Vietnam and the world outside

The case of Vietnamese communist advisers in Laos (1948–62)

Christopher E. Goscha[1]

Abstract: **This paper, concerned with Hanoi's relationship with Laos in the period 1948–62, explores some of the long-term ideological, cultural and strategic factors that shaped how the communist Vietnamese saw the world outside, and what, in turn, this can tell us about these same Vietnamese. After an opening historical overview, the paper examines how Vietnamese communist proselytizing in Laos in the years of war between 1945 and 1954 marked a change in the ways in which the Vietnamese viewed the world outside, and how this view picked up on earlier civilizing impulses. The final section focuses more on security, and how it led the Vietnamese communists to play a potent role in Lao affairs through to the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1962. The paper argues that while national interest and security concerns most certainly counted in communist Vietnam's perception of, and deep involvement in Laos, at the same time Vietnam saw itself as being on the South East Asian cutting edge of a wider, modern revolutionary civilization.**

Keywords: **communism; culture; civilization; Laos; Vietnam; Pathet Lao**

And the people's revolutionary war has this which is truly paradoxal: It is undertaken by the Vietnamese against the French in the name of the Independence of the Cambodian people. The people's revolutionary war [there] is the work of one foreign army fighting against another, the latter contesting the former's right to bring Happiness to the country in question (French intelligence officer in Cambodia, circa 1950).[2]

[1] I would like to thank David Marr, Grant Evans, Li Tana, Vatthana Pholsena and Merle Pribbenow for their helpful comments and suggestions. This article first took the form of a paper delivered at the 3rd ICAS in Singapore in August 2003. Without the kind support and financial aid of Anthony Reid and the Asian Research Institute this reflection would never have seen the light of day.

[2] Cited in CFTC, EM/3B, No 2371/3, 'Synthèse d'exploitation', signed Gachet, p 1, box 10H5585, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre [hereafter cited as SHAT].

I have always been fascinated by the degree to which both French 'colonialists' and Vietnamese 'internationalists' have believed – and some still do – in Indo-China. While the justifications the two sides marshal to defend their cases are diametrically opposed, each sees itself as bringing a superior and brighter future to the three current nation states that once constituted French Indo-China: Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. If the Third Republic relied upon the famous *mission civilisatrice* and Western notions of superior progress and modernity to justify its 'right' (*le droit*) and 'duty' (*le devoir*) to colonize Indo-China in the late nineteenth century, Vietnamese communists turned to internationalism and the superiority of communism to defend their 'internationalist responsibility' (*nhiem vu quoc te*) to take care of Laos and Cambodia. There is a paradox here, as this French officer noted above. Although they might have been enemies during the Franco–Vietnamese war (1945–54), the French and the Vietnamese were both convinced that they were doing the right thing in bringing 'happiness' and a higher order to the Cambodians and Laotians. Moreover, each continued to operate within an Indo–Chinese colonialist–internationalist model, in spite of the fact that new Cambodian and Laotian nation states were coming into being as the French began to decolonize. Neither the French nor the Vietnamese really saw themselves as outsiders in western Indo-China. Only the Geneva Accords of 1954 would begin to change that.

It is not easy to write critically about these topics. Not only can such comparisons call into question the premises of French or Vietnamese ideological justifications of their actions in Indo-China, but three wars over different parts of Indo-China (1945–79) have transformed the topic into an explosive one – even in academic circles. This is particularly the case when it comes to writing about Vietnamese communist policy in Indo-China. The Vietnamese overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by early 1979 and their occupation of the country for the next decade or so were heated points of contention among the Asian protagonists and Western writers of all political colours, many of whom had taken political sides for or against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the earlier Indo–Chinese wars. For some, Vietnamese communists were nothing more than 'red' imperialists renewing early nineteenth century attempts to 'swallow' Laos and Cambodia whole or to create a new colonial federation in the one left vacant by the French. For others, Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia was justified on security and legal grounds:

the country had once again been backed into a corner by larger powers.

Fortunately, changes both inside and outside the region since 1989 have created a more favourable climate for taking another look at Vietnamese communist policy in Indo-China. Vietnam's biggest communist partner, the USSR, is gone, along with the Cold War. The Cambodian problem has been solved, Vietnamese troops withdrawn, and Hanoi's regional isolation ended: Vietnam is now a member of ASEAN;[3] and even communist China and Vietnam are back on track again. Moreover, the availability of a wide range of new Vietnamese communist materials on their activities in Laos and Cambodia during the Indo–Chinese wars makes it possible to examine in greater detail and in new ways the Vietnamese side. This essay seeks to take advantage of this favourable conjuncture and these sources to revisit Hanoi's relationship with its less studied Indo–Chinese partner: Laos. However, rather than trying to support or incriminate Hanoi's avowed 'special relationship' (*quan he dac biet*) with this small landlocked nation, in this reflection I try to analyse some of the long-term ideological, cultural and strategic factors that affected how communist Vietnamese saw the world outside and what these can tell us about these same Vietnamese. The dispatch of, work on and reasons for sending thousands of Vietnamese advisers, specialists and soldiers to Laos serve as my point of departure. This reflection thus opens with a historical overview in order to track continuities and changes into the post-1945 period. In the second part of this article, I examine how Vietnamese communist proselytizing in Laos in a time of war between 1945 and 1954 marked a change in how the Vietnamese viewed the world outside and how this view picked up on earlier civilizing impulses. In the last section, I focus more on security and how it led Vietnamese communists to play a remarkable role in Lao affairs until the signing of the Geneva Accords on Laos in 1962. While this essay shows that national interest and security most certainly counted in communist Vietnam's perception of and deep involvement in Laos, it also argues that this same Vietnam saw itself as being on the South East Asian cutting edge of a wider, modern revolutionary civilization. Many Vietnamese communists believed in their revolutionary mission in Laos and Cambodia.

[3] Association of South East Asian Nations.

Vietnam and the world outside[4]

This missionary impulse in Vietnamese communist foreign policy has roots in the past, which are worth considering. In his analysis of the early nineteenth century Nguyen state's perception of 'the world outside Vietnam', Alexander Woodside has shown the degree to which the Vietnamese borrowing and application of the Chinese Confucian world view, language and cultural pretensions manifested themselves in complicated ways in a vastly smaller Vietnamese state located among similar-sized South East Asian countries. Woodside shows how the Vietnamese borrowing of a Sino–Confucian political model could lead to very different results in Vietnamese hands. This was particularly the case when leaders in Hue, convinced of the superiority of the Sino–Confucian political and civilizational models, dealt with Theravada Buddhist states in Cambodia, Burma, Thailand or Laos. Such pretensions could lead to fictions at an official level, revealing of the way Vietnamese rulers conceived of themselves and their place in the world. As Woodside writes:

> At this point, however, in Vietnamese hands, the Chinese model threatened to get out of control. China was a universal empire, whose tributary system only reflected, with ponderous exaggeration, China's very real cultural and economic dominance and magnetism in East and Southeast Asia. Vietnam, on the other hand, was not a universal empire at all. Rather, it was one of a number of competing domains in the genuine if vaguely defined multi-kingdom political environment of mainland Southeast Asia. The fact that Hue was really no more than an equal of the Siamese and Burmese courts in the 1800s produced an acute tension in Vietnam, of a kind rarely known in Peking, between the hierarchical Sino–Vietnamese ceremonial forms for diplomacy and actual Southeast Asian diplomatic exigencies.[5]

One of the interesting offshoots of the politico-cultural Confucian model in Vietnamese hands is the degree to which it reinforced Vietnamese efforts to try to civilize the 'barbarians' they encountered on their western flank. Nowhere is this better seen than in the Nguyen occupation of Cambodia during the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1834, the Vietnamese transformed Cambodia into the 'over-lordship of the pacified west' (*Tran Tay Thanh*), applying a Chinese tributary system and Sino–Vietnamese prefectures and bureaucratic traditions. This

[4] I borrow this expression from Alexander Woodside (1988), *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 2 ed, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p 235.

[5] Woodside, *supra* note 4, at p 235.

