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VIETNAM: MEMORIES AND MEANING

Behind the Scenes, in the Forefront: Vietnamese Women in War and Peace

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This essay explores contributions to Vietnamese history by Việt Nam's first historical generals (who were women) as well as by women from the Vietnamese Communist Party's early years through the French-American War (1945–1954) and the American War (1954–1975). It discusses how women used Confucian subservience, gender-determined dress, and traditional roles to supply local soldiers, gather intelligence, and resist the French and American armies. I provide information, documents, and photographs gathered by completing annotated book translations and by engaging in conversations and interviews conducted in Vietnamese over the course of nearly fifty years, including accounts from both famous and ordinary Vietnamese women. Their stories are unique yet representative of the experiences of many wartime participants.

Keywords: The Sworn Generation; French-American War; American War/Vietnam War; activism; spying; prison

Vietnamese Women in War and Peace

When we think about the French-American War (1945–1954) and the American War in Việt Nam (which Americans often call the Vietnam War, 1954–1975), we should address a seldom-spoken truth: Since the Vietnamese fought a people's war (*toàn dân*—all the people), demographics suggest that half of those fighting against the American-allied front were women. The story of these women begins in the first century C.E. with another seldom-spoken truth: The first Vietnamese historical (as opposed to legendary) personages were women.

Rooted in Ancient Matriarchy

From time immemorial, Việt Nam was a matriarchy with a well-established religion of mother goddesses, whom many Vietnamese still worship today (See **Illus. #1**, Hữu Ngọc 2016, 2017, 76–79). Matriarchy spawned Việt Nam's first historical generals, the



Illus. #1: A Vietnamese mother goddess in a drawing collected by the French soldier Henri Oger, who published more than 4,000 drawings of traditional Vietnamese life depicted by Vietnamese artists. Scholar Olivier Tessier of École française d'Extrême-Orient (ÉFEO) oversaw the Oger Collection's centennial publication in 2009. *Source:* Olivier Tessier, ÉFEO.

Trưng sisters— Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị (both ?–43 C.E.)—from an outlying district of modern-day Hà Nội. The Hán Chinese had occupied Việt Nam since 111 B.C.E. In 40 C.E., the sisters led a rebellion to avenge the death of Trưng Trắc’s husband, whom the Vietnamese annals say Chinese pro-consul Su Ting had assassinated. The sisters, their mother, and their women generals (whose names are known, affirming the sisters’ presence as historical characters) liberated Việt Nam from the Chinese. Before doing so, Trưng Trắc began Việt Nam’s tradition of generals writing poetry to galvanize their troops. Her “Oath at Hát River” in six-eight rhythm—a six-word line followed by an eight-word line—emphasizes the legendary Vietnamese Hùng Dynasty, which began in about 2870 B.C.E.:

First pledge: Wash away the enemy

Second pledge: Rebuild the Hùng Family’s ancient karma

Third: Avenge injustices against my husband

Fourth pledge: Execute this oath beginning to end (Borton 2007, 1).

Queen Trưng Trắc’s undisturbed rule lasted only a year. Then, in 41 C.E., the Chinese sent their famous general, Ma Yuan, to fight against the Trưng sisters and their forces. The Vietnamese, despite their passion and motivation, were no match for the larger and better-equipped Chinese army. Rather than endure capture, the sisters committed suicide in 43 C.E. Citizens in Hà Nội and three neighboring provinces maintain two hundred temples honoring the Trưng Sisters, whom ethnic Vietnamese—regardless of their current citizenship or country of residence—revere as national heroines (Hữu Ngọc 2016, 2017, 135–36).

The next most famous Vietnamese historical character is also a woman, Bà Triệu (226–248), who came from Thanh Hóa, the large province south of the Red River Delta in northern Việt Nam. Bà Triệu fought thirty battles against the Wu Chinese, commanding her army from atop an elephant. When her brother urged her to marry, Bà Triệu is said to have announced, “I want to ride the tempests, tame the waves, and behead the sharks in the East Sea.¹ I want to exterminate the enemy, protect

¹ Some people refer to the East Sea as the South China Sea, a region where ownership and political-military control of islands is in dispute today.

our borders, and save our people from the misery of slavery. I do not want a life of bowing my head and bending my back as a concubine" (Borton 2007, 2).

According to Vietnamese tradition, the invading Chinese troops complained that it was easier to fight a tiger than Queen Triệu. That is until, as the story goes, the Chinese sent their wily General Lu Yin, who ordered his soldiers to advance stark naked. This alarming offense caused Bà Triệu and her troops to recoil. Like the defeated Trưng Sisters, Bà Triệu drowned herself. Her tomb rests on a mountain peak in Hậu Lộc District, Thanh Hóa Province, with a temple honoring her at the mountain's base (Hữu Ngọc 2016, 2017, 132–33).

The French, the Americans, and their international allies were well aware of these early heroines and historical leaders. Yet, during the French-American War and the American War, these foreigners overlooked how stories about early Vietnamese women leaders and their successors had crystallized. Indeed, when the enemy arrives, Vietnamese—both men *and* women—inhale a common breath and exhale this shared response: "When the enemy invades, even the women must fight."

From Confucianism through the August Revolution (First Millennium C.E.–August 1945)

The nearly thousand years of Chinese occupation brought Confucianism to Việt Nam. Confucianism is a code of ethics (not a religion), with two of its precepts stifling women for generations. "The Three Obediences" hold that a woman belongs first to her father; then, upon marriage, to her husband; and upon her husband's death, to her oldest son. Thus, Vietnamese women living within Confucianism had no rights. The "Four Virtues"—proper work, proper demeanor, proper speech, and proper behavior—further enforced women's low status by ensuring their silence.

Yet, some women did push through Confucian strictures: Confucianism emphasized education, a value still encouraged in Vietnamese culture today and perhaps a factor behind the extraordinary academic achievements accomplished by the teenage Vietnamese Boat People who graduated as high-school valedictorians yet had arrived without a foreign language in Western host countries only a few years earlier.

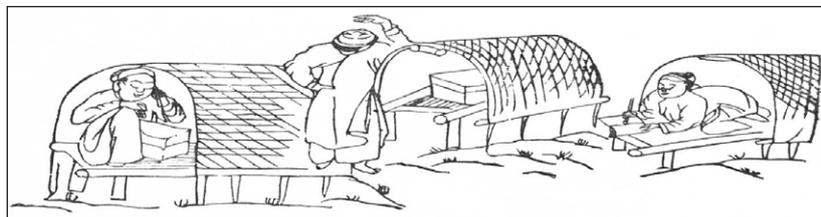
Until the early 1900s, the Vietnamese court selected mandarins through exams written in Chinese ideograms, with the content emphasizing literature and Confucian doctrine (See **Illus. #2**). The narrowing ladder of competitive exams began locally, progressed to the provinces, to the national level, and for a chosen few, to the king's court. Of course, Confucian strictures forbade participation by women. Nevertheless, Nguyễn Thị Duệ (1574–1654), with her father's permission, took the opportunity of her family's move to a new locale to disguise herself and live as a boy. To attend school, she changed her name to Nguyễn Văn Du. (In Vietnamese, “Thị” is a middle name used only for females, while “Văn” is used only for males).

Nguyễn Văn Du scaled the exam ladder, scoring highest in the national exam. However, King Mạc Kính Cung (?–1625; reign: 1592–1625) noticed Nguyễn Văn Du's slender figure and delicate facial features. Attempting to deceive the king was punishable by death, but Mạc Kính Cung commuted the traditional sentence. Nguyễn Thị Duệ subsequently taught at the king's court. She died at age eighty; the temple honoring her is a national historical site midway between Hà Nội and Hải Phòng. An accomplished poet, Nguyễn Thị Duệ asserted women's right to participate in academia with this famous couplet in six-eight meter:

This girl is taking the exam

Like the best scholar, strength is at hand (Borton 2007, 8).

