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## The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945–1955

Lương Trọng Tường was an early follower of the Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ and one of the most powerful men in An Giang Province. He had long surrounded himself with a two thousand man private army that included national army deserters. Officials in Sài Gòn sent him vain directives to disband, but hesitated to infringe on the autonomy that ensured the Hòa Hảo's cooperation with the government. From the Hòa Hảo perspective, any concession risked even further central government control. The stalemate broke when a rival Hòa Hảo group, known locally as the Golden Crab and more formally as the Miền Tây Anti-Communist Force, assassinated Lương Trọng Tường's deputy. Seizing the opportunity to assert control, Sài Gòn sent the national army into northwest Châu Đốc to capture these "outlaws." After two weeks, several firefights, and hundreds of arrests, government troops surrounded the Golden Crab commander Mach<sup>1</sup> at his home. He refused to surrender. The soldiers strafed the house. Inside they found Mach's body, not among the crude tools of an outlaw, but the paraphernalia of administration: legal forms, typewriters, and seals of office. Officers at the US embassy followed events from afar. They concluded the Golden Crab had exercised "quasi-governmental jurisdiction" in the area.<sup>2</sup> Sài Gòn got its outlaws—yet for a time they made the law in that small corner of Châu Đốc.

That was in late 1974. It was the last fight between President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Republic of Vietnam and the Hòa Hảo figures it relied on for

electoral and military support in the Mekong Delta. The fall of Sài Gòn and the last of Indochina's ordinal wars would soon overshadow this minor affair. Yet it does say something important about the character of the state and sovereignty in Vietnam, one which took form decades earlier but continued to constrain the country's various nation builders. Sovereignty is not a fact. It is an assumption about authority that Lương Trọng Tường and Mach demonstrate could not be taken for granted in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> To understand the modern Vietnamese state and how the Golden Crab came into possession of some small piece of it, we should reexamine this state's origins and the fragmentary nature of sovereignty in Vietnam. Though largely forgotten today, the Republic of Vietnam's halting experiments in state building, counterinsurgency, and socio-political reform had begun during the First Indochina War under its predecessor state: the French-sponsored State of Vietnam (SVN) [*Quốc Gia Việt Nam*].

The SVN emerged from a fitful series of negotiations, begun in 1946, between French officials seeking a political resolution to the war and an array of Vietnamese nationalists opposed to the communist leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Upon its official inauguration in 1949, this new state united the formerly separate colony of Cochinchina with the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam. The SVN possessed a decentralized administration that gradually assumed control of domestic affairs from colonial authorities. Its newly formed national army and partisan forces grew rapidly and assumed an important battlefield role. By 1953, SVN administrators held independent command of a significant area, especially in urban centers and the southern provinces. Its international sovereignty, however, remained partial and subordinate to Paris in the French Union, an ill-defined community of former colonies that France claimed would replace its empire with a more egalitarian community.

The State of Vietnam was no simple puppet. It was a Janus-faced creature that began to deliver the promise of liberal democratic governance and prosperity in urban centers but retained old structures of colonial dominance alongside new forms of authoritarian governance. It was a work of bricolage: the unanticipated collection of state projects and personalities left over from the recent past and conditioned by the fragmentary character of the modern Vietnamese state. Its French and Vietnamese animators

fashioned this state from the concrete and ideational remnants of the Indochinese colonial state, the Japanese-sponsored Empire of Vietnam (1945), the French-sponsored Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (1946–1947), and even the DRV. They were further supplemented by the military forces and political ideology of anti-colonial revolutionary parties like the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDDĐ) and Đại Việt, as well as the Catholic, Cao Đài, and Hòa Hảo religious organizations, among others. This state's agents thus ranged from modern bureaucrats and republican reformers to autonomous confessional enclaves, ethnic administrative units, and military commands.

In the SVN, state transformation can be better understood as an act of bricolage and sovereignty its secondary effect. However, for reasons outlined in this paper's historiographical review, Vietnamese and Western historians have largely omitted the SVN and other failed state projects from the history of Vietnam, which has consequently left us with a simplistic understanding of sovereignty in modern Vietnam. Therefore, this paper examines the heritage of the SVN state to highlight the limits of the pre-colonial and colonial regimes and how both Nguyễn Dynasty and French colonial authorities treated sovereignty as divisible and disburseable, in effect a negotiable practice.

As a result, the central institutions of the SVN struggled to assert their “sovereign practice”—to institutionalize and extend their authority—because their bricolage state produced a pastiche of uneven and overlapping authority diffused across the state, and always challenged by the DRV. At the ground level of the First Indochina War, sovereignty was thus better understood not as a possession, but a quotidian and volitional practice. Up above in the diplomatic realm, SVN leaders likewise agreed to parcel out their external sovereignty. Faced with the reality of French re-occupation, and displeased with the type of revolution advocated by the DRV leadership, elites in the SVN agreed to share sovereignty within the French Union. Though ultimately betrayed by France, these Vietnamese accepted a Union that acknowledged Vietnam's right to independence and promised it equal footing with the former metropole. That the centralized, sovereign nation-state would become the dominant ideal in the 1960s was by no means a foregone conclusion, nor one that seemed possible, to many Vietnamese now remembered as collaborators or feudal relics.

As a topic of inquiry, sovereignty can be one means to move beyond old debates. The moralizing nationalist rhetoric of Vietnamese historical actors and the reproduction of those themes in Western scholarship has cast a long shadow over the history of Vietnam. Consequently, historians have offered strong contrasts between nationalists and traitors, between those on the “right” and “wrong” sides in the country’s thirty-year civil war. This focus on nationalism has eclipsed the study of the state. Sovereignty may be a means to dissociate the state and nationalist ideology, but not discard either.<sup>4</sup> When the inquiry is sovereignty, a commonality between all the Vietnamese states of 1945–1955 emerges quite clearly: each accepted compromised external and internal sovereignty to further their domestic agenda. From this perspective the SVN was not fundamentally different from the DRV, but a state with a different range of options, capabilities, and choices.

### Historians and the State of Vietnam

From 1952 onward, Vietnamese nationalism and French Orientalism provided the basic framework for histories of the Vietnam wars. In that year Philippe Devillers and Paul Mus published histories of the First Indochina War. Working as a journalist in Vietnam, Devillers quickly became disillusioned with French actions. He was deeply impressed by the Việt Minh’s nationalism and sympathized with nationalists supporting both the DRV and SVN. However his focus on nationalism made him disdainful of those who supported the Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina [Cộng Hòa Tự Trị Nam Kỳ] within a federal Vietnamese or Indochinese community. His book concluded with the hope that a Bảo Đại-Hồ Chí Minh accord could reconcile the two nationalist camps without French interference. In retrospect, Devillers’ focus on an abstract Vietnamese nationalism led him to underestimate the polarization between these competing state projects and the DRV leadership’s ideological commitment to build a Marxist state. Mus, his contemporary, was a former colonial and scholar turned critic who drew on his Orientalist training to argue for the cultural dimension of the Vietnamese revolution. In his mind, Hồ Chí Minh was the authentic embodiment of an ageless Vietnamese spirit based on Confucian values and peasant culture.<sup>5</sup>

Perceptions of the SVN shifted following Ngô Đình Diệm’s campaign to unseat Bảo Đại and proclaim the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in 1955. Like

his communist foes, the aspiring president cast Bảo Đại as a decadent playboy and decried much of the SVN leadership as feudal remnants or traitors who had collaborated with France. On this much, the regimes in both North and South Vietnam agreed. Authors favorably inclined toward Ngô Đình Diệm and his assertive brand of nationalism took up these points. One such historian was Joseph Buttinger, a supporter of Ngô Đình Diệm and advisor to the US military advisory mission in Sài Gòn. Buttinger detailed the SVN period and its cast of characters, but held a dim view of its leadership in comparison to Ngô Đình Diệm.<sup>6</sup>

The “Orthodox” school of Vietnam War history consolidated soon thereafter in the early 1970s. Scholars opposed to the Vietnam War mobilized history to argue that the SVN was historical proof of South Vietnam’s illegitimate heritage and presaged its failure. The American war in Indochina would therefore remain forever unwinnable, they explained, because Washington was allied with a South Vietnamese state that was inherently illegitimate. Embodying the Orthodox school was Frances FitzGerald’s Pulitzer-winning *Fire in the Lake*, which echoed Mus’ argument that America was fighting not an enemy in Vietnam, but the march of history. Thereafter most scholars agreed with FitzGerald’s conclusion that the defeat of the RVN was “inevitable,” that for Vietnamese “peace implies revolution.”<sup>7</sup> When American journalists penned grand narratives of the Vietnam War in the 1970s and 1980s, they took up these same themes. For Stanley Karnow and others, the SVN was a paper government. Bảo Đại was “indolent,” “a weak, unpredictable, corruptible playboy” and other non-communist Vietnamese politicians were “superficially affable” but “conniving” and “totally untrustworthy.”<sup>8</sup> For the next three decades, this interpretation remained the orthodoxy in American academia.