Vietnamese *mission civilisatrice* of the Sino–Confucian kind led Vietnamese missionaries to adopt more aggressive policies in the very different political-cultural world of Theravada Cambodia. By the late 1830s, Vietnamese officials were trying to change Cambodian clothing and language, political organization and theory, and even Cambodian religion. In so doing, Nguyen leaders saw themselves on the cutting edge of a superior Sino–Confucian cultural world. 'In a sense', Woodside argues, the Nguyen 'could see their mission in the world as constituting a continuation of that culture-spreading process in which the Chinese had indulged from the central Asian steppes to the Kwangsi wilderness and which they themselves had later extended south to the Gulf of Siam and now to Cambodia'. It was both a form of cultural proselytization and auto-legitimation, confirming that the Hue court was, too, a 'central kingdom'.[6]

The French colonization of Vietnam directly influenced how the Vietnamese saw the world and their place in it. Far from locking the Vietnamese into a colonial time warp, from 1887 the French placed the Vietnamese, the Lao and the Khmer in an unprecedented colonial state called the 'Indo–Chinese Union' from 1887 (and increasingly 'French Indochina' from the First World War). The Nguyen, Khmer and Lao monarchies were scrapped in favour of the Indo–Chinese colonial state. The French, not the Vietnamese, Lao or Khmers, ran diplomacy. As I have tried to show elsewhere, many Vietnamese elites believed French promises of association and colonial modernity. Several leading colonial nationalists, such as Nguyen Van Vinh, Bui Quang Chieu and Nguyen Phan Long were able to rethink Vietnam's political future in terms of the French Indo–Chinese model. From 1930, several Vietnamese were speaking of an Indo–Chinese Federation, which would allow for local nationalisms. These Vietnamese justified their leading position in such an Indo–Chinese Federation on their mastery of colonial modernization, their favoured alliance with the French, and the preponderant role they played in the Indo–Chinese project (working in western Indo–Chinese cities, offices, mines and plantations). This hooked up with pre-colonial Vietnamese self-perceptions and visions of the Lao and Khmer. However, this new Vietnamese Indo–Chinese vision of the future ran into stiff opposition from emerging Lao and Khmer nationalists. By the 1930s, leading Khmer and Lao nationalists had rejected the Indo–Chinese model. Not only did they

[6] Woodside, *supra* note 4, at pp 253–254.

resent the leading role the Vietnamese played in the colonial state and their civilizing discourse, but they feared that a federal structure would allow the Vietnamese to dominate them legally. The Lao and the Khmer wanted separate nation states, not a shared one with the Vietnamese. Unlike their Vietnamese colonial partners, Lao and Khmer elites rejected the idea of creating an Indo–Chinese federation and citizen.[7]

The colonial period was no black hole for Vietnamese anticolonialists either. New visions of Vietnam and its place in the world were also occurring, building upon earlier ones to create something new. For those Vietnamese who continued to believe in an independent 'Vietnam', the most militant were forced to go abroad to keep it alive, or risk imprisonment, marginalization or worse. Effective French *Sûreté* repression pushed this imaginary Vietnamese nation and the handful of nationalists backing it deep into Asia. Nearby independent Asian states – Thailand, Japan and China – became crucial refuges. The Japanese military defeat of the Russians in 1905 was a turning point in Asian anticolonialism. Chinese, Korean, Indian and Vietnamese nationalists flocked to Japan, convinced that independent Meiji Japan held the keys to building a modern nation state and an Asian future free of direct Western domination. Phan Boi Chau, the most famous Vietnamese anticolonialist at this time, began sending Vietnamese youths to Japan to study modern ideas and military science as part of his 'Go East' (*Dong Du*) movement. We now know that Meiji support of Asian anticolonialism would turn out to be a hollow promise. Nevertheless, these early Asian connections in Japan were important in that they brought Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese intellectuals together as part of a wider mental attempt to make sense out of Western colonial domination, the loss of their states, and the way to go about reversing the painful state of colonial events. They exchanged ideas and publications, and reflected together for the first time on the common threat posed by European domination. While nationalist priorities certainly dominated outlooks and inter-Asian anticolonialist actions were anything but coordinated, this wider Asian view of the region, its past and possible future marked a small, but important shift in Asian views of the region and the world. The Vietnamese were part of this shift.

[7] Goscha, C. E. (1995), *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism (1885–1954), Part I,* NIAS, Copenhagen; and Goscha, C. E. (2004), 'Beyond the "Colonizer" and the "Colonized": Intra-Asian Debates and the Complexities of Legal Identity in French Colonial Indochina' (in press).

Building on this was the Russian October Revolution of 1917 and the emergence of communism as the state ideology of the Soviet Union. This would have an even greater impact on the minds of many Asian anticolonialist nationalists. First, communism now existed in an independent state. Second, communism, based on the credo of Marxism–Leninism, provided a seemingly coherent explanation for Western colonial domination and offered a way out of the Darwinian one-way street of subjugation for the semi- and fully colonized of Asia. Lenin's theses on colonialism explained how the expansion of European capitalism had led to their exploitation and the domination of large parts of the world. Marx offered a historical and economic analysis that promised an eventual world revolution based on class struggle, and extolled proletarian internationalism as a modern identity extending beyond national and racial borders. Communism was 'modern'. Moreover, Marxism–Leninism offered an internationalist outlook that sought to integrate the Asian anticolonialist cause into a wider, world revolutionary movement based in Moscow and claiming historical continuity with the French Revolution and in opposition to capitalist and colonial domination. All alone in the colonial desert, internationalism offered a ray of hope in Asia, something that was in great demand in China, Korea and Vietnam after the First World War. Finally, communism also provided a powerful organizational weapon for nationalists, especially when it came to fighting long wars.

Moscow seemed to make good on all this when Lenin founded Comintern (Communist Internationalist) in 1919 to promote and support revolutionary parties across the globe. Disappointed by revolutionary failure in war-torn Germany, European communist advisers soon landed in southern China to build communism in the 'East'. With important Comintern aid, the Chinese Communist Party came to life in 1921 in Shanghai, while the 'Vietnamese Communist Party' was born in early 1930 in another southern Chinese port, Hong Kong. Ho Chi Minh, the father of this nationalist party, was simultaneously an early member of this wider internationalist communist movement. This would have an important impact on how Vietnamese communist nationalists viewed Vietnam and its place in the world. Moreover, being an internationalist was a very important source of political legitimation for communist leaders. An accusation of heresy by Moscow was the equivalent of excommunication by the Vatican for a Catholic missionary. Both Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong understood this and the importance of internationalism as a source of legitimation

for Chinese and Vietnamese nationalist communism. In late 1930, following internal criticism of Ho's deviationist nationalist tendencies, the Vietnamese party was renamed the 'Indochinese Communist Party' in order to conform to Comintern orders that communist parties in European colonies should correspond to the colonial states they were opposing – Indonesia and not Java, Indo-China and not Vietnam. The Indo–Chinese colonial entity carved out by the French in 1887 thus delimited the internationalist responsibility of Vietnamese communists, and not the narrower nationalist one that patriotic Vietnamese anticolonialists had been imagining up to that point.

Like their counterparts allied with the French on the inside, Vietnamese communists were in a very tricky situation from the start, for the internationalist model demanded by Comintern, based on the French model of Indo-China, did not coincide with the pre-colonial state, nor the one nationalists had been imagining since the late nineteenth century in the form of 'Vietnam'. Vietnamese communists were thus in a unique position in that their internationalist mission charged them with bringing communism to all of Indo-China – not just to the future nation state of Vietnam. Moreover, if many Vietnamese nationalists believed in internationalism and their Indo–Chinese mission, hardly any Lao or Khmer did before the mid-1950s. There were few, if any, Khmer or Lao running pre-Second World War revolutionary networks in western Indo-China, or running revolutionary channels between Moscow, Paris and Guangdong. Many early Lao and Khmer nationalists first looked to pre-existing religious networks running to Thailand, where they studied in Buddhist institutes of higher learning. Others, such as Son Ngoc Thanh in Cambodia, played important roles in Buddhist institutes created by the French to shut down this threatening religious pull of Theravada Thailand (where Buddhism was being integrated into building a Thai national identity under royal patronage). Until the end of the Second World War, the Vietnamese were largely alone in their bid to spread the revolutionary word in western Indo-China, relying almost entirely on Vietnamese émigrés to build their bases along the Mekong.

The year 1945 was important in that the Japanese overthrow of the French Indo–Chinese colonial state and the subsequent Allied victory over the Japanese allowed Vietnamese communist nationalists to take power in August 1945. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the reality of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). By late 1946, the Vietnamese went to war with the French to make sure that this

nation state stayed on the map rather than the neocolonial one the French were counting on rebuilding. The paradox, however, is that if Vietnamese communists were willing to go to war to save the DRV, they were simultaneously committed to the internationalist model holding them to move towards a communist revolution in all of Indo-China: that is, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. However, following the outbreak of full-scale war for Vietnam in late 1946, the flame flickered at best as the DRV struggled to survive against the French Expeditionary Corps. In early 1948, when Vietnamese communists decided to move into the second phase of a three-part programme leading to a general counter-offensive, the ICP embarked upon a new policy to build up revolutionary bases and military activities in Laos and Cambodia and to move towards a more communist line in all of Indo-China, including talk of a future Indo–Chinese communist Federation. In mid-1948, the ICP approved a new policy and oversight committee for Laos and Cambodia with Vo Nguyen Giap at its head.[8]

While Vietnamese cadres and soldiers were sent westwards from 1948, it was above all the Chinese communist victory of October 1949 and Mao Zedong's diplomatic recognition of the DRV in early 1950 that led Vietnamese communists to concentrate seriously on building revolutionary bases, structures and cadres in Laos and Cambodia. In exchange for re-entry into the internationalist fold and in order to allay doubts in Moscow and Beijing about an overly nationalist ICP, Vietnamese communists had to show their real internationalist colours. This occurred in 1951, when the ICP was brought out of the shadows and renamed the Vietnamese Worker's Party, linked publicly to the internationalist world and obligated to adopt communist policies or lose Sino–Soviet support at a crucial juncture. Land reform was one obligation. The intensification of the Indo–Chinese internationalist model was another. As the French moved to transform their Indo–Chinese federation into the 'Associated States of Indochina', Vietnamese communists responded in kind in 1950 by forming national resistance governments in Laos and Cambodia as part of a larger Indo–Chinese revolution. In 1951, the Vietnamese created the Khmer People's

[8] *Cach-Mang Dan-Chu Moi Dong-Duong: Trich ban bao cao 'Chung ta chien dau cho doc lap va dan chu' cua Truong Chinh tai hoi nghi can bo lan thu 5 (8–16 thang 8 nam 1948)*, pp 1–27, especially pp 25–27. For a military analysis, see Goscha, C. E. (2003), 'La guerre *pour* l'Indochine: le Laos et le Cambodge dans l'offensive vietnamienne (1950–1954)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, No 210, pp 29–58.