During feudal times, a few mandarins' wives and concubines, as well as several women in the king's harem, continued Nguyễn Thị Duệ's example, learning to read and write and going on to create striking works in Vietnamese literature. The most famous of



Illus. #2: An Oger Collection drawing shows one scholar's apprehension during the triennial exams, while two scholars compose their answers in poetry written in *Hán* (Chinese) ideograms. *Source:* Olivier Tessier, ÉFEO.

these, next to Việt Nam's national epic, *The Tale of Kiều* by male poet Nguyễn Du, is the anti-war poem “Chinh Phụ Ngâm” [Lament of a wife whose husband has gone to war]. The Vietnamese praise Đoàn Thị Điểm (1705–1748), who translated the original Chinese version by male poet Đặng Trần Côn (1710–1745). Her beautiful translation trimmed the lament from 477 to the famous 412 lines, which include this excerpt:

The brook rippling beneath the bridge is pure,
 The roadside grass is still a tender green.
 Seeing him off leaves her anguished
 Once he's astride his horse, aboard his boat.
 The rushing water can never cleanse her grief,
 The fragrant grass can never ease her memories (Hữu Ngọc 2016,
 2017, 40–42).

In his autobiography, Hồ Chí Minh² (c. 1890–1969), founder of the modern Vietnamese state, mentions that he taught “Lament of a Wife Whose Husband Has Gone to War” to staff accompanying him during long treks through the jungle. The son of a Confucian scholar, Hồ Chí Minh spent thirty years (1911–1941) overseas, living and working in China, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Russia, and Thailand. His years in the United States and England coincided with peaks in the Women's Suffrage Movements in both countries. These political movements affected him deeply. Under the pseudonym Nguyễn Ái Quốc [Nguyễn the Patriot], he published *Le Procès de la colonisation française* [French colonialism on trial] in Paris in 1925, with a chapter on women. In early 1930, while in Hong Kong as staff for the Comintern (*Communist International* based in Moscow), Hồ Chí Minh drew together three then-separate Vietnamese communist parties to form the Vietnamese Communist Party (Hồ Chí Minh 2012, 25; Borton 2010, 20–57).

² Hồ Chí Minh had at least 169 known pseudonyms and aliases. During World War II, in August 1942, he first used “Hồ Chí Minh” [Hồ with an Enlightened Mind]. This name, by which he is best known, appeared on introduction papers Hồ Chí Minh carried when he left Việt Nam, hoping to re-connect with Chinese communist revolutionaries and meet the Allies fighting the Japanese. Instead, he was arrested by the Chinese Guomindang [Nationalist Party] and imprisoned for thirteen months.

Women as well as men were deeply involved in the early days of Party organizing. For example, in 1930, Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái (1915–1944) was an undercover student organizer for the Communist Party at Huế's Đờ ng Khánh School, the only French-affiliated high school for girls in Việt Nam's Central Region. She was arrested in 1930 along with Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013), another undercover organizer and co-founder of one of the three original Vietnamese communist parties. Quang Thái would become Võ Nguyên Giáp's first wife (See **Illus. #3**). Years later, in 1954, General Võ Nguyên Giáp defeated the French and their American allies in the French-American War, sounding "the death knell for colonialism" (Giáp 2017, 2). He continued as North Việt Nam's premier general and, in April 1975, defeated the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and its American allies in the American War.

In 1930, the first night of the two students' detention, Quang Thái's voice emanated from the Women's Cell, echoing throughout the prison: "*Personne ne te dénonce, ne dénonces personne,*" she called out. [No one denounces you, you denounce no one] (Hồng Cư 2016, 148).

Fellow prisoners (in particular smitten teenager Võ Nguyên Giáp) were inspired by Quang Thái's spirit, as well as by her poem, which circulated throughout the prison:



Illus. #3: Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái (1915–1944), 1937, with Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013), the victorious general who defeated the French Army in 1954 and the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese in 1975. *Source:* Phạm Hồng Cư.

Sixteen springs have passed during my life,
 Feelings and thoughts trigger my endless tears.
 Observing the imperialists leaves my soul heavy,
 My heart wrenches, watching workers' hard labor.

Remain ready to sacrifice, despite death's threat!
 Be strong in struggle although heads fall!
 When we can raise the workers' banner
 Souls in the Other World will smile (Hồng Cư 2016, 145).

Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái and Võ Nguyên Giáp were married in 1935 and moved to Hà Nội, where Giáp taught high-school history, attended law school, and continued work as a Party activist, mostly as a journalist. Quang Thái served as an underground organizer of women. She was arrested again in 1940 and held in Hà Nội's Hỏa Lò Prison, better known to Americans as the Hà Nội Hilton. She died in 1944 from typhus while still a prisoner.

Quang Thái's activist spirit owed much to the example of her older sister, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (1910–1941, see **Illus. #4**), who had left Việt Nam in March 1930 for the Comintern's Eastern Department in Hong Kong. Minh Khai, the first Vietnamese woman to study in Russia, spoke at the VIIth Comintern Congress (1935) about the communist movement's limited roles for women. Returning to Việt Nam, she was the Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn Party secretary until her arrest on July 30, 1940. Held in Catinat Detention Center, she bit her forefinger and, using her blood as ink, wrote the following poem on the wall of the Women's Cell:

Whether beaten, hung, or swung, be resolute,
 Whether clamped or chained, say nothing false.
 "Sacrifice yourself! Struggle to serve our cause!"
 The only recantation will be death's release!

On August 28, 1941, a firing squad at Hóc Môn, now a district of Hồ Chí Minh City–Sài Gòn, executed Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai and five other Party leaders. Minh Khai



Illus. #4: Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (1910–1941) with Nadya Krupskaya (1869–1939, Bolshevik revolutionary and Lenin’s wife) at the VIIth Comintern Congress (Moscow, 1935), which Minh Khai attended with her husband, Indochinese Communist Party Secretary Lê Hồng Phong (1902–1942). Minh Khai, the first Vietnamese woman to study in Russia, spoke about women’s issues at the Congress. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

insisted the guards remove her blindfold so she could stare at her executioners. She intentionally wore a white blouse so the marksmen would see her blood (Nguyệt Tú 2004, 163; Borton 2010, 71).

The Vietnamese Communist Party, as established in February 1930 by Hồ Chí Minh, emphasized nationalism, whereas the Comintern stressed internationalism. However, Trần Phú (1904–1931), who assumed Party leadership in October 1930, changed the Party’s name to Indochinese Communist Party and wrote a new set of theses and guidelines aligned with Comintern directives. Soon after Hồ Chí Minh returned to Việt Nam in early 1941, he drew Party leaders together to address those major philosophical-political changes, although for years the Party’s name remained unchanged.

In May 1941, under Hồ Chí Minh’s leadership, the Party renewed its focus on nationalism by creating the Việt Minh Independence Alliance (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*—usually shortened to “Việt Minh”) to unite all patriots regardless of political affiliation. The Việt Minh created citizens’ national-salvation organizations, including Women for National Salvation, which functioned on the local, district, provincial, and national levels, as did the Party’s Women’s Union, founded in 1930, and as does the Vietnam Women’s Union today. Using these nationwide structures, women organized overtly during World War II in liberated areas and undercover in areas occupied by the French and Japanese.

The Việt Minh welcomed women as participants alongside men. During the early 1940s, Võ Nguyên Giáp was one of the Việt Minh organizers, learning four ethnic-minority languages so that he could teach undercover, commune-based, political-education training sessions without interpreters. He insisted that participants in each session include women (Lạc 1995, 21–64). By September 2, 1945, many of these ethnic-minority women were marching in Việt Minh armed women’s units at Việt Nam’s Independence Day parade.