If the arc of the story was known, all its details were not. When American, British, and French archives began to open their Vietnam era records in the late 1990s, diplomatic historians elaborated on the narrative. In histories of the First Indochina War, authors took up the caricatures of Ngô Đình Diệm and South Vietnam popularized by FitzGerald as a framework to interpret the SVN. Americans should have known better than to support South Vietnam, one such study argues, because they had already tried “fabricating a new Vietnamese nationalism unambiguously aligned with Western

interests” with Bảo Đại.<sup>9</sup> Like earlier journalistic studies of the war, scholars of American diplomacy were often less concerned with the history of Vietnam per se, than with what Vietnam could say about the character of American foreign policy. The SVN and its supporters continued to be cast as toadies, puppets, and connivers. After all, this narrative served to heighten their moral indictment of American foreign policy for its support of the SVN and South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> After fifty years of politicization, the historiographical trend had migrated far away from Devillers’ attempt to criticize French colonialism while noting the equivalence between Vietnamese on both sides of the war.

Recently, nationalism’s hold on the field has loosened. Philip Catton and Edward Miller’s studies of Ngô Đình Diệm have overturned the Orthodox characterization of the South Vietnamese president and argued that the conflict may be better seen as one between different visions of modernity. Despite this, even among Vietnam specialists critical of the field’s tropes, the SVN can still be safely cast as “a stereotypical puppet regime.”<sup>11</sup> Conversely, in *Cauldron of Resistance*, Jessica Chapman focuses on the southern politico-religious groups that formed a key part of the DRV before joining the SVN. Chapman emphasizes that these were legitimate nationalist organizations and the primary rivals of Ngô Đình Diệm’s regime in its first years. The complexity of the First Indochina War in Cochinchina is traced to the emergence years earlier of the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and Bình Xuyên in what she terms the “wild south,” which only grew “wilder” during the war. Yet the wild south provides a tautological explanation for everything. As Stathis Kalyvas noted in his study of civil war, if we view all violence through a national binary (e.g., France vs. Vietnam, communism vs. nationalism) we mistake for madness what is actually the logic of violence at the ground level.<sup>12</sup>

## The State as Bricolage

In Vietnam what appeared “wild” may be better understood as a competition among numerous rival state projects. Both the DRV and the SVN claimed to be grand fronts capable of rallying the country’s diverse organizations. Vietnam’s past state projects had left behind legitimating symbols, functional institutions, political traditions, and sovereign practices that each new state incorporated or suppressed. Understanding the SVN and its fragmented sovereignty therefore requires a perspective that better reflects the bricolage of state making.

In *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss contrasts the production of mythical and scientific thought by analogy to the French bricoleur and the engineer. The bricoleur is part handyman and part scrapper. While an engineer works from concepts and raw materials to surpass the limits in a certain state of civilization, the bricoleur works within them. This individual has to make do with whatever is at hand. Their stock is “not raw materials but wrought products,” accrued from past odd-jobs and retained because they may come in handy. The bricoleur must work retrospectively, limited by objects whose characteristics were designed for a different purpose, but just the same creatively in refashioning them to suit another purpose. Each addition and modification alters the possible subsequent arrangements, leaving the finished product unlike what may have been envisioned or preferred. Rather, this new artifact is “the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of the previous constructions or destructions.”<sup>13</sup> Like bricolage in the physical sense, Levi-Strauss concludes mythical thought is continually reconstructed from the remnants of past events.

We may call certain elites state “architects,” but their repertoire often resembles that of the bricoleur more than the architect or engineer. A bricolage framework, moreover, helps us avoid a monolithic, static, or ahistorical view of the state. Our attention is drawn to the origin and heterogeneity of structures and personalities, allowing us to see how smaller shifts accrue to form larger transformations or, conversely, why revolutions and crises do not necessarily beget revolutionary change. For this reason Charles Tilly, editor of the pioneering *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, would later clarify that the study of political development in early modern Europe was not concerned with the formation of states per se, but their transformation.<sup>14</sup>

The “wrought products” at hand for any state project may be structural (buildings, machinery, resources), conceptual (ideology, symbols, identities, institutional models), or human (royalty, officials, bureaucrats, soldiers). European colonial regimes were bricoleurs par excellence, imposing their sovereign claims on top of kingdoms and ruling through indigenous bureaucracies. Such was the case in Vietnam, where French control relied on the cooperation of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) administration. This frustrated reformers like Phan Châu Trinh, who argued for accommodation with

France as a means to engineer the monarchic state into a more democratic structure.<sup>15</sup> Even post-colonial revolutionary states aspiring for radical change found themselves cobbling together a new order with the remnants of an *ancien régime*. In its first years, the DRV was itself a bricolage state, drawn from the colonial regime and short-lived Empire of Vietnam. “The ‘wiring’ of the colonial state had largely survived,” David Marr notes in his history of the DRV, “to be used by new masters.” Only with the arrival of Chinese aid and advisors in 1949 was the DRV leadership able to more fully engineer a party-state.<sup>16</sup>

### Sovereign Practice & the State of Vietnam

Bricolage is therefore a process inherent to state transformation, but heightened in cases where the state is historically fractured. In the SVN, the collapse of a fragmentary colonial state and exigencies of wartime state-building accentuated its occurrence. As such, a conventional interpretation of sovereignty as absolute and indivisible has little utility for understanding the SVN. First, after scrutinizing several classic theories of sovereignty, it is argued that the more productive lens for understanding sovereignty in the First Indochina War is as a *de facto* practice that extends and reproduces authority. Second, drawing on recent studies of decolonization, it becomes clear that sovereignty was a malleable and divisible set of practices. If we approach sovereignty as part of the bricolage of state-making, we see sovereignty too is a historically contingent concept. Elites in the former colonial world emerged from it with different ideas about what form of political organization to pursue and how sovereignty could be layered or parceled to achieve their visions. The absolute nation-state that arose from decolonization was not the only possible avenue out of empire, nor the only one initially imagined.

Most studies of sovereignty begin with the French jurist Jean Bodin. Midst the turmoil surrounding the Wars of Religion in sixteenth-century France, Bodin theorized the modern European definition of sovereignty to reinforce the state’s autonomy and primacy. Bodin argued that the state possessed “absolute and perpetual power” expressed through law, which signaled its “absolute authority over all the rest without exception.”<sup>17</sup>

In the early twentieth century another jurist, Carl Schmitt, drew upon Bodin’s foundational work to reassess the concept of sovereignty. Both Schmitt and Bodin shared a view of sovereignty as legally expressed but



never legally constrained. Sovereignty stands above the law, capable of suspending the latter in a crisis. The sovereign, Schmitt famously wrote, “is he who decides on the exception.”<sup>18</sup> Schmitt’s theory brings us closer to understanding sovereignty in the SVN by emphasizing its continual construction. While some have misinterpreted “the state of exception” as the moment a passive sovereign is galvanized into action, it merely affirms a sovereign that was embedded in quotidian practice. For Schmitt, the sovereign is an ultimately unauthorized power that routinely endorses itself as the authority through the use of an explanatory and legitimizing script that can range from national unity, to democracy, religion, or ethnic identity. Through this mechanism, the sovereign controls the heart of political life: the ability to determine friend and enemy. However, this justification is not objective. Within the state, sovereign practice is always contested or opposed to some degree, and never complete. All others accept, acquiesce, or are forced to comply.<sup>19</sup>

Though Schmitt was born more than a century later, his sovereign practice significantly resembles that of G.W.F. Hegel. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel defines internal sovereignty as the ongoing production of an ideal. His concept of sovereignty is the unity—the idealism or “ideality”—of the political state. The various powers and functions of the state are not authorized by virtue of their own existence nor the will of an individual who commands them. They derive authority from subordination, through law and constitutional rule, to the ideality of the whole state. Ideality requires that civil society embrace the “idea of the whole” political community as its paramount concern. In peacetime this justificatory narrative helps the state create an “unconscious necessity” for itself that overcomes personal or local loyalties. When faced with crisis, constituents place their trust in the state to uphold the “idea of the whole” political community and defend it even if it requires sacrificing previously legitimate functions or authorities. In terms almost identical to Schmitt, Hegel concludes that in this moment of crisis—when the suppression of law is accepted as necessary to preserve the whole—the idealism that constitutes internal sovereignty “attains its distinct actuality.” For both theorists, internal sovereignty is not a prerequisite for state formation, but its secondary effect and ultimate, unattainable aspiration.<sup>20</sup> It is this definition, and not the more contemporary European idea of discrete, bounded sovereignty, that applied to Vietnam. Throughout the Indochina

wars, sovereignty remained a practice that had to be asserted and continually created at the grassroots level of governance.