Revolutionary Party and began work on a Lao party that would not be officialized until 1955 (see below). The VWP's real power, however, lay in secret 'party affairs committees' (*Ban Can Su*). The Vietnamese created them for each region into which they had divided Laos and Cambodia for political and military reasons. Working through these party affairs committees, the Vietnamese were the moving force behind the creation of revolutionary parties in and for Laos and Cambodia. By early 1950, Inter-Zone IV's Party Committee had already transferred some 150 new personnel to the 'Central Lao Party Affairs Committee', now working as party province committee members down to local agents. At the end of 1950, the number of Vietnamese soldiers operating inside Laos had risen to about 8,000. In 1951, Vietnamese military and cadre strength in Laos reached around 12,000 personnel, 7,809 in 1952, 7,632 in 1953, and 17,600 in 1954. During the 1953–54 Winter–Spring Campaign, designed to support the Dien Bien Phu Campaign, a total of 10,000 Vietnamese troops went to fight in Laos.[9]

Security was certainly a part of it. Laos and Cambodia were vital to protecting Vietnam's western flank and both countries would be important parts of the shift towards a classic war in the form of a general counter-offensive. This third and final phase in Vietnamese political and military thinking sought both to keep the DRV on the map and to take all of Indo-China from the French. With this in mind, since 1950, the highest ranking Vietnamese strategists had begun work on creating a north–south route running from the Sino–Vietnamese frontier to western central Vietnam by way of central and southern Laos and north-eastern Cambodia. This 'Indochinese Trail', as it was first called, would supply regular troops sent from central Vietnam to liberate southern Indo-China, Cambodia and above all southern Vietnam. While the Geneva conference brought the Franco–Vietnamese war to an end before any serious battle for southern Vietnam materialized, this Indo–Chinese trail was in effect the precursor of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which would be revived in 1959 as the Vietnamese resumed their struggle for southern Vietnam.

[9] Pham Sang, 'Appendix 1: Tong hop nhung chi vien cua Viet Nam cho cach mang Lao (1945–1975), Ban khoa hoc, Tong cuc hau can QDNDVN', reproduced in 'Ho Chi Minh voi Cach Mang Giai Phong Dan Toc Lao', Master's Degree Thesis, Vien Nghien Cuu Chu Nghia Mac-Lenin va Tu Tuong Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, pp 164–167.

I have treated these questions in detail for the period from 1945–54.[10] What interests me here is that Vietnamese communists believed in their Indo–Chinese model and revolution. The dissolution of the ICP in 1951 in no way spelt the end of the Vietnamese faith in the Indo–Chinese internationalist model. Continued security concerns only reinforced this. By 1950, Vietnamese communists were making no effort to conceal the fact that they saw themselves on the Indo–Chinese cutting edge of world revolution in South East Asia. The General Secretary of the ICP, Truong Chinh, confirmed this in early 1950.[11] Just as the Chinese felt it was their 'internationalist duty' to assist the Korean and the Vietnamese against the French and the Americans, so too did the Vietnamese consider it their international obligation to bring communism to Laos and to Cambodia and to fight for their 'liberation' from French colonialism as part of a wider worldwide communist struggle against imperialism. As Truong Chinh put it, 'Indochina was now an integral part of the struggle for world peace'.[12] What is remarkable, when reading Truong Chinh's internal reports, is the degree to which Vietnamese communists were committed to fighting on in the whole of Indo-China on behalf of the wider internationalist civilization. It was an important source of legitimation for a party that had been isolated for years and badly out of touch with the world communist movement.[13]

New Vietnamese primary and secondary sources leave no doubt as to the extraordinary role that Vietnamese communists played in exporting communism to western Indo-China. Staffed overwhelmingly by Vietnamese cadres, the *Ban Can Su* ran revolutionary affairs throughout Laos and Cambodia. Vietnamese cadres and military 'volunteers' (*tinh nguyen*) built state organizations, put the Lao and Khmer 'revolutionary' armies together, and often administered, *de facto*, party and government affairs for these two theoretical revolutionary nation states. The Vietnamese helped create police services, tax codes, economic structures, in short revolutionary states based on the Sino–Vietnamese

[10] Goscha, C. E. (2000), 'Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco–vietnamienne: réseaux, relations et économie', PhD thesis, EPHE, Indochinese section, La Sorbonne, Paris.

[11] Truong Chinh (1950), *Hoan thanh nhiem vu chuan bi chuyen manh sang tong phan cong: Bao cao doc o Hoi nghi toan quoc lan thu III (21-1–3-2-1950)*, Sinh Hoat Noi Bo xuat ban, pp 77–78.

[12] Truong Chinh, *supra* note 11, at p 78.

[13] Goscha, C. E. (2003), 'La survie diplomatique de la République démocratique du Vietnam: Le doute soviétique effacé par la confiance chinoise (1945–1950)?' *Approches Asie*, No 18, pp 19–52.

communist model.[14] They did this in the name of a wider world revolution of which they were now a public and legitimate part. Harking back to earlier times, ranking Vietnamese communists had no doubts in their minds that they were doing the right thing, a duty, in bringing such modern and revolutionary ideas, structures and possibilities to the Lao and the Khmer. Vietnamese communists saw themselves on the cutting edge of a superior revolutionary civilization running from Moscow to eastern South East Asia by way of China. All of this impacted on how Vietnamese communists saw Cambodia and Laos, their 'revolutionary' role in former French Indo-China, their place in South East Asia and the world, and it tells us a lot about how the Vietnamese saw themselves at this juncture. They were both fierce nationalists and committed internationalists, convinced of the superiority of the revolutionary kingdom to which they belonged, and determined to bring the international faith and liberation from colonialism to Laos and Cambodia as the Soviets and Chinese had done before them. There was thus continuity and change in this twentieth-century Vietnamese vision of the world outside. However, in so doing, Vietnamese communists must also acknowledge that they too played a part in heating up the Cold War in South East Asia in the early 1950s.[15] Vietnamese communists were historical actors.

A mission to revolutionize: Vietnamese communists in Laos after 1945

New Vietnamese communist memoirs leave no doubt as to the evangelical impulses in Vietnamese communism. In 1998, Nguyen Chinh Cau and Doan Huyen, two long-time and high-ranking political and

[14] For more on the Cambodian negotiation of the Vietnamese communist model, see Heder, S. (2004), *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model: Imitation and Independence, 1930–1975* (in press), White Lotus, Bangkok.

[15] However, I have found no hard evidence to suggest that Vietnamese communists intended to go beyond Indo-China. As far as I can tell, the Vietnamese were focused on taking Indo-China between 1950 and 1954 as part of their internationalist mission. The DRV's diplomatic overtures to non-communist South East Asia and above all Phibun Songkram's Thailand into the early 1950s suggests that the ICP-VWP did not count on going any further west than the Dangreks and the Mekong. It would be very interesting to know how closely US intelligence was watching *and* reporting to ranking policy makers on the Vietnamese incursions into Laos in 1953 and 1954. While I cannot prove it, I suspect that American intelligence was following Vietnamese military expansion into Laos very closely from 1953, considering it to be a litmus test as to Vietnamese communist intentions in South East Asia.

military advisers in Laos, published a history of Vietnamese volunteers and advisers in southern Laos and north-eastern Cambodia during the resistance against the French. They included a number of recollections gathered from Vietnamese advisers about their work in Laos during this period.[16] Proud of their 'internationalist responsibility' and victory in Laos in 1975, these former cadres provide fascinating details about their activities in Laos at the local level and how they viewed the Lao, Khmer and ethnic minorities. What comes through clearly in these accounts is the degree to which these communists believed in their missions in Laos, the righteousness of the cause, its legitimacy and their duty to spread the revolutionary word there. They also reveal new details about how communist advisers went about building bases outside of the Vietnamese nation state and converting adepts in the cultural and religious world of Theravada Buddhism or upland animisms. I would like to take up this question briefly here, for it says a lot about Vietnamese visions of the world outside and their place in it.