Under Hồ Chí Minh’s guidance, in December 1944, the Việt Minh formed their Public Education–Liberation Army, placing “public education” first in the army’s name in order to affirm Việt Nam’s strategic, nationalist tradition of “people first, weapons later.” The commander of the fledgling army was Võ Nguyên Giáp. Although women participated in self-defense and guerrilla units, the regular-force army at first consisted of only thirty-four soldiers, all of them men (Hồ Chí Minh 2011, 3, 539–40; Văn Kiện 2000, 7, 356–57; Borton 2010, 84–87). Most of the initial troops were ethnic Nùng or ethnic Tây.³ Soon, three women joined these first recruits, working in intelligence and supply.

By mid-1945, as Japan was collapsing, many Việt Minh pushed for an immediate seizure of political power through a nationwide uprising. Hồ Chí Minh withstood their pressure, instead waiting for the “opportune moment”—the diplomatic-political-military vacuum that he foresaw would arrive *after* Japan’s defeat yet *before* the French colonizers could return and *before* Chinese Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and British forces could occupy Việt Nam, as determined by the Yalta Conference. As soon as Japanese Emperor Hirohito read his Imperial Rescript on the Termination of the War (August 15, 1945), Hồ Chí Minh called Việt Minh leaders—both men and women—from across the country to a congress in Tân Trào, then the Việt Minh base about sixty miles north of Hà Nội.

³ Việt Nam has fifty-four different ethnic groups, with the Kinh (Việt) accounting for 85.7% of the population, according to the CIA’s *World Factbook* and older sources. The Tây are the largest ethnic minority with 1.9% of the population, while the Nùng, the sixth largest minority, account for 1.1%. For the most part, the Tây and the Nùng live in Việt Nam’s northern mountains.

At the same time, Việt Minh activists were also busy in Hà Nội. On August 17, 1945, two days after the Imperial Rescript, supporters of the Japanese occupation organized a public gathering in front of the Hà Nội Municipal Theater (the Opera House). Nguyễn Khoa Diệu Hồng was among the Việt Minh nationalists working undercover against these pro-Japanese organizers. She had been a fellow prisoner in Huế with Võ Nguyên Giáp and Nguyễn Thị Quang Thái in 1930.

By now, Nguyễn Khoa Diệu Hồng was a teacher at Huế's Đồng Khánh Girls' School. She approached the podium as if scheduled on the pro-Japanese program. Diệu Hồng wore an *áo dài*—the traditional Vietnamese silk dress with a high neck, long sleeves, and long panels flowing over satin trousers. Diệu Hồng looked so elegant that the pro-Japanese organizers did not recognize her as an intruder. Seizing the microphone, she exhorted the crowd, shouting, “Follow the Việt Minh!”

Trần Lâm had also slipped onto the speakers' platform, hiding in his shirt a large Việt Minh flag (later Việt Nam's national flag). When Diệu Hồng seized the microphone, Trần Lâm unfurled the flag to cheers from Việt Minh undercover activists scattered in the crowd. Responding to the agreed signal, they pulled tiny Việt Minh flags from their pockets and waved them, chanting, “Follow the Việt Minh! Follow the Việt Minh!” (Hồng Cư 2016, 147; Diệu Hồng 1993).

Diệu Hồng's call to action became the first overt step in the seizure of political power in Hà Nội. The event was peaceful. On August 18, Hà Nội's Việt Minh leadership decided independently of Hồ Chí Minh and the central-level Việt Minh in Tân Trào to seize complete political power the following day, August 19, 1945. These Hà Nội activists were recent graduates and students—young men *and* women—from the intelligentsia (Lê Trọng Nghĩa 2012, 2008–2014, 2014).

Between August 16 and August 30, 1945, the Việt Minh seized political power throughout Việt Nam—from the northern border with China to Hà Nội and the Red River Delta in the Northern Region (Tonkin), to Huế imperial capital in the Central Region (Annam), to Sài Gòn and on south throughout the Mekong Delta (Cochin China). Known as the August Revolution, this nationwide uprising based on fifteen years of national-local organizing (since the founding of the Party in 1930 but

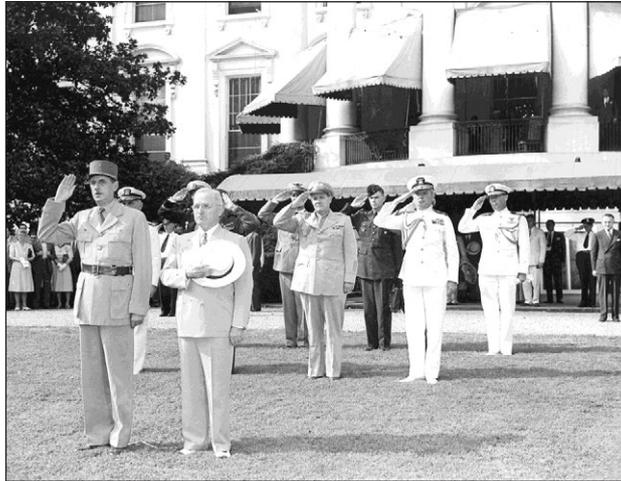
concentrated by the Việt Minh nationalists beginning in May 1941) may be unique in world history as a largely peaceful, nationwide revolution. Women's Union members under the Party and members from the Women for National Salvation under the Việt Minh were crucial in the August Revolution's success.

In later years, Communist Party members influenced by Maoism—in particular, Lê Duẩn (1907–1986) and Lê Đức Thọ (1911–1990)—portrayed Việt Nam's Revolution as led by workers. This is fiction. In 1945, Việt Nam had little manufacturing but did have several mines and rubber plantations. Most Vietnamese were not workers but, instead, impoverished peasants. The core revolutionary leaders, including Hồ Chí Minh, had come from the intelligentsia. The youths—again, both men *and* women—who raised the Việt Minh red flag with its gold star in cities and towns across the country during the August Revolution also came from the French-trained intelligentsia. They had never heard of communism or of the Party. They were nationalists (Borton 2013, 1).

From shortwave, international radio broadcasts during Việt Nam's August Revolution, Hồ Chí Minh knew that French Provisional President General de Gaulle was meeting simultaneously with U.S. President Truman. This state visit beginning on August 22, 1945, in Washington was *after* the Việt Minh had secured political power in Hà Nội, *after* the Việt Minh had raised their flag in Việt Nam's imperial capital (Huế), and *simultaneously* (given the time difference) with the Việt Minh's seizure of political power in Huế (Truman Papers 1945).

U.S. Ambassador Caffery's cable from France to the U.S. State Department had listed priorities for de Gaulle's visit: "1. The Pacific in general and Indochina in particular" (FRUS 1945, August 11). A subsequent cable noted that France would assure "American and British interest in the future of Indochina ... the only real foothold on the Asiatic mainland for the occidental democracies (France, Great Britain and the US)" (FRUS 1945, August 16).

De Gaulle was famous for bravado and self-promotion. After meeting with President Truman (See **Illus. #5**), he and his top generals traveled with U.S. military brass to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and then, on August 27, to General de Gaulle's ticker-tape parade in New York



Illus. #5: French Provisional President de Gaulle with U.S. President Truman, state visit to Washington, August 22, 1945, the day the French-American War in Việt Nam began. Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson is standing on the right in the wings. *Source:* Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.

City. Those trips and their publicity cemented the French and U.S. military leaders' relationships, sealing the basis for their nine-year partnership during the French-American War (Truman, 1945). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the American War in Việt Nam began with French Provisional President de Gaulle's state visit to Washington on August 22, 1945.