But sovereignty was fractured on high as well. In Vietnam and other areas of the decolonizing world this was the norm rather than the exception. Yet writing in the mid-twentieth century, theorists produced essential definitions of sovereignty that reflected their contemporary world rather than the concept's historical contingency. Fredrick Cooper's recent study of decolonization in French Africa illustrates that post-colonial histories have neglected the ambiguity of sovereignty and citizenship. Because the practice of sovereignty could be divisible, African leaders were able to seek an exit from empire that avoided extremes of national independence or imperial subordination and assimilation or total disassociation. The famous Senegalese nationalist Léopold Sédar Senghor was the strongest advocate of a multinational French Union in which Africans enjoyed the rights of French citizenship. One could be politically French, if not culturally. Sovereignty could accommodate this arrangement if it was layered at a territorial, federal, and confederal level. This framework, Senghor and Mamadou Dia argued, offered a model for a community in which French-speaking Africans could cooperate and demand progress toward French metropolitan levels of social and economic justice. For African leaders there was no inherent contradiction in building a sovereign national community in association with a larger French community. Even as Vietnamese nationalist rhetoric and the First Indochina War reached their peak in 1953, Senghor continued to warn against the "temptation of narrow nationalisms representing a grave danger in a world in which independence risks being an illusion."<sup>21</sup> Some form of shared sovereignty was a necessary strategy to accommodate metropolitan authorities, but also to account for potential regional conflict and the challenges of the Cold War. The leadership of the SVN likewise grappled with the balance between self-rule and sovereignty within this larger and unequal French political space. Yet, the 1940s was not a radical departure. Vietnamese political elites had long navigated unequal relationships with larger imperial states.

## State Consolidation in Vietnam

The bricolage SVN state and its acceptance of partial sovereignty emerged from a longer pattern of state practices in Vietnam. Historically, Vietnamese

elites adopted compromised forms of sovereignty to further their domestic aims and manage relations with larger states. Faced with imperial powers at their borders and local rivals at their gates, state elites and aspirants tried to leverage those unequal relationships in ways that consolidated their control over domestic rivals and grew their administrative-military capability. Consequentially, the processes of state formation in Vietnam have been intertwined with external states. Vietnam also has a history of “extraversion” like that proposed by Jean-François Bayart in sub-Saharan Africa. This is a more productive lens through which to view Vietnamese state builders’ engagement at different times, under different terms, and to different ends with Asian and European states. We can then acknowledge that Vietnamese, like Africans, have been “active agents in the *mise en dépendance* of their societies, sometimes opposing it and at other times joining in it, in such a way that it became an anachronism to reduce such home-grown strategies of “nationalism” or indeed of “collaboration.”<sup>22</sup>

Historians of pre-modern and early modern Vietnam have already begun to move us in this direction. Nationalist histories emphasizing a timeless Vietnamese resistance to China have given way to an understanding that the more common theme is one of elite cooperation, on unequal terms, between Vietnamese and Chinese speakers. To be sure, passing interludes of conflict and resistance occurred. The prevalent trend, however, is that Vietnamese elites preferred to adopt cultural and state models from the north. Sovereignty was a shared practice in this tributary relationship. Forgotten in the history of timeless resistance is that Chinese intervention came at the request of Vietnamese royals hoping to conquer domestic rivals. In fact, since the fifteenth century Sino-Vietnamese conflict was rare. Though Vietnamese historians do not dare speak of “civil war” [*nội chiến*], internal conflict among Vietnamese regions has been the prevalent modern theme.<sup>23</sup>

The willingness of Vietnamese elites to engage in partial forms of external sovereignty is also linked to the historic factionalism of the state in Vietnam, in particular the inability of state elites to cooperate with, or overcome, their domestic rivals. When Bảo Đại returned to Vietnam, he was struggling with the same forces his Nguyễn Dynasty ancestors dealt with *circa* 1800 as they overcame the short-lived Tây Sơn Dynasty (1788–1802). While Gia Long searched for European support to assist his return to the throne, his

northern competitors in the Lê clan had already persuaded the Chinese Qing court to send troops into Vietnam to help restore Lê Duy Khiêm. To the south, the fragmentary character of the state in Vietnam, and factionalism within the Tây Sơn regime, allowed Gia Long to attract defectors by negotiating arrangements of autonomy with military strongmen. He amplified that advantage by building a diverse apparatus that drew on European and Asian advisors, and heavily on Chinese Minh hương immigrants to rule a population just as diverse.<sup>24</sup>

Recent critical examinations of the Vietnamese colonial and dynastic state have revealed that its reach remained surprising limited throughout the modern period. As Brian Zottoli has shown, Nguyễn court historians constructed the “march south” [*nam tiến*] to valorize their victory and legitimize their rule. An unvarnished history of the Nguyễn Dynasty state reveals that fragments of the Cham Empire and Mạc Dynasty (officially 1533–1592) persisted into the eighteenth century. When Gia Long proclaimed himself emperor, Vietnamese speakers in the Mekong Delta were still a minority compared with Cham, Chinese, and Khmer.<sup>25</sup> The highland areas remained akin to foreign states that could be engaged on a limited political and economic basis, and Lê Văn Duyệt ruled the Mekong Delta by keeping its various constituents separate and thus at peace. Integration began only after the unpopular “cultivation” reforms of Minh Mạng and French colonialism.<sup>26</sup> On the eve of European conquest, the Nguyễn Dynasty thus sat atop an unstable imperial state that struggled to balance its sources of external support and centralize its administration.

The French colonial state that came crashing down in 1945 was grafted onto this earlier Vietnamese imperial project. Contrary to popular imagination, at the periphery of the empire, French colonial influence was limited, indirect, and often nonexistent. Well into the twentieth century, what the colonial authority could not do itself it did indirectly through the empowerment of outlying “pirates,” including Đè Thám, Ba Kỳ, and Liang Sanqi.<sup>27</sup> Vietnam’s disappearing architectural relics may say otherwise, but the colony was not the metropole in miniature, lagging behind but progressing toward the territorial sovereign state idealized in Europe. The byzantine Indochinese legal system comprised local customs, special statutes, the Gia Long legal code (largely borrowed from the Qing dynastic code), and French law. Depending

on the “region” [*kỳ*] of one’s origin, and if their dispute was with a French or “Annamese,” one could be subject to an entirely different set of laws.<sup>28</sup>

But those laws only held sway in areas firmly under state control. Even in Cochinchina, where French influence was assumed greatest, it faded quickly once outside the major urban centers. In the mid 1930s a Vietnamese reporter traveled to a 3,000-person village in Bến Tre that provincial officials had never visited. With the exception of those few who had traveled into the city, the rest had never seen a Frenchman.<sup>29</sup> In his study of the Indochina alcohol monopoly, Gerard Sasges shows this village was representative of the limits of the colonial state. French colonial influence, even in matters as vital as taxation, was limited to major urbanities, plantations, coastlines and the skeletal network of roads and canals controlled by colonial authorities. A decade later, it was no coincidence that the DRV state proved most resilient in areas where the practice of colonial authority had been limited or absent.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1940s, the question remained as it had in 1840: how to build state strength with such meager resources and yet overcome domestic and foreign threats. To different degrees of success, Vietnamese state elites chose to share sovereignty in pursuit of their goals. Beginning with the Japanese-sponsored Empire of Vietnam [Đế Quốc Việt Nam] in mid 1945, Vietnamese followed the example of Subhas Chandra Bose, Aung San and other Southeast Asian leaders by seeking an anti-colonial alliance with Japan. Constrained independence was preferable to inaction. As Vũ Ngự Chiêu showed, the DRV incorporated much of the Empire of Vietnam’s leadership and policies. And, lest we forget, during the “golden” era of DRV history from 1945–1946 the state did not possess full sovereignty. Even beyond the struggle between rival parties in the countryside, the Chinese occupation represented a serious constraint on the revolutionary state’s actions.<sup>31</sup> After 1949, the DRV welcomed Chinese advisors who oversaw its military modernization and land reform campaign.<sup>32</sup> That strategy compromised the state’s sovereignty but enabled its leadership to achieve domestic political and ideological goals opposed by French Union and SVN forces. Conversely, while attempting to build their own state, the SVN leadership endorsed the French presence in Vietnam while demanding it occur on more equal terms. Yet, without the support of these Vietnamese, it is possible that international pressure could have forced France to withdraw from Indochina years earlier. There was

a degree of equivalence, though nowhere near commensurate, between the compromised practices of sovereignty by Vietnam's decolonizing states.