These two Vietnamese advisers explain how they went about building up revolutionary bases and winning over hearts and minds in lower Laos from 1950. Like Catholic missionaries before them, in order to be effective in their work, Vietnamese advisers had to learn the languages of western Indo-China, above all Lao and Khmer, but also several upland minority languages. Before being sent westwards, political and military cadres passed through intensive language and cultural immersion courses. Special language schools were set up in western central Vietnam and lower Laos to train Vietnamese cadres intensively for work in western Indo-China. While training courses in Vietnamese for Laotians did exist, Vietnamese communist cadres had to learn the languages of Laos and Cambodia in order to explain revolution and war in terms that, they hoped, the Laotians and Cambodians would understand.[17] Nguyen Chinh Cau, a ranking political commissar raised in north-eastern Thailand (ethnically Lao) published one of the first manuals for studying Lao quickly and effectively, entitled *Hoc van chu*

[16] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan (1998), 'Introduction, Ban lien lac quan tinh nguyen Ha Lao – Dong Bac Cam-Pu-Chia', *Quan tinh nguyen Viet nam tren chien truong Ha Lao Dong Bac Cam-Pu-Chia (1948–1954)*, Hanoi, pp 13–78.

[17] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 24–25. The introduction (pp 13–78) was written by none other than Doan Huyen and Nguyen Chinh Cau.

Figure 1. Vietnamese troops helping with the harvest in Upper Laos in 1949 (copyright Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, Hanoi).

Lao [*Learn the Lao Language*].[18] The ICP also turned to the ethnic Vietnamese living in Laos and north-eastern Thailand. They were fluent in Thai–Lao and knew the local cultures well. Thanks to their linguistic and cultural knowledge, they served as important guides and go-betweens in this revolutionary proselytization in western Indo-China.[19] Language and power went together in a time of revolution.

Like other missionaries long before them, Vietnamese communists had to rely on local Lao or ethnic minority intermediaries. Often, upon

[18] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at p 58. Communist Vietnam's 'knowledge' of Laotian, Cambodian and ethnic minority linguistics, ethnology and culture stems in part from cadres who spent years working in western Indo-China during the wars. Several of them later returned to academia and published extensively, advising the government and the army on these two countries. The link between 'power and knowledge' has impacted upon how the Vietnamese have represented and understood western Indo-China in the social sciences.

[19] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 33–35, 153.

approaching a village in Laos, the inhabitants would run away in fear of the foreign Vietnamese, undermining confidence and conversions from the outset (and sapping Vietnamese team morale).[20] Vietnamese cadres quickly understood the importance of recruiting trusted native intermediaries. They targeted people who had the confidence of the villagers, above all local headmen, Buddhist monks or upland religious leaders. By winning their confidence, Vietnamese cadres could obtain crucial access to the villagers, which, in turn, would allow them to transfer front organizations and begin building revolutionary structures. Upon arriving in villages in upland areas in southern Laos, for example, Vietnamese cadres handed out photos of Sithon Kommadam, an ethnic minority Pathet Lao leader allied with the Vietnamese, whose family had considerable influence in lower Laos. In ethnic Lao areas, the Vietnamese relied on the royal pull in the person of Prince Souphanouvong (having failed to rally Prince Phetsarath to their cause). A female cadre, Hoang Thi Phuong, was sent to southern Laos in 1949 to mobilize women for the revolutionary cause. She went from house to house, proffering slogans and propaganda, but to no avail. Interestingly, she explains that all this changed when she met and received help from a local village monk. He explained that her revolutionary message was packaged in the wrong form and language; she would never reach the 'people'. Thanks to this monk's linguistic, religious and sociocultural experience and help, Hoang Thi Phuong was able to simplify, modify, and indeed, indigenize her message to tailor it to the interests and needs of her potential converts. She reveals too that this monk helped her make the right connections in order to gain the trust of the local Lao women.[21] Without such social alliances, the revolutionary word of Indo–Chinese communism remained *une lettre morte*. Pagodas were turned into revolutionary schools for the children, for teaching villagers Lao and for recruiting future cadres. Indeed, the teaching of Lao to the locals 'went together with the training of cadres' for the future. Vietnamese cadres took special courses on how to teach Lao and how to train more teachers to be sent to the uplands on behalf of the revolution. Not only was it a key part of training, but many of the upland peoples did not know the Lao language. Paradoxically, Vietnamese cadres played an important role in the spread of the Lao national language, albeit for internationalist purposes.[22]

[20] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at p 25.
[21] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 239–241.
[22] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 39, 44.

Vietnamese cadres 'went native' in many ways to win over the trust of the 'masses'. Many let their hair grow long and their skin darken in order to gain support for the revolution among the upland peoples. As one former cadre put it, it was part of the process of 'becoming one with the masses' (*quan chung hoa*).[23] Cadres sent westwards and into the highlands were expected to live with the villagers if need be, to work in the fields with them (see Figures 1 and 2) and even to marry into their families. This was, as another former cadre put it, a way of showing the people that there 'was just nothing worth being afraid of'. This was apparently particularly important in work among the upland peoples. One former communist missionary, Tran Xuan, explained that many Vietnamese cadres changed their names to Lao or upland ones in order to gain trust and to show their authenticity. These were the bonds that tied and counted, he explains in his memoirs. They were often 'adopted' (*con nuoi*) into the families of headmen, whom they targeted from the beginning as being 'good, having the confidence of the village', all of which would be 'advantageous to the work of winning over the support of the people'. Like missionaries, their language reflected the cause. They had 'to awaken' (*giac ngo*) the locals to the way of the revolution.[24] Their capacity to live for years in remote areas of Laos and Cambodia, working laboriously and often fruitlessly for the internationalist faith, also parallels the diffusion of Catholicism.

To win over local support, Vietnamese cadres active in western Indo-China underscored the *modern* benefits of communism. Cadres taught locals how to purify water, cook meat, procure salt, use modern agricultural tools, sew and develop local handicraft industries, even to build their houses differently. The Vietnamese opened up literacy campaigns to transmit the benefits of this new revolutionary civilization. The Vietnamese taught upland people the importance of hygiene, washing themselves, taking care of their animals and moving them away from their houses. All of this, one former cadre claimed, 'brought the people to realize the interest which the revolutionary power had in their well being'. The Vietnamese admit today that their aim was to bring modernity to these backward peoples, to change their habits and customs in favour of what they saw as superior ones. The discourse of modernity was an important tool in the Vietnamese bid to

[23] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at p 253.
[24] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 58, 136–137, 76–78.

Figure 2. Vietnamese and Lao soldiers helping with the rice harvest following the 'liberation of Sam Neua – early 1950s (copyright Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, Hanoi).

win over converts and gain the trust of the Laotians (and Cambodians).[25]

Such was the promise of salvation, of a better life and of the end of suffering. Communism, or at least, in Laos, revolutionary anticolonialism, was presented by Vietnamese cadres as the key to ending poverty, chaos and war wrought by 'foreign aggressors'. The 'French colonialists' and the 'American imperialists' were the source of all suffering. Propaganda presented them as the necessary enemies, and French military operations played into Vietnamese hands. The Vietnamese were there, as part of a larger revolutionary movement, to help put an end to this sad state of affairs. It is easy to write all this off today as revolutionary hocus-pocus; but these impulses and evangelical actions come through clearly in the memoirs of the two ranking Vietnamese cadres mentioned above and many other documents at the time. They believed. It was not simple 'historic' Vietnamese imperialism 'dressed in red'.[26]

[25] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 33, 43, 52, 57.

[26] What distinguished Vietnamese communism from its Catholic predecessor, however, was that the former truly attempted to convert the non-Vietnamese within the Indo–Chinese boundaries set out by the internationalist model, whereas Vietnamese Catholics in Laos and Cambodia tended to stick to the ethnic Vietnamese.

All this was also essential to building up revolutionary structures in western Indo-China in a time of war. The Vietnamese applied the Sino–Vietnamese revolutionary model in Laos and Cambodia, though they would soften their approach by tailoring it, as much as possible, to local exigencies and mentalities. Thanks to these efforts the Vietnamese, relying always on Lao, ethnic minority or Viet kieu intermediaries, were able to build up their bases and begin building a new revolutionary state administration in the villages they controlled. In mid-1950, Khamtai Siphandon and Xom Manovieng created two revolutionary 'districts' in Sanamsa and Saysettha in Attapeu province. They installed the Issara Front and then party and state organizations based on the Vietnamese 'People's Committees' (*Uy Ban nhan dan*) to the east and directly linked to Vietnamese politico-military organizations in DRV Inter Zone V. As in Vietnam, 'armed propaganda' was the preferred method for bringing villages under communist control. Vietnamese cadres applied this method assiduously in Laos and Cambodia. The main idea was to use propaganda (photos, slogans, music, theatre, dance, etc) to attract villagers, win over their support and mobilize them in favour of the revolution. The French were vilified and their supporters in the villages isolated psychologically, and sometimes physically.[27] As one Vietnamese analysed the effectiveness of armed propaganda in Cambodia in 1949:

> In short, armed propaganda is about more than just organizing meetings, gatherings, or putting on theatrical events. Armed propaganda must make propaganda and put in place and direct [revolutionary] organizations. [. . .] Armed propaganda will only achieve this stated goal when we understand the mentality of the population.[28]

One of the best examples of a revolutionary life in Laos and Cambodia is the career of Nguyen Can. In 1950, after intensive training in Khmer in Quang Ngai, he joined a Special Armed Propaganda Team (*Doan Vo Trang Tuyen Truyen dac biet*) and was sent to southern Laos for further

[27] Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, *supra* note 16, at pp 33, 43, 52, 57. While the Vietnamese could use forceful methods when needed, the problem was that violence and above all the execution of Khmer or Lao 'traitors' played into the hands of the French and, worse, could undermine village confidence, something that took Vietnamese cadres years to stitch together.