By 1969, Lyndon Johnson, who had been standing in the wings in 1945 (See **Illus. #5**), would see the number of American troops in South Việt Nam exceed 500,000—one American for every thirty South Vietnamese, an invading force. President Johnson, like his predecessors, may have never realized that half of the opponents U.S. soldiers faced among the nationalists in South Việt Nam were women, many of whom had sworn years before to defend their new country's independence.

Việt Nam's Declaration of Independence and the Sworn Generation (September 2, 1945)

The French and their American allies probably never recognized the fervor of what became Việt Nam's Sworn Generation. The August 1945 Revolution overthrew nearly a thousand years of Vietnamese monarchy and eighty years of

French colonialism. On September 2, Hồ Chí Minh, president of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRVN), read the nation's Declaration of Independence before the thousands of Vietnamese who had gathered in Hà Nội's Ba Đình Square. Radio Voice of Việt Nam broadcasted the event nationally, although technical difficulties prevented the program from reaching the crowd gathered in front of Sài Gòn's Notre Dame Cathedral (Bình 2015, 67–68).

American scholars emphasize that Hồ Chí Minh quoted the U.S. Declaration of Independence in the Vietnamese Declaration, but they miss a crucial point: President Hồ knowingly changed “All men are created equal” to “Each *person* is born equal.” By changing the American quotation's language and its intent, Hồ Chí Minh expanded Việt Nam's Declaration to include women and ethnic minorities (Borton 2001, 13–14). This change, as well as the openness associated with it, encouraged women to support Hồ Chí Minh's government.

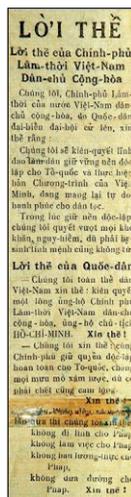
Lê Thi was one such woman. During Việt Nam's August Revolution, Lê Thi (1926–) was a Việt Minh organizer among Hà Nội's women students in the Việt Minh's Association of Women for National Salvation. Even though Lê Thi came from a family of patriotic intellectuals, no one in her family knew she was an undercover activist. Her future husband, whom she did not know at that time, was a youth organizer in the Việt Minh's Association of Youth for National Salvation and subsequently a security guard at the Declaration of Independence. In 1945, neither Lê Thi nor her husband had heard of the Communist Party or of communism. They were nationalists from the intelligentsia.

For President Hồ Chí Minh's reading of Việt Nam's Declaration of Independence, Lê Thi wore a white *áo dài*, the uniform of schoolgirls across Việt Nam. She stood at the end of a row of women students. To her surprise, event organizers sent her up on stage, telling her to raise the national flag to the flagpole's peak by the end of the national anthem. Lê Thi did not know the anthem and had never met her partner flag-raiser, Đàm Thị Loan, who came from the ethnic-Tây minority. Đàm Thị Loan (1926–2010) had been one of the first three women in Việt Nam's army. Many years later, she retired as a colonel.

As flag-raiser at her *lycée*, Lê Thi had delighted in tangling the rope for the French colors. Now, she didn't know what to do. She had thought the event would announce a new emperor, but this leader (Hồ Chí Minh) wore a simple broadcloth suit like Sun Yat-sen and white rubber sandals like ordinary Vietnamese. Only when "Tiến Quân Ca" [Marching Song, the newly chosen national anthem] began did Lê Thi realize that she had learned the song in her secret Việt Minh student group. She and Đàm Thị Loan raised the national flag to its place of honor.

Lê Thi remains a revolutionary. She founded the Women's Studies Center in Hà Nội during the 1980s and led it until she retired. Limping on a recently broken leg, she attended the 1995 International NGO (Non-Government Organization) Forum on Women in Beijing. In 2005, Lê Thi published *The Life of Single Women in Việt Nam*, the English version of her study published in Vietnamese in 2002. Now in her nineties, she continues to publish work on gender issues (Lê Thi 2015; Hữu Ngọc 2016, 2017, 311–14).

Even though Lê Thi was a recent *lycée* graduate, like others from her generation, she did not understand Việt Nam's Declaration of Independence, which Hồ Chí Minh had written for the world outside Việt Nam. However, she understood and can still recite the Citizens' Oath (See **Illus. #6**), which was also read that day. Standing at



Illus. #6: The Government's Oath followed by The Citizens' Oath, ending with four promises. *Source: Cứu Quốc* [National Salvation newspaper], September 5, 1945.

the back of the dais, Lê Thi watched the new country's citizens—a critical mass of the young nation's population—raise their hands and shout, “We swear!”

The Citizens' Oath is so concise that all Vietnamese people, regardless of education, age, or status, could easily remember it:

We, the entire citizenry of Việt Nam, swear: With one heart, we are determined to support the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam and support President HỒ CHÍ MINH.

We swear!

We swear: Together with the government, we will protect the right to complete independence for our Nation and oppose every plot to invade. Even if we must die, we are content to do so.

We swear!

If the French arrive to invade once again, we swear:

We won't be soldiers for the French!

We won't work for the French!

We won't sell food to the French!

We won't act as guides for the French!

We swear!! (“Lời Thề” 1945, 1)

That day, General Hồng Cư (1927–), now retired as deputy commander of the Central-Level Military Political Department, was eighteen and head of one of the two guard teams. Like so many others, he dreamed of achieving the highest profession—that of *thầy*, a scholar-teacher. He points out that the Vietnamese wars to achieve complete independence and re-unification consumed thirty years, from 1945 until 1975. He refers to his generation—those who swore the Citizens' Oath and then served in both the French-American War and the American War—as the Sworn Generation (Hồng Cư 2012, 3; Giáp 2017, 10–11).

In those days, an oath was a life-long promise. Nguyễn Hạc Đạm Thư, my research partner for many projects since early 1987 (See **Illus. #7**), was ten years old on Independence Day (September 2, 1945) in Hà Nội when she answered, “We swear!” She can still recite the Oath verbatim, even though she had never seen the text until I showed it to her seventy years after the event.

Several weeks after the Citizens' Oath, Việt Nam celebrated its Mid-Autumn–Full-Moon Festival, which is rather like Western Halloween. The country was still in crisis. Two million people in northern Việt Nam had died of starvation during the Japanese occupation only a few months before. The newly organized DRVN government faced famine, the lack of a constitution, religious divisions, a literacy rate between only 5 and 10 percent, and renewed war. By late September 1945, three weeks after the Declaration of Independence, French troops armed with American weapons and traveling on British ships were re-invading southern Việt Nam.

The French-American War Begins

Nevertheless, with the French en route, President Hồ called *all* the children—boys *and* girls—in Hà Nội to meet him on the steps of the Foreign Ministry Guest House opposite the Metropole Hotel to celebrate the Mid-Autumn–Full-Moon Festival. Youths between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five accompanied the children. Adults were excluded. Confucian precepts had permeated Vietnamese society, yet Hồ Chí Minh told the children they were *all* “citizens of an independent country.” Two weeks before, ten-year-old Đạm Thu had sworn the Citizens' Oath and watched—stunned—as uniformed, ethnic-minority women soldiers marched in the Independence Day Parade. Now, for the first time, she heard an adult address her as a human being. This was revolutionary—to be a person, like the boys! After President Hồ's short speech, the boys *and* girls raced to nearby Hoàn Kiếm Lake, where the youths had decorated paddleboats to look like the British ships bringing French soldiers to Sài Gòn. The children pelted the invaders with toy grenades, which the youths had fashioned from cut-up pomelo rinds (Hồ Chí Minh 2011, 4:15; Borton 1995, 65–66; Borton 2010, 103).