### Revolution & Civil War: August 1945

A host of state fragments, parties, and militias had arisen in Vietnam during the late-colonial years and World War II. Each exercised some form of sovereign practice after the March 1945 coup d'état, aspiring to maintain or expand their foothold. The forthcoming dilemma of the SVN state was preceded by the DRV's failed attempt at state-making through bricolage. Both governments would struggle to integrate and redirect the country's political and religious organizations. As the preeminent legal historian Frederic W. Maitland concluded, "the modern state is an almost fortuitous collection of functions left over from other bodies, and performs these functions in ways dictated to it by what those other bodies have already done."<sup>33</sup> Too often the religious sects, anti-colonial political organizations, and the post-colonial governments continued to function as they had since 1945, less collaborators than competitors exercising their own sovereign practices.

At the time of the 1945 August Revolution, the Vietnamese were already locked in a struggle for the destiny of the post-colonial state. The Empire of Vietnam government crumbled quickly after Việt Minh forces seized control of their August 17th rally in Hà Nội, though many of the Empire of Vietnam's leaders would join the DRV's first cabinet. Old Việt Minh units fought the newer as they struggled to take local leadership outside Hà Nội, while Democratic Party, and Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) members all moved to assert some form of authority over revolutionary councils. Armed units of the VNQDD and Vietnam Revolutionary League [Việt Nam Cách Mệnh Đồng Minh Hội] (ĐMH) moved into Tonkin with the support of the occupying Chinese troops and jockeyed with Việt Minh units for influence in border provinces.<sup>34</sup>

To the south, officials in the Empire of Vietnam mobilized the United National Front [Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất] (UNF), comprised of Trotskyists, Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and the Empire of Vietnam's Vanguard Youth organization. Within days they had organized several demonstrations in Sài Gòn with upwards of two hundred thousand participants.<sup>35</sup> But the UNF was mortally wounded after Phạm Ngọc Thạch, head of the Vanguard

Youth and a covert ICP member, withdrew and joined forces with the ICP member Trần Văn Giàu. Soon thereafter the UNF voted to do the same. As head of the Southern Administrative Committee Trần Văn Giàu also cited the necessity of “maintaining order” on the arrival of Allied forces as the basis for his August 28, 1945 command to dissolve all groups not under Việt Minh authority.<sup>36</sup> Violence flared between Khmer and Vietnamese in early September, thrusting the committee into a crisis that could jeopardize diplomatic cooperation between Hà Nội and Phnom Penh. The Committee was sent scrambling after Sơn Thái Xuân,<sup>37</sup> a Khmer Krom village elder in Trà Vinh Province, was killed. He was also the grandfather of Sơn Ngọc Thành, the Cambodian prime minister.<sup>38</sup>

In response to Trần Văn Giàu’s marginalization of rivals, the Hòa Hảo tried to retake control of Cần Thơ, igniting a battle with Việt Minh cadres that led to the execution of the Hòa Hảo military commander Trần Văn Soái’s son and the Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ’s brother. Back in Sài Gòn, after failing to capture Huỳnh Phú Sổ, Trần Văn Giàu and the Provisional Committee ordered the arrest of Hòa Hảo leaders and dissolution of its organizations, sparking even wider violence between the two before reaching a tentative rapprochement.<sup>39</sup> Over the next two months the Việt Minh executed scores of those affiliated with the defunct UNF, specifically those who were Trotskyists or members of the Vietnam Independence Party [Việt Nam Độc Lập Đảng].

For a time the DRV was able to improvise a unified bricolage state. Bảo Đại became advisor to the new government and appeared at Hồ Chí Minh’s side at major events, while key members of the Empire of Vietnam, religious leaders, and exiled nationalist parties took leadership roles. Still unclear was who would wield power and the terms of its exercise. This central cleavage, apparent in August 1945 and only settled in April 1975, would widen in 1946. In Tonkin, militias and party members of the VNQDĐ, ĐMH, Đại Việt, and Việt Minh fought one another in a civil war that predated the return of French troops. Midst the killing, one Việt Minh soldier called for an end to this bloody civil war and the need to prepare for foreign invasion. In a public letter he reflected:

We had suffered . . . so we became confused and immersed in a cycle of sin.

What sorrow! My own hands have shot dead three dear fellow brothers, because

someone told me they were not in true revolutionary parties. I kept trusting that they were Vietnamese traitors [*Việt-gian*], reactionaries we had a duty to eradicate. . . . **Vietnamese must stop killing Vietnamese over politics.**<sup>40</sup>

With their leadership in exile, the VNQDĐ, Đại Việt, and ĐMH aligned with southern political leaders opposed to the DRV's dictatorial rule or communism. Together they formed the Front for National Union [Mặt Trận Thống Nhất Quốc Gia Liên Hiệp] (FNU). Nguyễn Văn Sâm, an anti-colonial journalist who served in the Empire of Vietnam before joining the Việt Minh, led the new front. He headed a public campaign that spring for new negotiations with France. The program found a ready audience among those already disillusioned. That summer six hundred intellectuals, artists, professionals, and former DRV officials in Hà Nội signed a petition calling upon Bảo Đại to negotiate with France. They further accused the DRV leadership of totalitarianism and placing its interest above that of the people.<sup>41</sup> In September 1947, the FNU's leadership met in Hong Kong and took up these same themes to accuse the DRV and its ICP leadership of subordinating the Vietnamese revolution in their pursuit of a communist state. These diverse party leaders, most of whom had long opposed the monarchy, voted to recognize Bảo Đại as their representative and to resume negotiations with France. Retaliation was quick. Within a month DRV agents assassinated Nguyễn Văn Sâm in Chợ Lớn. At the same moment, in Hà Nội, agents murdered Trương Đình Tri, the former DRV Minister of Health and a prominent Đại Việt member. Leaderless, the FNU foundered. Its membership soon migrated to Lê Văn Hoạch's rival Vietnam National Rally [Việt Nam Quốc Gia Liên Hiệp].

## The State of Vietnam

At a time of increasing factionalism, Bảo Đại's non-partisan "person" became the only point of rally. Meanwhile, French colonial officials like Léon Pignon and Jean Cousseau reached out to Bảo Đại, hoping that he could solve France's Indochina dilemma once more. The former emperor remained in Hong Kong, openly critical of France in his statements, tying his return—and thereby French political plans—to French recognition of Vietnamese unity and independence. Over the next months Vietnamese personalities poured into Hong Kong on the three weekly flights from Sài Gòn.



Negotiations between Bảo Đại and the colonial authorities progressed slowly, with the latter unwilling to concede much to their ostensible Vietnamese allies. But in 1948 metropolitan officials finally agreed to move toward a limited form of Vietnamese self-rule by sponsoring the Provisional Central Government of Colonel Nguyễn Văn Xuân. Under the Colonel's leadership this government officially represented all three *kỳ* (Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin) and began preparations for future negotiations to define the exact powers of an independent Vietnamese state. To the great worry of the DRV, Nguyễn Văn Xuân began dispatching representatives abroad to gain international recognition of his government from Asian states. Meanwhile, elaborating on an earlier agreement made in Hạ Long Bay, on March 8, 1949 Bảo Đại and French President Vincent Auriol signed the Élysée Accords recognizing Vietnam's right to a constrained independence. The SVN had won French recognition of its territorial unity and partial sovereignty through a national army and diplomatic representation. France would, however, retain key controls over each for an indeterminate period of time.<sup>42</sup>

More than anything, Bảo Đại may personify the bricolage of state-making in Vietnam from the late colonial to the post. When he returned to lead the SVN in 1949, the former emperor had already been subject to four "Bảo Đại solutions." The first came as he returned to Vietnam after a decade completing his education in France. To counteract unrest following the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviets, colonial officials organized his return to Annam in 1932. The young emperor was sent on tours of the countryside, but quickly realized he was without power to apply his lessons in politics or modernize the kingdom. During World War II, French Admiral Jean Decoux revived Bảo Đại as a symbol of Vietnamese nationalism and once again as "the first modern Monarch of Annam" and, to coincide with the Vichy youth mobilization agenda, "the first sporting Sovereign."<sup>43</sup> Soon thereafter Japan made its belated and conditional offer of independence. Bảo Đại declared Vietnamese unity and independence under the Empire of Vietnam, before abdicating in a ceremony arranged by the ICP and serving as a prominent advisor in the DRV's first months. Much of the ICP leadership disliked the former emperor, seeing in him the feudal past and an obstacle to their vision of modernity. Hồ Chí Minh however saw the emperor's status as a national and non-partisanship symbol as the very building block his new state needed.