[28] 'Rôle au Cambodge de la brigade de propagande armée et bilan des activités du groupe de propagande du Sud-Ouest, exposés par le 'Ren Luyen' No 2, du 15 décembre 1949', Vietnamese article captured and translated in SECAM, No 95, 19 January 1952, file Organisation du Front du Cambodge, box 10H4121, SHAT (underlined in the original translation).

Figure 3. Souvenir photo of Vietnamese military cadres with a minority family in Upper Laos in 1949 (copyright Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, Hanoi).

training in mass mobilization techniques for the Lao, and then to north-eastern Cambodia with 60 other cadres in order to develop revolutionary bases and prepare the ground for the upcoming general counter-offensive. Things did not go smoothly at the outset. More than half of their Khmer interpreters deserted, leaving them with few vital intermediaries to win back the Khmer villagers who had run away with great fear when the revolutionary team arrived. Nguyen Can explains how he had to reassure locals that the arrival of these cadres in their village would not invite repression and violence from the French (which it often did). With the help of Viet kieu sent from Thailand, the team was able to make some progress along the lines outlined above. They were content to win over the 'two-faced' support of local headmen, who served simultaneously for the pro-French and pro-revolutionary Cambodian state apparatus. Of particular value was the support of a

trusted Khmer cadre 'Si Da'. Through him, the Vietnamese were able to win over local confidence in a number of villages. Si Da helped allay local fears of the Vietnamese and he played a vital role in establishing the Issarak front through the creation of mass organizations for the local youth, farmers, women, Buddhists, etc. He established important links with local monks, the crucial go-betweens. However, if Si Da was the Vietnamese point man, all of this work was under the direction of the powerful Party Affairs Committee for North-eastern Cambodia led by Vo Chi Cong and directly linked to Inter-Zone V in southern central Vietnam.[29]

While the dominoes would most certainly not fall in the ways imagined by the Americans (and much to the disappointment of Vietnamese cadres slaving away in insalubrious conditions in Laos and Cambodia – see Figure 3), the Vietnamese had a revolutionary vision of Indo-China that cannot be explained entirely by security imperatives. In the end, however, it was indeed the favourable international conjuncture created by the Chinese communist victory of late 1949 and building Vietnamese military power that would secure bases in Laos and Cambodia, allowing the Vietnamese to oversee the installation of Khmer and Lao resistance front organizations and government bodies in their zones. Military power counted as much as revolutionary evangelism. As Vu Dien Nam, one of the highest ranking leaders of the Cambodian Party Affairs Committee, put it around 1951:

> As the international conjunctures are unceasingly evolving and since the Vietnamese resistance is moving towards victory, we must be ready to seize the favorable moment which will bring the Cambodian revolution to fruition.[30]

This was particularly the case in Laos from 1953 and in Cambodia in mid-1954. When DRV regular troops entered north-eastern Cambodia in May 1954, there to greet them were Nguyen Can and his Khmer ally, Si Da, nominal head of the newly liberated zones. Backed up by the DRV's military power, Vietnamese revolutionary missionaries on the ground lost no time in expanding and installing new communist

[29] Nguyen Can (2000), *Dong va Tay Truong Son*, NXB Lao Dong, Hanoi, pp 28–30, 32–33, 50–52.

[30] Comité territorial du Nam Bo [Xu Uy Nam Bo], Comité des Affaires courantes du Comité de commandement provincial de Can Tho (undated, but circa 1951), 'Décision de la 2ème réunion des cadres du pays tout entier', captured and translated in HCFIC, CFTSVN, EM/2B, No 5208/2S, 'Traduction d'un document', 6 September 1951, file Traduction de documents rebelles, box 10H2171, SHAT.

organizations in the areas the army controlled. In mid-1954, Nguyen Can shook hands in north-eastern Cambodia with Tran Quy Hai, the head of the powerful 325th Division itself.[31] Like the missionaries before them, Vietnamese communists were not the only ones to take advantage of favourable political conjunctures and military power to achieve their ends. However, when the war in Indo-China ended suddenly in mid-1954, the Vietnamese understood that the Lao, Khmer and ethnic minorities had little real experience in this revolutionary work and had no military force of importance. The real power still lay in the hands of the Vietnamese cadres on the ground and the army backing them up. What would happen to these revolutionary structures in western Indo-China if the Vietnamese troops and cadres had to pull out? This was a question the Vietnamese were already asking themselves as negotiations in Geneva intensified in mid-1954.[32]

Security and faith: Vietnamese advisers in Laos, 1954–62

Vietnamese security and the internationalization of the Lao crisis (1954–62)

In accordance with the Geneva Accords signed in July 1954, a political settlement was supposed to take place to elect a coalition government in Laos (and Vietnam) via elections. In the meantime, Pathet Lao (PL) troops were allowed to regroup to the two eastern provinces bordering Vietnam: Phong Saly and Sam Neua. While the ambiguity of the Accords allowed the Pathet Lao and the RLG to differ (often violently) over who had the right to administer these two provinces, the events of 1956 held out the possibility that a coalition government could indeed be formed and Lao neutrality maintained. On 30 October, the Pathet Lao and the RLG signed a ceasefire treaty. On 28 December, both agreed to form a coalition government and return the PL provinces to the RLG administration. In November 1957, agreements were signed in Vientiane on the formation of the first coalition government. The PL provinces were returned to the RLG and two PL officials entered the coalition

[31] Goscha, *supra* note 8.

[32] It should be recalled that during the Geneva Accords one of the major sticking points was Pham Van Dong's ferociously stubborn support of the political and diplomatic reality of the Lao and Khmer governments the Vietnamese had created and nurtured. While security concerns were undoubtedly on Dong's mind, the Vietnamese negotiating strategy on Laos and Cambodia in Geneva suggests that they really did believe in the internationalist righteousness of their Indo–Chinese mission.

government. Souphanouvong headed the Ministry of Reconstruction and Planning and Phoumi Vongvichit became Minister of Religion and Fine Arts.

Trouble began, however, when elections in May 1958 handed left-leaning parties, such as the PL and the Santiphap party, 14 seats in Souvanna Phouma's government. The USA was shocked and reacted by supporting anticommunist Lao leaders. The potential for the breakdown of Lao neutrality was real. The termination of US economic aid to Souvanna Phouma triggered the resignation of his government, opening the way for a rightist government to step in under the anticommunist and pro-American leader named Phoui Sananikone. He excluded the Pathet Lao from the government and moved to absorb the Pathet Lao's two battalions into the RLG army. Things took a turn for the worse in mid-1959, when the government arrested Pathet Lao leaders in Vientiane following the failed integration of the Pathet Lao battalions into the RLG army. On 24 May 1959, the rightist government declared that the PL were rebels and that there could be no political solution to the problem. A state of emergency was declared on 4 August 1959. As would be the case in Cambodia after Lon Nol's overthrow of Sihanouk in March 1970, the Vietnamese decided that a purely political line for the Pathet Lao would be suicidal; an armed line would now be necessary, as we shall see.

The situation in Laos melted down even further in mid-1960 when a young military officer, Kong Le, carried out a coup d'état in early August against the right-wing government, disgusted by the political squabbling and deplorable conditions of lower-ranking officers. A week later, General Phoumi Nosavan, a staunch anticommunist, launched a counter-coup against Kong Le's forces in Vientiane in a bid to take power. Kong Le handed over power to Souvanna Phouma, who formed a government in opposition, which presented itself as the legitimately constituted RLG. The Chinese, Vietnamese and Soviets considered this to be the case. In December 1960, following a fierce battle for Vientiane, Souvanna Phouma took refuge on the Plain of Jars, while Kong Le tried to hold the city. Although a ceasefire took effect on 11 May 1961 and a Second Geneva Conference opened on 16 May 1961, fighting continued. Following a major PL victory at Nam Tha, a second coalition government was created in June 1962 and the Geneva agreements on the neutrality of Laos were signed in July 1962. Nevertheless, the Lao crisis came dangerously close to involving regional and world powers in a major Cold War confrontation. It was in this complex

situation that the DRV provided vital aid and assistance to the Pathet Lao. Part of it was an 'internationalist duty', but this time geopolitics made itself felt in no uncertain terms. With this wider context in mind, we can now look more closely at the role Vietnamese advisers and troops played in Laos during this crucial period.