Yet despite the French re-invasion, within a few weeks, with just his brief words in Việt Nam's Declaration of Independence and then at Hà Nội's Mid-Autumn–Full-Moon Festival, Hồ Chí Minh had initiated a cultural revolution for the women of Việt Nam. Then on January 6, 1946, Việt Nam held its first national election. Women and ethnic minorities were among the Vietnamese voting for the first time, with southerners casting their ballots as the French pelted polling sites with American bombs dropped from American planes. In March, women as well as ethnic minorities served as representatives to Việt Nam's first National Assembly (Bình 2015, 72).

In November 1946, the French, using American materiel, re-invaded northern Việt Nam. By mid-February, the Vietnamese withdrew from their own capital after a two-month battle. The French occupied Hà Nội. Nguyễn Hạc Đạm Thu, now eleven, had come from a family with sufficient wealth to own a Renault touring car. During the battle, her family had evacuated to Thanh Hóa Province, but then returned to Hà Nội. As a teenage student, Đạm Thu organized undercover inside French lines, unbeknownst to her family. Why? Because she had taken the Citizens' Oath and because of tradition: "When the enemy invades, even the women must fight." Đạm Thu was arrested while organizing *lycée* students in French-occupied Hà Nội. She describes her incarceration:

They beat me for three days, they used electricity, but I refused to name others in our group. They went to my mother's house, caught my mother by surprise. She hadn't known about my activities! I was in prison a month with buyers and sellers, peasant women who'd been arrested in the market. We were like a club, reciting poetry, singing, trading stories and experience (Borton 1995, 56).

Đạm Thu's family secured her release and sent her to Paris so that she would "stay out of trouble." Shortly thereafter, the Geneva Agreement created North Việt Nam and South Việt Nam.⁴ Đạm Thu studied at the Sorbonne, where she met her husband, who had come from Huế, in South Việt Nam. The couple married in Hà Nội, North Việt Nam, in 1955, expecting to follow tradition and move to her husband's home in 1956, when the country was to be re-united after the elections stipulated in the Geneva Agreement. However, the American War intervened. U.S.-backed South Việt

⁴ The terms "North Việt Nam" and "South Việt Nam," as well as capitalized "North" and "South," correctly apply only between the Geneva Agreement (July 27, 1954) and the end of the American War (April 30, 1975). Until July 27, 1954, use of Việt Nam's traditional three regions (Northern Region, Central Region, and Southern Region) is appropriate. Use of the three regions' French names (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, respectively) is appropriate during French colonialism. After April 30, 1975, correct usage is "Việt Nam," even though the country was not formally united into the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (the formal name used today) until the unified National Assembly meeting on July 2, 1976.

Nam refused to allow elections to re-unite the country. Đạm Thu's children were almost grown by 1975, when she first met her mother-in-law.

During the post-war years, before normalization of diplomatic relations between Việt Nam and the United States, Đạm Thu helped host the National Women's Union's guests, including Americans. A northerner with direct ancestors' names or the first and second steles in Hà Nội's Temple of Literature (Temple to Confucius), she served as French interpreter for General Nguyễn Thị Định, a southerner and the National Women's Union president from 1987 until her death in 1992.

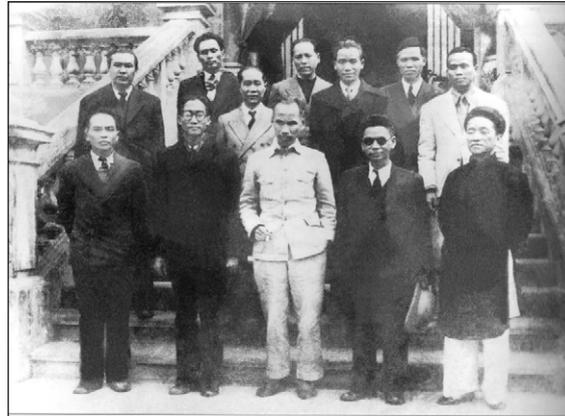
The French-American War (1945–1954)

One might ask why so many from the Sworn Generation, including women, died during war and why those who survived had to sacrifice thirty years (1945–1975) to secure full independence and re-unification for Việt Nam. A glance at the photograph of Việt Nam's provisional government provides an answer (See **Illus. #8**).

The ministers of Việt Nam's provisional government comprised a formidable group of highly educated, skilled, and fiercely dedicated patriots. Only two-fifths were



Illus. #7: Nguyễn Hạc Đạm Thu (second from right, who grew up in French-occupied Hà Nội) with, left to right, Lady Borton, Nguyễn Thị Thập (a southerner and leader of the 1940 Southern Uprising in Việt Nam's Mekong Delta, a deputy to Việt Nam's first National Assembly, and a retired president [1956–1974] of the National Women's Union), Nguyễn Thị Loan (Women's Union staff in Hồ Chí Minh City/Sài Gòn), and Nguyễn Thị Hai Giàu (a southern nationalist organizer), 1987. *Source:* Lady Borton.



Illus. #8: The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRVN) Provisional Government (with no women and five ministers or deputy ministers not shown on September 3, 1945) posed a new world order as the government of an independent nation, thereby threatening the mother countries determined to continue ruling their colonies. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

communists; three-fifths came from other parties. One can guess the consternation—expressed and imagined—in the mother countries. If Việt Nam succeeded as an independent nation, wouldn't other colonies also erupt into nationalist movements for independence?

What would Gandhi do in the British Indian Empire (modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka)? Indeed, British records show the alarm of the Churchill Cabinet at India's independence movement (British Cabinet 1944–1945). While at Yalta, Churchill had asserted the United Kingdom's mother-country right to India (FRUS 1945, February 9). But India wasn't the Western empires' only worry. What about British colonies in half of Africa? What about French colonies in the other half of Africa? What about Dutch re-occupation of the East Indies (Indonesia)? What about the Philippines, not yet independent from the United States?

Nine years after Việt Nam's Declaration of Independence, on April 7, 1954, a month before the French-American defeat at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, President Eisenhower characterized Western fears of communism with his falling-domino analogy. However, the original touch point for Eisenhower's dominos was not communism. Rather, the sparks came from the post-World-War-II *nationalist*

movements for independence that Việt Nam helped inspire. Indeed, the Vietnamese paid a huge price as the first colonized people to stand up against Western empires.

The nationalist fervor of the Vietnamese was nationwide. Nguyễn Thị Bình (1927–, see **Illus. #9, #10, #18–#23, #25**) was a teenage organizer for the broadcast of the Declaration of Independence in Sài Gòn in the Southern Region (Cochin China). Mme. Bình is probably the most famous living Vietnamese. She is the only living signatory to the Paris Agreement on Việt-Nam (1973), as foreign minister for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam (PRG, previously the National Liberation Front or NLF). The PRG/NLF is sometimes called the “Việt Cộng,” initially a pejorative but now accepted and common in Việt Nam today, although often spoken with a jesting tone.

In 1945, Mme. Bình was teaching math to help her father, a traveling surveyor, support her five younger siblings, whom she had been raising for the two years since her mother’s death. Pretty and exuberant, Mme. Bình was a local Việt Minh organizer who, like many others, had not heard of communism or of the Party. However, she did know about the famous revolutionary Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Hồ Chí Minh), whom her maternal grandfather, Phan Châu Trinh, had mentored in Paris during the early 1920s. Like others, Mme. Bình was a nationalist. And, like her comrades, Nguyễn Thị Bình was also an intellectual. As a schoolgirl, she had excelled in mathematics and competed in cross-country races and basketball games (an American invention!). Then the revolution and war intervened, as it did for everyone in the Sworn Generation. Mme. Bình never finished her baccalaureate. Instead, she worked as an undercover organizer in Sài Gòn until her arrest.