Indeed, in 1945 rumors circulated of Hồ Chí Minh's displeasure that lower ranking ICP members had arranged for Bảo Đại's abdication. Even after Bảo Đại fled to Hong Kong, the DRV renamed him an advisor to the government and Hồ Chí Minh continued to appeal for his return.<sup>44</sup>

Almost all Vietnamese histories regard Bảo Đại and the Nguyễn Dynasty at the time of the August revolution as a spent force. French colonial rule and the mandarin's corruption had certainly eroded the prestige of the monarchy, but this absolute assessment reflected the opinions of certain political elites more than the population at large. Certainly the DRV's continued attempts to woo him back to Hà Nội indicate otherwise. When Bảo Đại began to ally with dissident Vietnamese political figures it caused considerable alarm among their leadership. Even in Cochinchina, where conventional accounts assure us that Bảo Đại had no influence, their cadre reacted swiftly to this news, conducting polls to evaluate the public attitude toward Bảo Đại and his declarations from Hong Kong.<sup>45</sup>

With recognition of independence in hand, albeit in a very restricted sense, Bảo Đại returned to Vietnam. On the eve of the inauguration of the SVN, Bảo Đại declared his vision for the future to an audience before Sài Gòn's city hall and across the airwaves. He would rule according to Mencius' adage "The People Above All" [Dân Vi Quý]. Four years earlier this had also been the guiding principle of the Empire of Vietnam, and won praise from scholars as the first popular form of Vietnamese government.<sup>46</sup> Sovereignty belonged to the people, but would have to remain suspended, the former emperor declared. The ongoing war made a national election impossible. He would take temporary control of the state to find a peaceful resolution. When circumstances allowed the people to clearly express their opinion, sovereignty would return to the people through national elections that would decide the country's political system. Even Bảo Đại's position as chief of state would be put to a vote—a promise that Ngô Đình Diệm would later take up. In the meantime, the government promised democratic reform, the promotion of peace and individual liberty, and an end to illiteracy.

After four years of war and deprivation, the Bảo Đại solution generated enthusiasm and curiosity. Thousands attended rallies in Sài Gòn, Hà Nội, and Hà Đông.<sup>47</sup> Urban centers had begun to see signs of economic recovery,

and battlefield success allowed refugees to come from the countryside in the tens of thousands. But there was also great uncertainty and fear. Educated elites looked at the civil war tearing apart China and hoped that the new government would not lead to an expansion of the conflict in Vietnam. Bảo Đại and southern politicians agreed Sài Gòn would become the SVN's new capital, hoping it would cement the country's new unity and overcome lingering separatist tendencies in the south.

Any optimism was tempered by the destruction of the ancien régime in the countryside. Since 1945, territory had passed between control of traditional village notables, the DRV, sect militaries, and French Union forces and their Vietnamese auxiliaries. The situation was worst in Annam and Tonkin, where Việt Minh control was more entrenched than in Cochinchina. Việt Minh cadres had assassinated a staggering 473 village notables in just Thừa Thiên Province by the end of 1949. A clear demarcation between the cities and the countryside existed, the barrier of control between two states. Village officials in this liminal zone were forced to play a "double game" as agents of both the DRV and SVN, tacking between the two depending on circumstance and the possibility of retribution.<sup>48</sup> The formation of the SVN exacerbated these battles. In Thừa Thiên, the province chief reported that local Việt Minh had accelerated their assassinations and propaganda denouncing Bảo Đại with the SVN's assumption of power in January 1950. Meanwhile, local VNQDD members had formed their own units to identify and assassinate Việt Minh cadre.<sup>49</sup> Even low-level government representatives found themselves the target of state violence. Like the Algerian war to come, the Việt Minh had targeted teachers as frontline administrative arms of Nguyễn Văn Xuân's Central Provisional Government. Toward the end of 1948, forty village headmasters were kidnapped in Hà Đông, while another fourteen were arrested and four executed in Đan Phượng. By the time of Bảo Đại's return, hiring new teachers became a priority to accommodate losses and the refugee families who had chosen to move into SVN controlled territory.<sup>50</sup>

The overarching aim of the SVN government was to rally the Việt Minh foot soldier. High-level officials of the SVN and much of the political elite sympathized with the goals of the resistance. In their eyes, the vast majority of the Việt Minh was noble and brave ("our heroes" even among Bảo Đại's

family) but led astray by the communist leadership at the top of the DRV. Bảo Đại and his first prime minister, Nguyễn Phan Long, declined diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China in the hope that they could keep the broader Asian Cold War at bay and allow for reconciliation between the government and Việt Minh foot soldier.<sup>51</sup> French military officials were incensed by the SVN government's favorable stance toward their enemy, unable to comprehend that the SVN was *not* a rejection of the revolution but a means to fulfill it on more moderate terms and under different leadership. Only in mid 1951 did the rhetoric, and war at large, begin to harden. Prime Minister Trần Văn Hữu's speech after the Franco-Vietnamese victory at Vĩnh Yên was the first to call the Việt Minh an "enemy" and denounce the southern sects' continued contact with the Việt Minh. Those words merely confirmed reality. As he noted, the DRV troops were not fighting Frenchmen, but killing Vietnamese youths in SVN's new national army. No longer was it tolerable to speak forgivingly of the resistance.<sup>52</sup> Trần Văn Hữu's successor would elaborate upon this harder line toward the DRV.

Echoing the words of French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, another "tiger" who confronted weak domestic support for war against a formidable opponent, Nguyễn Văn Tâm came to office with a promise: "*Je fais la guerre* [I make war]!" In strong terms, this former administrator and police official framed the war as a choice between tradition fused with liberalism in the SVN or a foreign communist dictatorship in the DRV. Through 1953 he oversaw an escalation in national army mobilization underway since 1951, a modest land reform law, and a new labor code. Nguyễn Văn Tâm also instituted a three-stage, ground-up national democratization [*dân chủ hoá*] that he argued drew on Vietnam's strong democratic tradition in the village. The administration linked voter registration to the census, and thus to the military mobilization, for the first municipal and provincial elections in January 1953. Voting was restricted to areas deemed pacified and suffrage was limited to males. Over two-thirds of one million registered voters cast ballots in an election that was limited but free. Though the election posed a grave threat to the DRV's international reputation, scattered Việt Minh assassinations and propaganda had a limited effect.<sup>53</sup>

A group of affluent professionals won the Sài Gòn elections, campaigning on basic services and aid to the lower classes. Reflecting the differing

experiences of the north and south, in Hà Nội the election became a referendum on the war and national politics. The ticket headed by Nguyễn Thế Truỳền, Hồ Chí Minh's closest associate and the leading anti-colonial activist in 1920s Paris, and other anti-Việt Minh *attentistes* [those who wait-and-see] won convincingly with their pledge to push for an elected national assembly, an end to French privileges, and an end to the war. Nguyễn Thế Truỳền continued his campaign through his newspapers. He became the foremost advocate of non-alignment in the Cold War, arguing forcefully for the neutralization of Vietnam and alliance with the non-aligned Afro-Asian nations.<sup>54</sup>

However, the central SVN leadership argued the foreign threat of communism and its rejection of individualism necessitated the French presence. French support was still necessary, they conceded, to defend the SVN against the DRV and its Chinese allies. At the commissioning of seven hundred new Vietnamese national army officers, Minister of Defense Phan Huy Quát told forty thousand spectators that Vietnam represented the plight of the world at large, divided between two modes of life, two modes of thinking. "The Viet Minh communists, for whom the ends justify the means, consider the soldier as a simple instrument of war, whose value does not exceed that of an automatic gun. By contrast, the national government recognizes you as more than a soldier, for all that which makes humans sacred."<sup>55</sup>

But the distinction appeared less dramatic to the young men subject to mobilization. After Bảo Đại decreed a new "total" mobilization as the siege of Điện Biên Phủ escalated, a sense of uncertainty fell over Hà Nội. Even the cinema provided no escape. Police now lurked in the wings, stopping shows to inspect the crowd for draft-age youths. If someone was caught without papers, he was taken directly to the Bureau of Mobilization office. Young men now had to choose between mobilization in the maquis or under their former monarch. A dozen students at the Ecole Supérieure de pédagogie chose to abscond in the night and search out Việt Minh beyond Hà Nội's edge. One student, Pham Van An, struggled to decide if he would join them. The choice was not as clear as framed by Minister Phan Huy Quát or Hồ Chí Minh. Pham Van An's feelings of camaraderie, patriotism, and individual liberty conflicted, pulling him both ways. He ultimately refused to go. "I fear too much," he explained to a friend, "that the V[iệt] M[inh] would forcibly

enlist me in that army of coolies transporting weapons.” Another student confided to a friend his determination to avoid military service on either side: “Nationalists or communists, they are only *boys* [domestic servants] in service of the French, Americans, or Russians.”<sup>56</sup>