The impact of Geneva on Vietnamese policy for Laos

If the Vietnamese had pulled their troops out of Laos in accordance with the Geneva Accords, they were determined to keep the Pathet Lao alive by consolidating its military and political presence in the two provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly and also by developing an official communist party for Laos, separate from the Indo–Chinese one theoretically dissolved in 1951. Even before the Vietnamese agreed to sign the Geneva Accords, they understood that the situation in Laos had changed. No longer would they be able to send troops into Laos without risking major retaliation in diplomatic and possibly military terms, above all from the USA. French Indo-China no longer existed as a colonial state. It consisted now of four independent nation states, each recognized internationally. However, we now know that the DRV/VWP left behind secret advisers in Laos. According to internal statistics, a total of 960 Vietnamese cadres and personnel remained in Laos after the ceasefire, consisting of 314 military personnel and 650 cadres, 122 of whom were reserve personnel permanently based on Vietnamese soil. Another source holds that there were 849 personnel operating in Laos between late 1954 and the end of 1957, including 250 officers and 531 civilian government personnel. According to a report from CP-31 (a special VWP committee on Laos – see below), between the end of 1954 and the end of 1957, the DRV maintained a total of 849 personnel in Laos (including one Central Committee member, three high-level cadres, 53 mid-level cadres and 138 junior-level cadres).[33]

Much of this elite personnel would constitute a secret advisory group formed by the VWP during the Geneva Conference. On 28 June 1954, Vo Nguyen Giap informed Nguyen Khang, Head of the Party Affairs Committee for Western Laos and probably the most powerful Vietnamese party specialist on Laos at the time, that the VWP Central Committee had agreed to separate the system of advisers from the voluntary army (most of which had been pulled out of Laos). Chu Huy

[33] Pham Sang, *supra* note 9, at pp 167–168.

Man, a high-ranking Vietnamese communist of Tai origin, received orders to begin training cadres. The latter would advise the Pathet Lao Ministry of Defence, the Commadam Military Academy and the PL liberation army brigade.[34] The VWP revamped its previous Lao policy in order to 'build their [PL] armed forces, consolidate the bases of the two provinces, create and train cadre teams'.[35] The 28 June Central Committee instructions made it clear that a new system of advisers would be sent to help, at the outset, the Pathet Lao Ministry of Defence 'in all matters', above all in the training of military and political cadres for running the Pathet Lao's administration and armed forces in the provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua. Vietnamese advisers would work down to the regional level.[36] As we shall see in greater detail below, these advisers were soon to be known as 'Group 100'.

Politically, Vietnamese communists had to tread a fine line. On the one hand, they had created the resistance governments of Laos and Cambodia as part of a larger internationalist model for the whole of former French Indo-China. On the other hand, the Geneva Accords had prevented the Vietnamese from putting those governments in power as the sole legitimate national powers – royalist nation states emerged out of Geneva in Laos and Cambodia. Vietnamese communists thus shifted to a peaceful political struggle for their revolutionary allies in Laos and Cambodia. Biding its time, Hanoi improved relations with the RLG and Sihanouk, while secretly continuing to support Lao and Khmer communist parties.[37] In theory, the VWP still seems to have

[34] 'Brother Giap to brother Khang', 28 June 1954, in 'Indochina is one battlefield (collection of materials about the relationships between the three Indo–Chinese countries in the anti-American and saving-the-country cause)' (1981), Military History Institute Library, Hanoi (translated from the Vietnamese by Cam Zinoman, with the financial support of the CWIHP, Washington, DC, to appear in the CWIHP Bulletin in late 2004); and 'Mat dien cua Trung Uong ngay 28 thang 6 nam 1954 ve tinh hinh va chu truong cong tac o Lao', cited in Bo Quoc Phong, Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam (1999), *Lich Su Cac Doan Quan Tinh Nguyen va Chuyen Gia Quan Su Viet Nam tai Lao (1945–1975): Doan 100, Co Van Quan Su, Doan 959, Chuyen Gia Quan Su*, luu hanh noi bo, Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Hanoi, p 20, note 1.

[35] 'Thu cua Trung Uong Dang gui dong chi Nguyen Khang, Truong Ban Can Su Giup Lao', dated 30 August 1954, cited in Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 19, note 1.

[36] 'Mat dien cua Trung Uong ngay 28 thang 6 nam 1954 ve tinh hinh va chu truong cong tac o Lao', cited in Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 20, note 1.

[37] Even in Cambodia, the DRV left a handful of secret advisers in place under the direction of the all powerful Party Affairs Committee either for north-eastern Cambodia or for all of Cambodia. In July 1957, convinced that Sihanouk was serious about remaining neutral in the new circumstances, the VWP Central Committee ordered its remaining cadres to pull out of north-eastern Cambodia. In late 1957, the Vietnamese cadres in Cambodia withdrew. Nguyen Can, *supra* note 29, at pp 95–99.

taken its Indo–Chinese internationalist task seriously. On 18 July 1954, Truong Chinh, Secretary General of the VWP, explained in an internal report that the VWP had to continue to work for the Lao and Cambodian revolutionary movements. He outlined four major tasks. Vietnamese communists had to:

(1) establish the major revolutionary parties of Laos and Cambodian workers and working classes;
(2) strengthen and expand the 'United National Front' (apparently referring to the pre-existing Khmer Issarak and Lao Issara, now the Pathet Lao);
(3) 'build up forces'; and
(4) strive hard to train cadres.

While Vietnamese communists had been obligated by a diplomatic accord to put the internationalist Indo–Chinese revolution on hold, they nevertheless had to keep some sort of an Indo–Chinese bloc alive in order to counter what the VWP saw as an American strategy to dominate South East Asia via Indo-China. Unsurprisingly, all of these crucial geo-strategic questions were being discussed behind party doors during the Geneva Conference. Between 15 and 18 July 1954, for example, the VWP Central Committee's 6th Conference held that the:

> American imperialist is the major obstacle to re-establishing peace in Indochina. They are aggressively forming a South-East Asian invasion block, using Indochina as a springboard to expand their aggressive war [. . .] The American imperialists . . . are becoming the major and direct enemy of the Indochinese people.[38]

In eastern Laos, the DRV sought to cover itself in case things took a turn for the worse regionally and/or internationally. The two regroupment provinces in Laos were thus of the utmost strategic importance. Most of the Pathet Lao cadres and military personnel were repatriated to Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces, bordering on upper western Vietnam. A total of 2,362 came from lower Laos, 2,241 from Vientiane and Sayaburi, 670 from Xieng Khouang, 584 from Luang Prabang, 206 from Hueisai, and 1,000 had already been active in Phong Saly and Sam Neua since the 1953–54 incursions. According to Vietnamese

However, the Vietnamese maintained contacts with the emerging Khmer Rouge. Vo Chi Cong was in charge of this issue for the COSVN (*Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam Viet Nam*). Vo Chi Cong (2001), *Tren Nhung Chang Duong Cach Mang (hoi ky)*, Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, Hanoi, pp 247–248.

38 'Report by Comrade Truong Chinh', dated 18 July 1954, in 'Indochina is one battle-field', *supra* note 34.

statistics, a total of 8,238 Pathet Lao cadres and troops (some 6,056) were relocated to these two provinces.[39] On 16 October, according to the Vietnamese, the DRV withdrew its 'voluntary army' from Laos, while the Pathet Lao forces were regrouped to Phong Saly and Sam Neua.[40] On 19 October 1954, the VWP's Politburo announced that it would help the Lao revolution even though the Geneva Accords called for non-interference by outside forces. The existence of two provinces in Phongsaly and Sam Neua allowed the VWP to try to keep the Pathet Lao alive, instead of letting it fade away as would be the case in Cambodia:

> No matter how the situation develops, we must use all efforts to strengthen the task of consolidating the two provinces, building the army, building the people's foundation and push forward the political struggle everywhere, all over the country, especially in regions which our army has recently withdrawn.[41]

Blatantly missing, however, was an official Lao revolutionary party to work with the VWP. Despite earlier Vietnamese efforts, communism in Laos remained weak. Vietnamese military power and missionary cadres had been the driving force (see above). In February 1951, when the ICP broke up into national parties, there were, according to Vietnamese records, 1,591 party members (including 481 provisional ones) in Laos, the majority of whom were Vietnamese volunteers and cadres.[42] After the dissolution of the ICP in 1951, the Vietnamese and Lao communists in Laos operated in shared cells, not yet divided along nationalist lines for the simple reason that no Lao party existed.[43] In the absence of the ICP, the VWP's powerful 'party affairs committees' directing all the zones of Laos (and Cambodia) secretly ran the show. In Cambodia, the most powerful office was the 'Party Affairs Committee' under Nguyen Thanh Son. In Laos, the VWP continued to administer party matters through the 'Party Affairs Committee for Western Laos' under the direction of Nguyen Khang. In March 1953, when the Vietnamese invaded Laos for the first time, the 'Party Affairs

[39] 'Su truong thanh cua luc luong cach mang Lao' cited in 'Nhung su kien chinh tri o lao, 1930–1975', 'Tong hop nhung chi vien cua Viet Nam cho cach mang Lao (1945–1975), Ban khoa hoc, tong cuc hau can QDNDVN', pp 194–195.