Like many activists, Mme. Bình holds a “doctorate from a prestigious French institution”: The French colonial system incarcerated political prisoners, thereby creating a concentration of detained, experienced activists, who used their time in prison for intensive training opportunities. Political prisoners taught each other mathematics, T’ang Dynasty poems, political theory, and guerrilla tactics. They passed along personal experiences on how to organize for the Revolution and how to withstand torture if arrested. Vietnamese men and women acknowledge that women prisoners rarely broke under torture. The

men were more likely to give names, perhaps, the women say, because women give birth and are raised with the assumption that they must withstand pain (Borton 1995, 83–84).

In her memoir, *Family, Friends and Country*, Nguyễn Thị Bình provides a mini-lesson in withstanding torture:

I was cruelly beaten without stopping because an earlier arrestee had broken down under torture and given my name. First, they tortured us by savage beatings, then by submerging us in water, then with electricity, then— I wanted to die so they would finish.... I was most worried about breaking under torture and giving names, leading the enemy to arrest others. I decided that I would accept whatever the enemy said about me, but my one purpose was to say nothing else. After a time, the torturers saw they could not wrest any information from me (Bình 2015, 51–52).

Mme. Bình spent three years in prison. Released in 1954, she returned to activism. That pattern—from activism to arrest-torture-education in prison to release to renewed activism to arrest-torture-education in prison to release to... —was a common, lifelong practice for many women from Việt Nam’s Sworn Generation.

Women also stood up in battle. The year 1954 saw one of the most famous battles of the twentieth century, Điện Biên Phủ, which General Giáp called the “death knell for colonialism.” One woman in particular played a special role at Điện Biên Phủ, saving lives on both sides.

The battle began with the destruction of the Béatrice and Gabrielle outposts on the nights of March 13 and 14, 1954, respectively. Foreign military visitors had praised those French highpoints for their impenetrable defenses. However, French-affiliated, ethnic-Thái⁵ Vietnamese soldiers holding nearby Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 highpoints watched the Việt Nam People’s Army (VNPA) under General Giáp’s command demolish two of the strongest French units, which had been stationed

⁵ “Thái” should not be confused with citizens from Thailand. The ethnic Thái, Việt Nam’s second largest ethnic-minority group, live mostly in northwestern Việt Nam and account for 1.8% of the population.

at Béatrice and Gabrielle, and then drive back French tank reinforcements arriving from the Central Sub-Sector. The ethnic Tháis at Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 were apprehensive.

On the afternoon of March 15, by pre-arrangement via radio with the French commander at Điện Biên Phủ and the French command in Hà Nội, twenty severely wounded French soldiers from Béatrice and Gabrielle arrived at Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 for transfer to the French side. The French had chosen forty ethnic-Thái stretcher-bearers, perhaps without realizing that these survivors' tales from Béatrice and Gabrielle would further frighten the French-affiliated, ethnic-Thái soldiers defending Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2.

On March 16, the VNPA's 308th Division Command ordered Phạm Hồng Cự, the 36th Regiment's deputy political officer, to secure peaceful surrender of Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 through public education. Implementation details were up to Hồng Cự, who could not speak Thái. He found an ethnic-Thái woman fluent in Vietnamese and asked if she would convey a message in Thái to the Anne-Marie French-affiliated, ethnic-Thái soldiers. He would provide her with a megaphone. She readily agreed.

The message the two devised and which she shouted in Thái was simple: "Return to your mothers and fathers and wives! Return to your villages! Don't die for the French!"

The night of March 16, the People's Army's artillery struck the French posts, but Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 were exempt. Those two strongholds remained silent, except for the Thái woman's voice calling out through the darkness to the French-affiliated Thái soldiers. The next morning, the Thái soldiers at Anne-Marie mutinied against their French commander, demanding their day's rations. Refusing, he ordered the French artillery in the Central Sub-Sector to shell any fleeing Thái soldiers who had been allied with the French.

By then, the Thái woman with the megaphone had moved into the shelter dug especially for her close to Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2. She kept calling out in Thái. Meanwhile, the People's Army's artillery protected the Thái soldiers racing over to the VNPA side. Once they reached safety, the Thái soldiers met ethnic-Thái women—their mothers, wives, and sisters—who had already pledged that their sons, husbands, and

brothers would return home and no longer fight alongside the French. Anne-Marie 1 and Anne-Marie 2 surrendered to the Việt Nam People's Army without any combat and without any loss of life (Hồng Cư 2017). This was not the case, however, for the rest of the Điện Biên Phủ Battle, one of the most devastating in history.

When French and American generals set out their imagined order of battle for the VNPA forces opposing them at Điện Biên Phủ, they failed to take sufficient notice of the women. General Giáp would often say that the Việt Nam People's Army's victory against stunning Western odds in 1954 came from the depth of nationalism within Vietnamese culture and the active involvement of *all* of Việt Nam's citizens (Giáp 2017, 45).

To feed the People's Army, hundreds of women steered boats laden with rice down a network of rivers from China to Điện Biên Phủ. Meanwhile, thousands of women using baskets slung from shoulder poles were hauling rice to Điện Biên Phủ from Thanh Hóa Province, the home of Queen Bà Triệu, who had vowed in the 200s C.E. to behead the sharks in the East Sea. The foot trails leading from Thanh Hóa to Điện Biên Phủ stretched six hundred miles one way, across mountains and rivers. The women porters consumed en route much of the rice they carried, highlighting the need to rely on more efficient transport using roads and trucks. Meanwhile, teams of men carved out new roads through the mountains, while teams of women repaired the truck tracks, filling bomb craters⁶ (Giáp 2017, 173–75, 232n4, 248).

After the People's Army's victory at Điện Biên Phủ on May 7, 1954, the women working in supply and road repair for that battle returned to their home villages. The Geneva Conference on Indochina opened the next day, but fighting continued at other sites until the Geneva Agreement was signed on July 27, 1954, dividing Việt Nam into North Việt Nam and South Việt Nam.

Yet even before the Republic of France and the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRVN) signed the Geneva Agreement, the United States brought Ngô Đình Diệm (1901–1963), who had been living in the USA for three years, to Sài Gòn to serve as

⁶ Most exploding bombs did not throw the soil outwards but, instead, impacted the earth like gigantic sledgehammer strikes, creating craters, which women filled with dirt they had hauled from afar in baskets hanging from shoulder poles.

prime minister for what would become South Việt Nam. Also before the Agreement was signed, the United States took control from France of the Vietnamese military in what would become South Việt Nam, which did not yet have a full military division. In mid-May 1954, U.S. General John (Iron Mike) O'Daniel (1894–1975), the ranking American officer in Việt Nam, was already planning to create nine divisions by October 1954, when he would “start in [the] south, and as this army moved north it would gain experience in combat, eventually reaching [the Red River] delta as a battle hardened force” (FRUS 1954). With these steps, the American War began even before the French-American War had ended.

In accordance with the signed Geneva Agreement, during the subsequent three hundred days, the Vietnamese who had fought alongside the French, been employed by the French, or supported the French, as well as many Catholics allied with the French in the North, went to South Việt Nam. Simultaneously, in accordance with the Geneva Agreement, the Vietnamese organizers and units that had fought against the American-backed French south of the 17th parallel traveled to North Việt Nam for what was called “re-grouping.” They expected to return home to southern Việt Nam after the elections scheduled for July 1956. Most of those who regrouped to North Việt Nam were men. Many of those southern men married their sweethearts to tie down their relationships during their absence, which they assumed would be two years. If they survived, most of those men did not meet their sweethearts again until more than twenty years of war had passed.

The American War: Two Is One, One Is Two (1954–1975)

In 1956, backed by the USA, leaders in South Việt Nam refused to allow elections to re-unify Việt Nam as stipulated in the Geneva Agreement. The reason may be best explained by U.S. President Eisenhower (1890–1969, president 1953–1961), who later wrote, “...possibly eighty per cent of the population would have voted for Communist Hồ Chí Minh as their leader rather than [South Việt Nam's] Chief of State Bảo Đại” (Eisenhower 1963, 372).