Similar themes animated Minister of Social Action Lê Thắng’s village reorganization plan, which aimed to improve the lot of peasants while bringing them more firmly under the government’s authority. He billed the project as the centerpiece of the national government’s social program and the model for thousands of future villages. Each new village was comprised from refugees and peasants willing to move out of Việt Minh-dominated areas. Organizers felt that the planned scheme of houses, schools, temples, markets, athletic fields and military posts would help modernize country life. The villages’ placement near major highways would also facilitate commerce and ensure the national army could aid in their defense. In Lê Thắng’s vision, the aid was a “moral loan” between the state and peasant that carried an obligation to contribute to the political and economic strength of the nation. The resettlement program struck at the core of the DRV’s existence. If the SVN could separate it from the rural population and their resources, the DRV state would essentially cease to exist. Conversely, the SVN would be able to better mobilize soldiers, recruit labor, and tax. To combat the program in the south, the Việt Minh commander for Gia Định ordered cadres into not yet moved villages to propagandize and spread misinformation, but to limited effect.<sup>57</sup>

The DRV was more worried about the Đồng Quán model village in Tonkin. Though subsumed under Lê Thắng’s broader agenda, the Governor of North Vietnam, Nguyễn Hữu Trí, was the driving force behind the most ambitious of all the village projects. Sixteen miles south of Hà Nội, at the juncture of Route 1 and 22, the North Vietnam Service of Public Works laid out a 100-hectare (247-acre) development with housing for ten thousand peasants drawn from twenty-five villages. As soon as work began, Việt Minh troops attacked the structures nightly. Laborers hired to repair the damage fled after the Việt Minh threatened to burn their homes. Despite resistance, by the end of 1953 administrators were able to finish the village and begin moving thousands from the surrounding villages. On its heels, the North Vietnam Service of Public Works produced another ten smaller model

villages before 1954. But modernization projects found what would become familiar hurdles. Local Vietnamese SVN officials—and from 1951 their American counterparts in the forerunner to USAID—grappled with peasants who had little interest in their new wells or put their pesticides to different use than they intended.<sup>58</sup>

While the public face of the SVN showed socio-political reform and a modern state model, its underside revealed a tenuous lattice of alliances. To draw away the base of the Việt Minh resistance and build the first government spanning from the Chinese border south to Cà Mau and west to Lai Châu and Ban Mê Thuột, the SVN needed to incorporate highlands that remained outside effective lowland state control through the 1940s.<sup>59</sup> Negotiating each arrangement was particularly difficult. The terms of each accord needed to satisfy an array of stakeholders that ranged from French colonials, national SVN administrators, and local ethnic minority leaders. The resulting bricolage of states contained overlapping authorities and sovereignties. While the lowlands formed the mass of the SVN territory under chief of state Bảo Đại, in the highlands Bảo Đại once again became king. To safeguard their freedom of action in Indochina, French officials had demanded a separate status for the highland *pays*. Leaders of the upland ethnic groups were in agreement that they would only adhere to the SVN project on a separate basis, under the person of Bảo Đại, but not subject to control of the lowland state. Speaking at a ceremony of allegiance in the northwest highlands, the Nùng delegate Cao Văn told Bảo Đại that they had administered their own government and defense for several years. They had already “acquired de facto autonomy” during World War II and in the early years of the war, which they would not forfeit. The corresponding ceremony in the Central Highlands went far worse. Chiefs from the Rhadé, Mnong, Bahnar and others paraded their elephants, sacrificed buffalo, and drank rice wine with Bảo Đại and High Commissioner Léon Pignon. In their minds it was another colonial ceremony, only begun in 1933 under the Pierre Pasquier. But as Pignon spoke they were shocked to hear him boast that the uplands were joining the government of the lowlands, even with a separate statute. In vain, the chiefs drafted a letter of protest to the High Commissioner.<sup>60</sup> Their inclusion into the SVN state was a *fait accompli*.

In the lowlands the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Catholics, Bình Xuyên political organization, Chinese congregations, and old nationalist parties each formed their own separate administrative apparatuses, replete with armed forces, social services, and political arms. Their authority over significant territory had made them formidable rivals of the Việt Minh, but also to Vietnamese officials who aimed to refashion this bricolage state into a centralized, modern administration. In a way the logic of this strategy countered French and SVN aims to build a viable central government. In allying with the state fragments that had broken away from the DRV, the SVN was working with forces that had proven most resistant to the control of a central government. Further complicating matters was that each organization experienced some degree of inner dissension due to leadership rivalries or ideological differences. Forces under the command of the Hòa Hảo's top military official, Trần Văn Soái, remained locked in a low-scale war with rival Hòa Hảo military leaders like Nguyễn Giác Ngộ. Within the Cao Đài similar disagreements, notably between the military commanders Trình Minh Thế and Nguyễn Văn Thanh, prevented unity of action at crucial moments. Quite often these military men passed into "dissidence," temporarily disavowing the SVN only to negotiate a new *ralliement* [alliance] switching their allegiance back. Each negotiation yielded them a larger area of operations or new material aid.

Smaller state fragments largely escaped public attention, but illustrate how the SVN expanded through the use of older state projects and indirect authority. An early leader of the VNQDĐ, Vũ Hồng Khanh, fled to China after a failed uprising at Yên Bái in 1930, thereafter organizing Vietnamese revolutionaries in southern China and serving as an officer in the Kuomintang army. He returned to Vietnam after the August Revolution and took a leadership position in the DRV, before retreating back into China after the defeat of the nationalist parties at the hands of Võ Nguyên Giáp. As Chinese communist troops neared complete victory in December 1949, Vũ Hồng Khanh cobbled together an army of Vietnamese, upland minorities, and Kuomintang soldiers. In December 1949, they headed toward Lạng Sơn, intent on attacking the Việt Minh and French. After suffering defeats at the hands of both, Vũ Hồng Khanh agreed to pledge his loyalty to Bảo Đại and crossed over. Under North Vietnam Governor Nguyễn Hữu Trí's authority he gained command of a mountain redoubt. His base of operations and



several hundred soldiers became a small replica of the Whampoa Academy in northwest Vietnam where Chinese republican values were studied. Though he had pledged loyalty to the SVN and its French sponsorship, one of Vũ Hồng Khanh's first maneuvers was a covert appeal to American officials for direct US aid to supplant France.<sup>61</sup> Two years later, Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm named this former revolutionary his Minister of Youth and Sports in a cabinet that drew heavily on leaders of the old revolutionary parties. It is not clear what happened to the mountain base. Other Kuomintang soldiers were sent to Phú Quốc for temporary internment and repatriation. However, in the late 1950s they were still farming pepper while directing and manning the island's militias.<sup>62</sup>

Creating and transforming the SVN's institutions led not only to contests with Việt Minh cadres, but also among the central state's bureaucrats. Who exactly wielded power and the terms of its exercise were open questions at the ground level, even within the state. The creation of the National Army of Vietnam brought one more competitor into the countryside and cities. In certain rare cases, the National Army and the sect militaries faced off in full-scale battles when disagreements arose over command. But even in Sài Gòn, low level violence betrayed the difficulties of building the coercive apparatus of the new state. After witnessing yet another brawl between his police officers and National Army soldiers, the District Three Inspector reported that "at this moment uniformed police are faced with two enemies: the Việt Minh and the Vietnamese soldiers."<sup>63</sup>

The division of administrative duties between the central government and these state fragments created daily contests to expand one's sovereignty at the expense of the other. Depending on the day or week, that "other" could be an agent of the DRV, France, the SVN, a sect military unit, or local militia. Viewing these individual organizations as states leads us away from dead-end debates about who was truly nationalist. Just as we view states on the international stage, we can see the actions of each state fragment not as switching sides, but remaining on their own side.<sup>64</sup> This can apply as well to the DRV and its party leadership, who gained the cooperation of France to attack domestic opponents in the North during 1946, and then rival leaders in the South. Similar to other civil wars, the DRV fought two distinct campaigns. There was an external war against the French but, at its onset and

conclusion, the Indochina Wars were internal wars against domestic opponents. The latter often took precedent over the former.<sup>65</sup>

Though recent work has connected the cultural or racial biases of American diplomats serving in Vietnam and Ngô Đình Diệm's decision to fight the sects after 1955, this battle between states from 1945 to 1955 is missing. Administrators resented the sect forces as archaic obstacles blocking the formation of their modern centralized state. Often they had good reason to feel so. As province chief of Long Xuyên, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ watched helplessly as the Hòa Hảo leader Ba Cụt ransacked government buildings, implemented illegal taxes, and assassinated local police chiefs during his five dissidences.<sup>66</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ would go on to orchestrate Ngô Đình Diệm's battle against the sects in 1955 for his own reasons. Over the prior nine years Ngô Đình Diệm himself was intimately involved with the litany of front organizations comprised from old political parties and the sects. All faltered over internal division and competing leaders' aspiration for national power. That long and familiar series of failures provided some part of the inspiration for the divide and conquer strategy Ngô Đình Diệm deployed.