[40] 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

[41] 'The Politburo's decision regarding help for the Lao revolution', dated 19 October 1954, in 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

[42] 'Su truong thanh cua luc luong cach mang Lao' *supra* note 39, at p 193.

[43] 'Bao cao cua dong chi Dao Viet Hung, Pho Chinh uy quan tinh nguyen, uy vien Ban Can Su Mien Tay', cited in Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 43.

Committee for Western Laos' helped a handful of Lao communists to create the 'Mobilizing Committee for the Creation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party' (*Ban van dong thanh lap Dang Nhan Dan Cach Mang Lao*). This proto-communist party was designed, at least on paper, to direct the resistance in Laos and to prepare a founding congress for creating a national Lao revolutionary party.[44] While the mobilizing committee seems to have existed briefly, no congress was ever held, nor was any Lao party created before the end of the Franco–Vietnamese war in mid-1954. After the signing of the Geneva Accords, the majority of Lao communists were relocated to the provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua.[45]

If the VWP was going to keep its Lao revolutionary allies alive in military and administrative terms after Geneva, a Lao revolutionary party would be indispensable. On 22 March 1955, after training Lao cadres in ideology and organization, the 'Congress for the Creation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party' (*Dai Hoi Thanh Lap Dang Nhan Dan Cach Mang Lao*) was held on the border of Thanh Hoa. More than 20 Lao delegates attended the meeting to approve the Party's political programme. It was officially considered to be the Lao offshoot of the Indo–Chinese Communist Party. It was called the 'Lao People's Revolutionary Party' (LPRP). Kaysone Phoumvihan became its first General Secretary. The son of a Lao–Vietnamese marriage, Kaysone spoke fluent Vietnamese. In April 1955, the LPRP created the party committee for the army (*Dang Uy Quan Su*), based on the Sino–Vietnamese model. Kaysone was also its general secretary. This party committee in the army was also referred to as the High Command for the Pathet Lao Army (*Bo chi huy toi cao quan doi Pathet Lao*).[46] Party membership, however, remained low in the late 1950s. Between March 1955 and October 1955, only 72 individuals joined the party.[47] During the first semester of 1956, the LPRP counted 343 active members in 58 party cells in the whole of the country. The second semester saw this increase to 2,879 party members in 334 cells: 182 worked in rural cells,

[44] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 43. An identical pre-Party structure had preceded the founding of the Khmer Revolutionary People's Party.

[45] 'Bao cao cua dong chi Dao Viet Hung, Pho Chinh uy quan tinh nguyen, uy vien Ban Can Su Mien Tay', in Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 43. Before the Geneva Accords were signed in July 1954, it seems the Vietnamese allowed the Lao to begin forming and running their own communist cells.

[46] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 44.

[47] 'Su truong thanh cua luc luong cach mang Lao', *supra* note 39, at p 195.

64 within the army and 88 in other administrative positions. Twenty-five per cent came from peasant backgrounds; the rest were workers, students and those from 'bourgeois' backgrounds.[48]

The VWP still maintained the overall direction of revolution in Indo-China. In August 1955, Truong Chinh sent a letter to the Lao People's Party National Leading Committee, 'analyzing the situation and contributing opinions about tasks'.[49] On 10 August 1955, the VWP created the 'Lao and Cambodian Central Committee', headed by Le Duc Tho. His deputy was none other than Nguyen Thanh Son (Nguyen Van Tay), the ICP's top expert on Cambodian affairs and former head of the Cambodian Party Affairs Committee. This powerful new party committee had five major tasks. First, it was to study and monitor the situations in Laos and Cambodia, making suggestions to the VWP Central Committee on policy action. Second, it was to watch over and help the Central Committee (presumably the VWP) to provide leadership in administering the ceasefire in Laos and Cambodia. Third, this committee would continue propaganda activities in order to 'strengthen and develop friendship among the people of the three countries'. Fourth, it was in charge of 'building good relationships with the people and the government of the Lao Kingdom and Cambodia'. Fifth, the committee was directed to train cadres to work in the battlefields of Laos and Cambodia or among those who had regrouped. It was also instructed to determine how to provide economic help to Laos and 'strengthen the economic relationships among the three countries'.[50]

Building up the Pathet Lao: 'Group 100' (1954–56)[51]

The decision taken in Geneva to create two zones for the Pathet Lao meant that the VWP had to move fast to train the Pathet Lao army, to

[48] 'Su truong thanh cua luc luong cach mang Lao', *supra* note 39, at p 196.

[49] Cited in 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34. The Lao People Party's National Leading Committee included Kaysone, Kham Seng, Bun, Sisavat and Nouhak. Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit joined later. It seems to have been the equivalent of the Lao 'Politburo' in the early days.

[50] 'Establishment of the Lao and Cambodian Central Committee', in 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

[51] While I concentrate on new Vietnamese materials in discussing Groups 100 and 959, I owe a debt to the path-breaking studies of Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff (1970), *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff (1986), *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, CA.

consolidate its administrative presence in these two provinces, and to expand its territorial control of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, given that the DRV's army was now obligated to withdraw entirely from Laos and might not be able to return, certainly not in the overt military terms of 1953–54. The DRV/VWP had to operate by other means. As we have seen, the DRV did not lose any time when it came to the Pathet Lao. In July 1954, the VWP's General Military Committee (*Tong Quan uy*) and the Ministry of Defence recalled one of its highest ranking, experienced and secret specialists on Laos, Dao Viet Hung (then Deputy Political Commissar in the Vietnamese volunteer army in Laos). He was asked to report on the new situation in Laos, to comment on plans already under way, and to make suggestions as to how the Vietnamese would respond to it in the new conditions established by the Geneva Accords.[52] Nguyen Chi Thanh, an increasingly powerful politico-military man in the Politburo, Deputy Secretary of the *Quan Uy*, and the head of the influential General Political Bureau (*Tong Cuc Chinh tri*), announced the decision to form a special 'Military Advisor Group to Aid the Pathet Lao Army'. It was known as 'Doan 100', that is 'Group 100' (apparently for the number of cadres it contained at the outset). It was officially created on 16 July 1954, before the ink had dried on the Geneva Accords.[53] The DRV had no intention of abandoning the Pathet Lao. Indeed, Doan 100 played a pivotal role in creating the Lao Party noted above.

Chu Huy Man, a long-standing communist of Tay ethnicity and a ranking political commissar in the 316th division up to 1954, became head of Doan 100 and also directed its powerful 'Party Committee' (*Dang Uy*). He answered personally to the DRV General Staff and to Van Tien Dung, who oversaw the entire operation.[54] Nguyen Thang Binh led the subgroup in charge of advising the General Staff section of the Pathet Lao Ministry of Defence; Le Tien Phuc was the leading adviser on political affairs and was also attached to the Organizing Committee of the Lao Ministry of Defence. Nguyen Duc Phuong headed the advisers to the Logistics Section of the Pathet Lao Ministry of Defence.[55] On 10 August 1954, Doan 100 left for Laos, where they met

[52] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 15.
[53] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 15.
[54] 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.
[55] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 15–16. Later, Chu Huy Man was transferred to the Ban Can Su Viet Nam giup Lao, led by Nguyen Khang. *Ibid,* p 16, note 1.

at Muong Xoi with the ranking leaders of the Pathet Lao 'central government' (*trung uong*) and its Ministry of Defence. Most important was the welcome of Kaysone Phoumvihane (head of the PL and the Minister of Defence); Sisovat Keobounphan (head of the PL's General Staff); and Bouphom Mahasai (head of political affairs in the PL army).[56]

By signing up to the Geneva Accords, the DRV now had to transform the Pathet Lao into a military and political force able to stand on its own two feet, but without direct Vietnamese military intervention. This is where Doan 100 came in. In August 1954, Vietnamese sources made no effort to hide the fact that things were in a mess in the two provinces, and the Pathet Lao's ability to hold on to them, much less run them, was anything but certain. The Vietnamese were clearly worried. Revolutionary bases and the economy in these two provinces 'had not yet been stabilized'. The Pathet Lao's 'culture was developing slowly, the livelihood of the people was lacking in many areas, many areas suffered from bandits, spies and repressive regional traitors'. The PL had 'not yet responded to the requirements of the new situation and responsibilities'.[57]