The years following the Geneva Agreement were terrifying for many women in South Việt Nam. Ngô Đình Diệm's police rounded up anyone associated with those who had re-grouped to North Việt Nam—that is, the wives, fiancées, daughters,

and sisters left behind. Many women were arrested and tortured. The Diệm police brought guillotines into villages for public executions. The women seemed to have no recourse (Borton 1995, 72–77).

Then, in December 1959, Nguyễn Thị Định (1920–1992, see **Illus. #9, #10**) and other women in the Mekong Delta's Bến Tre Province took the initiative. They spread rumors through the Market Mouth—women hunkering behind their wares, buying and selling, bartering and chatting, and sending and receiving undercover messages—that armed men returning from the North were preparing to strike. The rumors were pure invention. The women, who had no weapons, carved bamboo stems to look like guns. They tied up their hair so they would resemble men. At



Illus. #9: Nguyễn Thị Định, right, a southerner and leader of the Long-Haired Warriors, was a victorious general in Sài Gòn in 1975. She later served as president of the Women's Union of unified Việt Nam and as a member of the National Assembly for unified Việt Nam. Here, General Định meets with Mme. Nguyễn Thị Bình, another southerner and foreign minister for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam (PRG), in a PRG-controlled area before 1975. *Source:* Nguyễn Thị Bình.



Illus. #10: Nguyễn Thị Bình (left), Nguyễn Thị Định (right), and other Long-Haired Warriors, South Việt Nam, before 1975. In the background is a photograph of Hồ Chí Minh. *Source:* Nguyễn Thị Bình.

twilight on January 2, 1960, the women encircled a U.S.-backed ARVN base. They set off firecrackers, which exploded like gunfire as the women darted this way and that, imitating soldiers attacking, their palm-stem guns silhouetted in the smoke-filled dusk. Already frightened by the false rumors that had spread through the markets, the ARVN soldiers fled, tossing aside their weapons. The women gathered up the ARVN troops' abandoned guns and ammunition (Borton 1995, 74–77).

Using lightning strikes, Mme. Đĩnh and her female troops liberated the rest of their district (administratively equivalent to a U.S. county), which they held throughout the war. News of their ruse spread by the Market Mouth. Before long, women in neighboring Mỹ Tho Province were carving palm-frond guns and setting off firecrackers as they, too, besieged ARVN bases. “Đông Khởi” [Uprising], referring to the rebellion Mme. Đĩnh led, is now the name of the Sài Gòn street most famous for its bars and prostitutes during the American War.

Nguyễn Thị Thanh (1924–1994, see **Illus. #11**) was an activist in Mỹ Tho Province. She had a startling, almost spiritual beauty, with her pure white hair, unlined face, and quiet presence. She had never married because she'd been arrested



Illus. #11: Local organizers in Bàn Long Village, the revolutionary base for Tiền Giang Province (formerly Mỹ Tho Province) in the Mekong Delta, left to right: Anh Mười [Tenth Brother], Nguyễn Thị Hai Giàu, Chị Chín [Ninth Sister], and Nguyễn Thị Thanh, 1988. *Source:* Lady Borton.

three times and spent sixteen years in prisons, including in the tiger cages on Côn Đảo Island.⁷ Until I met her, Nguyễn Thị Thanh had never told her story, but not because of censorship. None of the women had told their stories, perhaps because they shared versions of the same narrative. They knew one can't compare pain and loss, for each person's pain is individual and unlimited in its ability to haunt.

When Nguyễn Thị Thanh did tell her story for the first time, dozens of women came to listen, filling the meeting room at the Tiền Giang Provincial Women's Union in Mỹ Tho City. During a break for tea and dragon fruit, the other women told their stories, too, all of them conveying the same theme: from activism to arrest-torture-education in prison to release, then return to activism... (Borton 1995, 110–12).

These women played many roles, drawing on many sources, but for all of them Confucianism, with its precepts establishing a subservient role for women, had permeated Vietnamese culture while they were growing up. They had learned to be present but seemingly innocuous, unaware, silly if they were younger or dim-witted if older. They were experts at acting and at being ignored. This made them perfect spies.

Popular American media has centered on the idea of one man as the “perfect spy,” but the truth is a different story. No one person is *the* perfect spy. Rather, Vietnamese intelligence work during the French-American War and the American War involved ordinary soldiers, ordinary citizens, guards, lookouts, radio operators, cryptographers, decoders, liaison runners, undercover agents, cartographers, interpreters, cultural interpreters, adults, elders, youths, children, men, and women

⁷ The French secured rights to Côn Đảo Island south of Sài Gòn in 1783 but occupied it only after 1861. They began to turn the island into a prison for political activists in 1862. In 1939, the French added 120 “tiger cages,” with some cages open on top to rain and sun. During the American War, one cage usually held five political prisoners. The cells' dimensions of four feet by eight feet meant two prisoners slept atop the other three. In an effort to control flies, guards walking on the rebar roof threw lime down on the prisoners.

The tiger cages were secret until 1970, when American journalist Don Luce obtained a map and led a delegation including Congressional aide Tom Harkin (later a senator representing Iowa from 1995 until 2015) to the site. Press coverage, particularly Harkin's photographs in *Life Magazine* on July 19, 1970, led to widespread demonstrations in the USA and closure of the tiger cages. However, the U.S. military, using South Vietnamese workers, immediately built new rows of tiger cages outside of town and down a secret road. The new cages were smaller and more numerous than the cells in the French prison.

(Lê Trọng Nghĩa 2004–2014). The list goes on. But women were crucial, because the foreign officers and troops ignored Vietnamese women, dismissing them as only servants or prostitutes.

However, women were among the Revolution's first spies. Indeed, the first four Vietnamese spies cum liaison runners in modern times included a woman, Lý Phương Đức, who had learned her skills in Canton during the mid 1920s from Hồ Chí Minh himself. He personally trained these four youths while serving as Comintern press attaché and Russian-Chinese interpreter for Mikael Borodin, Soviet military advisor to the Guomindang. Hồ Chí Minh's teaching was intensive, with instruction and practice in trailing a source, detecting secret police, hiding underground newspapers, deceiving inquisitive police, inventing stories to conceal their activities if questioned, and withstanding torture if captured (Khoan 2006, 2009).

During the French-American War, women were particularly suited for work as spies, gathers of information, liaison agents, messengers, and long-distance runners in a time before telephones were common in Việt Nam. During the American War, the women nationalists in South Việt Nam learned that U.S. soldiers thought anyone wearing black pajamas (*áo ba ba*, both sexes' traditional peasant clothes—black trousers and a black blouse or shirt. See **Illus. #12**) was Việt Cộng, while anyone wearing a white blouse or shirt supported the Americans. Peasant women were



Illus. #12: Chị Ba [Third Sister], in peasant black pajamas and a camouflaged conical hat, shows how she and other women ducked under foliage, hiding the supplies they slipped throughout the bayou in Tiền Giang (Mỹ Tho) Province, Mekong Delta. Local women knew the tides' effect on canals and sluices and, therefore, how to elude ARVN and U.S. soldiers. *Source:* Lady Borton.

so poor that they usually owned only one set of black pajamas. The women spies and messengers shared a white blouse. Whoever was “running” through territory controlled by Sài Gòn or American troops wore the white blouse. Other women served as hubs in the Market Mouth, hiding maps in packages of cigarettes and inside pineapples (Borton 1995, 28–31).