His task was complicated by the empowerment of a new segment of elites that formed the SVN bricolage state. For the first time since the early nineteenth century, military prowess became an avenue to integrate and propel new leaders. This form of state building allowed armed leaders to trade on their authority over some locality, thus climbing a "ladder of militarization" to provincial, regional, and national prominence.<sup>67</sup> Though most histories speak of monolithic and distinct Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, Catholic and Việt Minh organizations, their military leaders shared a comparable character. They possessed strong leadership, charisma, and a martial prowess that elevated them to popularity and military command during 1944–1945. Nguyễn Bình, Ba Dương, Năm Lửa, Bảy Viễn, Ba Cụt, Lâm Thành Nguyên, Trình Minh Thế, Nguyễn Giác Ngô and their lesser-known compatriots were more similar than different. Conversely, historians have tended to repeat the moralizing partisan discourses of Ngô Đình Diệm and the DRV, which labeled the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, and Catholics as feudal or criminal elements, incapable of building nationalist support.<sup>68</sup>

The popularity of historical Chinese novels in Cochinchina is one way to understand the perception of these latter day men of prowess. More

importantly, it demonstrates how state actors within the SVN engaged in ideational bricolage, deriving legitimacy from diverse sources. *Tam Quốc* [*Three Kingdoms*] was the first Chinese epic translated into the Romanized Vietnamese script at the turn of the century and rose to tremendous popularity in Cochinchina, and was soon adapted into songs, operas, and plays. At least 135 translations of Chinese stories were published in Sài Gòn, bringing readers adventure, political intrigue, and strong heroes in *Thủy Hử* [*Water Margin*], *Bạch Xà* [*Legend of the White Snake*], *Giang hồ Nữ hiệp* [*Errant Heroines*] among many others. It was not a surprise then that in the early 1940s outlaws and self-styled revolutionaries tended to adopt *nom de guerre* based on these Chinese figures. When one such bandit managed to kill a Vietnamese colonial militiaman, he taunted the survivors that he could not be caught for “I am the terrible Tiét Nhân Quý [Xue Rengui]!” he said in reference to the Tang Dynasty general. The writer Bình Nguyễn Lộc thus felt that through their adoration of these novels, southerners acquired a “very strong Chinese worldview.” Still in the 1960s “commoners and bandit chiefs alike all try to style themselves after Đôn Hùng Tín [Shan Xiongxin] or Quan Công [Guan Yu],” two important historical Chinese military leaders featured in these novels. Other observers also tied these stories to a real sentiment of legitimacy behind these southern strongmen. Like their Chinese heroes, they too became high officials in a new government after beginning political life as rebels.<sup>69</sup>

A Chinese proverb explains “Young people should not read the *Water Margin*, old people should not read the *Three Kingdoms*,”—the young likely to mimic the banditry and disregard for old social orders captured in the former, while the aged susceptible to partake in political intrigue glorified in the latter. If the proverb traveled with its inspiration, southerners did not endorse its wisdom. Certainly Nguyễn Bình did not. Though commander of DRV forces in the south, he devoured these Chinese epics instead of communist theory.<sup>70</sup> And when the Hòa Hảo prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ dedicated a poem to the Bình Xuyên troops, he and others invoked the Chinese term *giang hồ* [errant], popularized in the context of these Chinese novels, to romanticize their errant origins as pirates and praise the development of their revolutionary spirit.<sup>71</sup>

These stories offered a popular point of reference to legitimate their authority, particularly when it came to the delicate subject of collaboration

with foreign powers. During World War II, Huỳnh Phú Sổ referenced Chinese epics in poetry and announcements to justify the necessity of cooperation with Japanese authorities. Not surprisingly, some Hòa Hảo village militias invoked the “chivalrous” themes of these stories in their names.<sup>72</sup> Trình Minh Thế also persuasively weaved these stories with contemporary events. During his 1952 dissidence, Trình Minh Thế distributed leaflets that chastised the Cao Đài military’s chief of staff Nguyễn Văn Thanh and called for all Vietnamese to oppose France. The collapse of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) in *Three Kingdoms* and the fall of Edgar Faivre’s government in Paris offered a prescription for action. Just as Guan Yu had served under the tyrannical Eastern Han Chancellor Cao Cao after he was captured in 198 BCE, circumstance had forced the Cao Đài to collaborate with France. But when Cao Cao suffered a critical defeat, Guan Yu seized the opportunity to turn against him and escape. This same opportunity was now at hand. To collaborate with France in pursuit of independence was no crime, but to continue collaborating after this opportunity was a great crime, Trình Minh Thế averred.<sup>73</sup>

That there existed some legitimacy and favor for this governance by strongmen does not mean all viewed it as just or desirable. Absent ideology, the style of governance practiced by these southern leaders and their Việt Minh competitors resembled apolitical bandits. Despite the strongmen’s pillaging of certain members of the community, people frequently saw their “racket” as commensurate with state power. The band or unit would implant in an area and provide protection from other pirates. Some peasants respected pirates and sought their favor through gifts, perhaps better seen as taxation. In disputes, a villager could turn to his local strongman for assistance in settling the argument or imposing his justice.<sup>74</sup> The arrangement became essentially another familiar form of governance, a protection racket not fundamentally different from the repertoires of the central state. Charles Tilly may have noted in the 1980s that state making and organized crime were fundamentally similar processes.<sup>75</sup> But the insight of his argument was not new. Then, and still today, it is found in the Vietnamese saying, “the bandit robs you at night, the state robs you in the day” [*cướp đêm là giặc, cướp ngày là quan*]. As the SVN national army moved into the countryside, that racket became more competitive. Those living within the area of a new national army post were subject to *corvée* or taxation to support the imposition of yet another state.

## The Failure of the State of Vietnam

However, it was the contradictions at the highest levels of the SVN's shared sovereignty that hastened its demise. Try as they might, French colonials could not indefinitely ignore what had long ailed the empire and now the French Union. Within the *mission civilisatrice* and its more benign successor, "association," was the promise that France would indeed reimburse the colonized with their sovereignty. The promise of the French Union was that this moment was finally at hand, that association would be made freely and as equals. Yet time and again metropolitan and colonial officials subverted the State of Vietnam's ability to manage its affairs and actively discredited its leaders.

By the end of 1953, sentiment had shifted strongly against continued association with France as conceived in the French Union. Even Nguyễn Văn Tâm, who history has remembered as a caricature of colonial collaboration, demanded the abrogation of all Franco-Vietnamese treaties. Vietnam, he said, would no longer be tenant of a house built without it.<sup>76</sup> Realizing that sentiment, the prime minister literally destroyed the house. In a crowded ceremony Nguyễn Văn Tâm wielded a sledgehammer to break down the door of the Maison Centrale, Sài Gòn's French colonial prison, and then demolished the entire structure. Aiming for maximum impact, Nguyễn Văn Tâm held the demolition on the fourth anniversary of the unequal Élysée Accords that had birthed the SVN, acknowledging that this day of supposed Franco-Vietnamese amity had become one of enmity. Paris contributed to the worsening situation that summer by unilaterally devaluing the piastre-franc exchange rate in violation of the SVN's right to consultation on economic matters. More than pride, the devaluation suddenly burdened the Vietnamese with inflationary food prices and fiscal shortfalls. In consequence the SVN was forced to freeze the national budget and suspend all government projects.<sup>77</sup>

The piastre devaluation exacerbated the growing sense of dissatisfaction with the Franco-Vietnamese relationship and frustration over a seemingly endless war. Two prominent religious leaders called for the abrogation of the Élysée Accords and the ratification of a true constitution for the SVN. Without this, the Bishop Lê Hữu Từ argued, Vietnamese citizens had the right to refuse the government's demands, even military conscription. When, in July, the French Prime Minister Joseph Laniel promised to "perfect" the independence

of the SVN, it made little difference. That fall, leading political and religious personalities convened two national congresses in Sài Gòn. The 150 delegates represented the diversity within the SVN. *Attentistes*, recently rallied DRV officials, as well as provincial officials elected in the previous spring's elections all gathered to discuss the future of the SVN and the prospect of shared sovereignty. Even Hoàng Xuân Giũ, who had trained at the Comintern before leading the Fourth International's Colonial Section in 1930s Paris, was present as a representative of the Bình Xuyên. Arrested in 1932 by the French police, who feared he would protest Bảo Đại's return home to Vietnam, Hoàng Xuân Giũ was now lending his support to the state helmed by the former emperor.<sup>78</sup>

Lê Đình Cự, a representative of the Vietnamese Socialist Party and a former Việt Minh supporter, asked his fellow delegates, "how many times have we negotiated, negotiations where we were only figureheads? How many times have we declared an illusory independence?" Overwhelming now, the delegates agreed the war could only end once the SVN had achieved full independence and total sovereignty. Without these, it was impossible to decisively win over the population. When the conference ended, the delegates passed a resolution stating the SVN would not adhere to the French Union in its present form. That decision would be put to a vote only after the SVN had achieved full independence.<sup>79</sup> What little tolerance remained for cooperation with France was soon shattered when Paris agreed to divide Vietnam as part of the Geneva Accords.