Doan 100 set to work immediately on building an army. This special group was considered above all to be a military advisory operation, organized between the general staff of both the PL and the DRV. This was in response to Pathet Lao requests for help in building the Lao army at the ministerial, regional and unit levels. The DRV sent advisers who had served in Laos before, or who had been intensively trained in and selected for what they could bring to the PL. Many helped the PL both create and intensify existing academies for officer and troop training. For example, the DRV played a key role in the functioning of the Kommadam Politico-Military Academy. Vo Quoc Vinh and Le Tu Lap were the main military advisers assigned to work there. These Vietnamese advisers played key roles in transferring Sino–Vietnamese and Soviet military science further west in Indo-China, and much more deeply into Laos than into Cambodia.[58] Chu Huy Man set about organizing new units, educating cadres, developing logistics and building up the Party. Kaysone approved all these moves. In the short term, they had to be able to block enemy military moves into these two provinces, as well as protect and consolidate the PL's

[56] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 23.
[57] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 26–27.
[58] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 17–19.

administrative presence. The creation of a PL army was thus crucial.[59] The total number of PL personnel relocated to these two provinces by late 1954 was 9,138. In collaboration with the Vietnamese, the Lao Ministry of Defence selected 7,267 of them to constitute its new military forces, designed to create nine infantry battalions, two technical and logistical battalions and a number of smaller units. Sixteen advisory subgroups were created and attached to relevant sections in the Pathet Lao politico-military structure. They worked in military intelligence building, communications, and as ground troops.[60] Group 100 advisers revamped the PL's army organization, recruiting and training at the regional through to the battalion level, all the while developing guerilla activities down to the village level. In late 1954, a meeting between the Doan 100 and the PL agreed that the goal of these actions would be to create a revolutionary army. Through Group 100, the DRV hoped to create a strong, operational PL army within three years.[61]

They also had to have well trained cadres. Politics and military affairs were closely woven together in the Sino–Vietnamese revolutionary model. Indeed, the two were inseparable. This was the case for the CCP, it was true for the ICP/VWP and it would be true in the making of the modern Pathet Lao military science and the army. Doan 100 provided advisers to help the PL in forming and developing cadres, who were badly needed if the Pathet Lao were going to apply Vietnamese political and military models, take control and administer the two provinces effectively. Doan 100 had advisers working at all levels of the nascent PL state structure, in cadre schools and classrooms, in developing armed propaganda, and proselytizing the enemy operations (*dich van*).[62] Nguyen Khang, both the head of the Party Affairs Committee for Western Laos and ranking member of Doan 100, was in charge of these political and party matters. Under his direction, Doan 100 began intensive training of minority groups and ethnic Lao. Cadres were selected for intensive training in political mobilization techniques, propaganda, administration and ideology. As new sources reveal, this was key to creating a 'leadership system for both the Party and the army'. Interestingly, Vietnamese advisers relied heavily upon developing a sense of inclusive Lao nationalism (*du the tinh chat dan*

[59] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 26–29.
[60] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 32, note 1.
[61] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 33–34
[62] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 17–18.

toc) in order to mobilize their new recruits in both political and military affairs. Doan 100 thus played an important role in 'raising the level of patriotism and consciousness of independence'.[63] To put it another way, the Vietnamese were a driving force in developing revolutionary Lao nationalism.

While I cannot go into all the details here, the Vietnamese evidence makes it clear that Doan 100 played an important role in keeping the PL on the political and military map. Doan 100 advisers trained Pathet Lao political cadres in order to build up the Lao communist structure. Group 100 helped the PL create the 'Military Party Section of the Laotian Central Committee' (*Dang Uy Quan Su Trung Uong Lao*) and the 'Center for the Education and the Cultivation of Affection for the Party' (*Trung Tam Giao duc boi duong cam tinh dang*), run by Xamanvinaket. Doan 100 advisers provided and translated party materials and textbooks for the Laotians. By late 1956, the LPRP had admitted 671 new members and 70 cells were officially functioning. Advisers helped the Lao develop a resistance economy, organize the administration in the two provinces, administer military and cadre schools, and build a road to link the two provinces more closely together. As in earlier times, the advisers went native. They studied Lao and other upland languages intensively (and spoke many of them fluently). They dressed like the Lao or the ethnic minorities in order to win their confidence. This, they believed, would facilitate the teaching of a wide variety of revolutionary ideas: 'from the smallest to the biggest ones' (*moi viec tu nho den lon*).

As during the Franco–Vietnamese war, Vietnamese communists saw themselves as the bearers of a new type of modernity. In order for the transfer of this foreign military technology, training and political ideas to work, the Vietnamese had to convince the Lao of the importance of learning and reading. Group 100 invested a large amount of time in improving literacy both among the ethnic Lao and the upland non-Lao peoples, especially in these two provinces.[64] By teaching recruits to read and training them in classes, the PL-Doan 100 could channel nationalism into their heads and transform them into the modernizers of a new culture and Lao vision of the future, this one allied with the Vietnamese and linked to a larger world view outlined above. Doan 100 helped turn ethnic minorities into Lao nationalists and inculcate a

[63] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 29, 36.
[64] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 37, 45–49.

wider idea of the nation than had ever been available in these remote areas, untouched largely by colonialism precisely because they remained 'backwaters' and far from global forces of modernization. By late 1957, according to the Vietnamese, almost all of the PL soldiers knew how to read and write in Lao. Vietnamese advisers set up training classes in villages to help get rid of outdated superstitions, bad habits and social ills. Vietnamese sources make no effort to hide the fact that not only was this designed to win over support for the PL, but it was an attempt to bring a new, revolutionary way of thinking to the Lao under PL-Doan 100 control.[65] The army was thus a particularly powerful weapon for social and mental change in the early revolutionary history of the Pathet Lao. State and military consolidation would have to come from the bottom up, at least for the time being. Direct military intervention was not yet an option as it had been during the war against the French.

Doan 100's efforts paid off. A recent Vietnamese history claims that adviser policies and educational courses 'changed the political face of the Lao army' (though the Vietnamese realized that the PL remained fragile). Between late 1954 and 1957, Vietnamese advisers trained hundreds of Lao officers and put together modern military units for the PL. The Kommadam military academy trained specialists in technical questions, training programmes, political questions, and the functioning of a modern army and its branches. The advisers helped administer five training classes during this period, each of which had three sections: military matters, politics and regional affairs. These courses lasted from three to five months. Doan 100 played an important role in developing the PL's radio system, key to any modern army, and trained the PL in encrypting and decrypting. On this latter note, the Vietnamese ran into trouble because the Lao did not know any 'Latin-based language' (*chu la tinh*), which made the extension of Vietnamese methods based on Romanized *quoc ngu* (the Vietnamese national language) difficult to transfer. The high illiteracy rate among the Lao did not help in this crucial area of modern military science. It appears that the Vietnamese finally developed a Latin system for encoding Lao messages. Between late 1954 and 1956, the Vietnamese trained 19 Lao telegraph operators and 20 encrypting specialists, among others. Before their withdrawal they had developed an operational communications system for the PL high command, complete with an encrypting service. In September 1956, shortly before the withdrawal of Group

[65] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 41–42.

100, the Vietnamese transferred this modern communications system to Laos. As one Vietnamese study reports:

> This was an outstanding success that helped our friends in the technical area and made them enthusiastic and have greater confidence in their own self-sufficient power.[66]

The Vietnamese contributed to the development of the PL's military intelligence services, based heavily on the Vietnamese model. Doan 100 trained Lao cadres in medical and pharmaceutical science, training some 48 medics, among other medical personnel. The Vietnamese built hospitals and brought modernity to the upland areas of these two provinces as a way of winning PL support and expanding the movement. They were also present in the development of PL mobilization and propaganda work, organizing theatrical groups and dancing troupes and using cultural activities to advance the revolutionary cause on the ground and, above all, to attract the people, the youth, to the cause.[67]

In terms of armed conflicts between the PL and RLG forces, based on the evidence currently available, the DRV did not send its troops into eastern Laos during this period. The main goal was to consolidate the PL's hold over the two provinces and build up the party and the army. During armed altercations from mid-1955, Doan 100 nevertheless played an important advisory role in PL military operations. Doan 100 helped organize the attack on Nasala, and the DRV claims that Doan 100 assisted the PL in repelling 685 attacks launched, in their view, by RLG forces.[68] As in Cambodia in 1957, when Sihanouk's neutrality convinced Hanoi that they could pull their secret advisers out, Souvanna Phouma's success in steering a neutral line apparently satisfied Hanoi's fears that the Americans would not be able to install a hostile government on Hanoi's western flank. In November 1957, decisions were taken to pull Vietnamese Doan 100 out of Laos. Chu Huy Man carefully watched over agreements allowing for the integration of the Pathet Lao battalions into the RLG army. Moreover, before pulling out, Doan 100 gave intensive courses in political and ideological indoctrination to cadres, officers and soldiers, especially those in the two battalions (*di gieo mam cach mang phat trien gap 10, gap 100 lan*). A *Dang Uy* remained in each battalion in the strictest of

[66] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 36–39.
[67] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 40–41, 50–51.
[68] Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 66–71, 82.