaimed under the slogan *Doi Moi*, and radical market-oriented reforms were carried out in subsequent years. Re-education camps were closed, and the surveillance system relaxed. Singapore's elderly capitalist statesman Lee Kuan Yew, one of those who thought the Vietnam War was meaningful because it stopped communist expansion, became advisor to the Vietnamese government. Relations with the USA were normalized in 1995, when Vietnam also joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the 1990s, Vietnam turned out to be a weak nation, still proudly independent, but without any allies. The country got through the Asian crisis 1997–9 without major scars, but continued to lag behind its neighbors economically. Some party veterans were disappointed by the disappearance of socialist values and institutions, and some western leftists saw corruption and growing inequality as evidence that the Vietnamese people, after winning their war through so much suffering, had lost their peace to the forces of global capitalism (Kolko, 1997; Logan, 2002, p. 224). Most commentators, however, agreed with the younger generation that Vietnam should open up, and compete in the global market. They saw no other way to get out of poverty.

In the process of transition to a market economy the wars became less meaningful, at least to the young, who could not care less about history. Still, if forced to take a longer perspective, even they may see their future way to prosperity as a prolongation of a tragic, yet meaningful long century.

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