## Conclusion

The following year, Ngô Đình Diệm took up a sweeping campaign to unseat Bảo Đại and wipe away the SVN. In a dramatic flair Ngô Đình Diệm orchestrated an *autodafé* [public burning] that marked the end of French colonialism. In the heart of Saigon, SVN army officers cast their French-inspired military uniforms into a bonfire.<sup>80</sup> The new administration, he promised, would do away with the feudal legacy of the bricolage state and its compromised sovereignty, in pursuit of a more modern state and society. Yet neither ritual nor action could erase the legacy of the SVN and the pattern of state fragmentation in Vietnam. The same tensions that surrounded nation building and the centralization of the fractious Vietnamese state continued to surround the First and Second Republics of Vietnam. Even in the North, where

war and competing mobilizations brought the DRV state to the grassroots of society, overcoming Vietnam's internal boundaries produced violent local responses after 1954.<sup>81</sup> In the South, Sài Gòn's political leaders would respond to the growing insurgency by reverting to the bricolage model of state building after 1963, re-empowering the same state fragments and outsourcing the local practice of authority in pursuit of pacification. They would, moreover, once again compromise their sovereignty and find themselves overly reliant on the might of a foreign state as they struggled to overcome domestic rivals.

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#### ABSTRACT

*This paper revisits the "bricolage" State of Vietnam and the fractured system of sovereignty that characterized its halting practice of sovereignty at the ground level during the First Indochina War. In addition, it examines how the French Union's concept of shared external sovereignty became discredited by the end of the war.*

KEYWORDS: *State of Vietnam, First Indochina War, sovereignty, bricolage, civil war*

#### Notes

1. In the original source this name did not have diacritical marks.
2. Embassy telegram (Embtel) 13389, July 25, 1973; Embtel 14243, Aug 7, 1974; Embtel 14418, Aug 9, 1974, Embtel 06896, May 25, 1974, in, Record Group (RG) 59, Access to Archival Databases (AAD), "Central Foreign Policy Files, July 1, 1973-Dec. 12-31, 1978," National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA).
3. This is F.H. Hinsley's pithy definition of sovereignty in "The Concept of Sovereignty and Relations Between States," *Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (1967): 242.

4. Douglas Howland and Luise White argue the study of nationalism has reified the state and argue that a focus on sovereignty can yield more productive studies of the state. See their "Introduction: Sovereignty and the Study of States," in *The State of Sovereignty: Territories, Laws, Populations*, eds. Douglas Howland and Luise White (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 2.
5. Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam, de 1940 à 1952* [A History of Vietnam, from 1940 to 1952], (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952); Paul Mus, *Sociologie d'une guerre* [Sociology of a War], (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).
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9. Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 223, 287.
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12. Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 38; Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
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14. Several scholars of institutional theory have recently advocated a "bricolage" perspective for similar reasons. See Martin B. Carstensen, "Bricolage as an Analytical Lens in New Institutional Theory," *Conceptualising Comparative Politics*, eds. Anthony Petros Spanakos and Francisco Panizza (New York: Routledge, 2015), chapter three.
15. Phan Chu Trinh's famous slogans were *Ỡ Pháp cầu tiến bộ* [Rely on the French for Progress] and *Tôn dân bài quân* [Up with the people, down with the monarchy], both quoted by Phan Bội Châu in *Overtured Chariot*, trans. by Vinh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 126.
16. David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 5; Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État Né de la Guerre* [Vietnam: A State Born of War] (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).
17. Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 43.
18. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.



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20. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 314–316, 359; Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Introduction," in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, eds. Hansen and Stepputat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.
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22. Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the world: a history of extraversion," *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 217–21.
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36. Telegram no. 717, August, 29, 1945, IIB 57/364(1), Fonds du Gouvernement de la Cochinchine (Gouchoc), Vietnam National Archives II, Hồ Chí Minh City (VNA-II).
37. In the original source this name did not have diacritical marks.
38. Telegram no. 787-NC, September 11, 1945, President Comité du Peuple Nambo à Chef province TRAVINH; Telegram no. 807/NG, undated [between Sept. 11–13] both in IIB 57/364(1), Gouchoc, VNA-II.
39. Telegram no. 784-NC, September 11, 1945, Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Nam Bộ gọi cho các Ủy Ban Nhân Dân HAU GIANG, IIB 57/364(1), Gouchoc, VNA-II.
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41. ‘Manifest des intellectuels Tonkinois,’ June 20, 1947, 118, Etats Associés (EA), Archives du Ministère des affaires étrangères, La Courneuve (MAE).
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  48. Report, Inspection des Affaires Politiques Administratives et Economiques 1949, 11, Phủ Thủ Hiến Trung Việt, VNA-IV.
  49. Letter, no.16-VP/M, Tỉnh trưởng Thừa-Thiên to Thủ Hiến Trung Việt, January 11, 1950, 23, THPTV, VNA-IV.
  50. Letter, “Về tình hình trường học trong hạt,” November 24, 1948, Giám-đốc Bắc Phần Việt Nam (Mai Văn Phương) to Quận Trưởng Đan-Phượng, 379, Sở Học chính Bắc Việt (SHCBV), VNA-I; Letter, no. 2.932-T/TC, July 22, 1950, Thị-Trưởng Hà Nội to Chánh-ty Tiểu-Học Thành Phố, 504, SHCBV, VNA-I.
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  52. *Discours de Vinh-Yên, 19 avril 1951* [Vinh Yên Address, April 19, 1951] (Saigon: Impr. Française d’Outre-Mer, 1951).
  53. Speech, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, “Hỡi anh em, chị em nông-phu,” VNA-II, PTTQGVN, 3357; Vietnam Presse no. 712. January 26, 1953, 637, TTQGVN, VNA-II.
  54. Letter, Nguyễn Thế Truyền to Mayor of Hà Nội, June 11, 1953, 68, Phòng Toà Thị Chính Hà Nội, VNA-I; His newspapers were *L’ami du peuple* and its Vietnamese version *Thân Dân* [The People’s Friend].
  55. “Discours prononce par le ministre de la defense nationale, Phan Huy Quat,” *Vietnam Presse* 985, October 26, 1953, 1568, PTTQG, VNA-II.
  56. Intercepted telegram, No. 256, April 27, 1954, Pham Van An (Ecole Supérieure de pédagogie, Hà Nội) to Dang Van Nhan (Ecole Supérieure des Travaux publics, Saigon) and Intercepted telegram no. 212, Nguyen Lan Giac to Nguyen Dinh Cat, April 7, 1954, both in 57, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.
  57. Vietnam Presse no. 670 “Le President Nguyen Van Tam Inaugure le village des rallies de Tan Phu Trung,” 1634, PTTQGVN, VNA-II; Translation, “Mesures prises contre la direction ennemie du rassemblement de la population,” *Front Lien Viet de la Province de Gia Dinh Ninh*, Vo Van Tao, 1 Jan 1952,” 1635, PTTQGVN, VNA-II.
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61. “V/v Truy to ten Vu Hong Khanh” no.130/B/KHN, Oct. 14, 1950, 905, Phủ Thủ Tướng, Vietnam National Archives III, Hà Nội (VNA-III).
62. Interview, Calvin Mehlert, Jan 11, 2014. As a Chinese speaker and Foreign Service Officer, Cal imbded with these pepper famers/militiamen in the mid 1950s and stayed on at the embassy through the 1970s. During that time he interviewed Vũ Hồng Khanh and Nghiêm Kế Tổ.
63. Commissaire de Police du 3ème Arrondissement [Hoa Van Mui] to Directeur de la Police Municipale, Feb 24, 1951, 53, HCI-SPCE, ANOM.
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