Peasant women who worked as hired help on U.S. bases were also integral to the cause. They did the laundry and cleaning and chatted up the American troops. They swept the GIs’ barracks and walkways, noting distances between offices and warehouses as well as measuring perimeters. They noticed the color-coded alert signs and any changes in inventory. When the women returned home, they reported any re-supply of arms, additions of personnel, any maps the American officers had pulled out for examination, and unusual visitors. They drew detailed sketches of the intruders’ bases for the local militia, who passed the information on to the Vietnamese People’s Liberation Army (the southern revolutionary armed forces). Although the American military police checked the women’s hand baskets when they left the U.S. bases for home each night, the baskets were always empty. The women had hidden everything they’d learned inside their heads (Borton 1969–1971).

Still other women, using femininity to their advantage, tossed their long, lustrous hair, tilted their heads, and touched their index fingers to their cheeks in enticing gestures as they flirted with foreign military officers. Nguyễn Thị Hoài Thu, a key underground organizer, wore an *áo dài* as she rode in the front seat of an officer’s jeep into the U.S. Division 9 base in Mỹ Tho Province, where she was hosted in the Officers’ Club. Several years after the war ended, Hoài Thu headed the National Assembly’s Social Affairs Committee, which is one of six standing committees (Borton 1995, 29).

The same pattern played out in the offices of top South Vietnamese officials and in American households in South Việt Nam. Dr. Dương Quỳnh Hoa (1930–2016) was PRG (Việt Cộng) minister of health. Wearing a stylish *áo dài* and speaking exquisite French, she joined cocktail parties at the residence of successive U.S. ambassadors in Sài Gòn. After the war, Dr. Hoa ran a pediatric clinic in Hồ Chí Minh City–Sài Gòn. Years later, she was one of the plaintiffs for the Vietnamese Agent-Orange legal case in the U.S. courts (Hoa 1989).

Mme. Nguyễn Phước Đại (1923–2013), a French-trained lawyer, was vice-president of the National Assembly in American-backed Sài Gòn. She employed a maid to clean her law office, which, as a law office, was off limits to police searches. Only after the American War ended did Phước Đại learn for sure that the maid, her own sister, was a Việt Cộng spy (Phước Đại 1995).

In many instances, it was women who handled transport and logistics. In preparation for the 1968 Tết Offensive, women drove oxcarts loaded with coffins. The Americans couldn't figure out why so many people seemed to be dying; they never discovered that the coffins concealed rifles and ammunition. Other women loaded rice into hanging baskets suspended from shoulder poles and pretended they were going to market, when in fact they were actually transporting drugs and grenades. Still others filled their small river boats with drugs, rifles, and ammunition, hiding the supplies under vats of *nước mắm*, the famous Vietnamese fish sauce with an odor nauseating to Westerners (See **Illus. #12**). These women assumed their operation was local until they heard about similar efforts across South Việt Nam when Liberation Radio broadcasted news of the 1968 Tết Offensive (Borton 1995, 114).

At the same time as the war raged in the American-backed South, the U.S. bombed North Việt Nam and PRG-controlled areas of South Việt Nam, exploding more bombs than the tonnage used by all sides on all fronts during World War II. In the face of such death and destruction, thousands of women joined the Youth Brigades, the para-military units that repaired the bombed-out tracks on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. This was dangerous work, for U.S. airplanes strafed the workers, who, like the North Vietnamese soldiers and the southern troops returning from regrouping, had meager rations and little defense against malaria. Most of these women served for the war's duration, many for over a decade. Their contribution is inadequately recognized.

Trần Thị Mỹ Hạnh (1945–), who was born in Hà Nội, captures the life of women on the Trail in this stanza from “The Road Repair Team at Jade Beauty Mountain”:

Pity the road circling the mountain,
Bomb craters slashing into bomb craters,
Olive trees, oak trees blackened with resin,

The birds scattered, ripped from their flocks,
 Every rock on Beauty Mountain cringing in pain,
 The earth tumbling down into the lowland paddies,
 Night after night Jade Beauty Mountain lies awake.
 The women repairing the road are uneasy;
 With torches, they search their way forward.
 For them, a bite of dried bread is a delicious treat (Mỹ Hạnh 2007, 151).

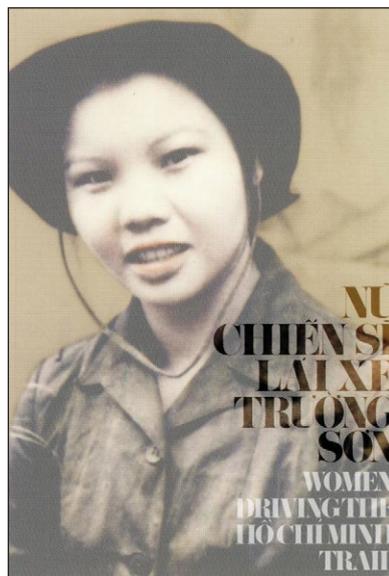
Youth brigades of women facilitated the treacherous journey many Vietnamese made down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail through the Trường Sơn Mountains to South Việt Nam. Nguyễn Thị Kim Cúc, a medical doctor from the North, met her husband on the Trail, married, and gave birth to their son, taking a few days off before returning to care for the wounded. Kim Cúc's unit had left Hà Nội with fifty medical personnel; five survived. Following the war, after a career as a pediatrician, Kim Cúc directed the International Relations Department for the National Women's Union in the 1990s. One American colleague aptly characterized her as the "ultimate networker."

Kim Cúc was a key organizer of the Vietnamese delegation to the 1995 United Nations Beijing NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Forum on Women. The Women's Union's nationwide local-district-provincial-national structure dating from 1930 and leadership by Kim Cúc and others suggests why Việt Nam had arguably the most representative and best-organized national group. For two years, the half dozen Vietnamese and expatriate organizers, all women, met weekly over a homemade lunch. Vietnamese do not talk about business over meals. Aligning with that custom, the lunches were forty-five minutes of raucous stories-on-the-fly with one purpose—fun. Then, when the serving dishes and rice bowls had been replaced by a teapot and tiny cups, Kim Cúc took over. Everyone kept right on laughing while, in fifteen minutes, she divvied up tasks for the coming week.

Funding ground rules for participants in the Vietnamese NGO delegation stipulated that upon returning to Việt Nam all participants would all write articles for their local newspapers and speak on local radio and television. For the first time, a

critical mass of Vietnamese—154 women and a few men, including ethnic minorities from across Việt Nam—met other women organizers from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. For the first time, after years of constraint caused by the vigorous U.S.-led embargo, while in Beijing, these Vietnamese organizers realized that HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, trafficking, and discrimination against girls and women were issues in *every* country. They understood these concerns were *human* issues and not a negative reflection on their country. As a result, for the first time, women in Việt Nam could speak publicly, write, and publish about these issues.

During the war, while Kim Cúc was treating the wounded on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, other women drove convoys of trucks carrying ammunition down the Trail and bringing severely wounded soldiers back out to the North (See **Illus. #13**). The women traveled by night, with metal “eyelids” shading their headlights so that ARVN and U.S. spotter planes would not see their trucks. These women referred to one section of the Trail as the “Corpse Road.” Trần Thị Định recalls:



Illus. #13: The DRVN mobilized its populace, including women drivers for the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Like everyone else, these women honored their assignments for the war's duration. *Source:* Việt Nam National Women's Museum.

I can never forget the time I was transporting the corpse of a companion-in-arms from Laos across the Gianh River. A bomb hit my truck, hurling the corpse into the water. My sense of right and wrong as well as affection for this comrade prodded me so that, whatever the cost, I knew I had to retrieve his body. I plunged into the river and, after many attempts at diving, at last retrieved the corpse and carried it up onto the road. I loaded the corpse back into my truck and continued on (Women's Museum 2014, 94).

If one of the vehicles had mechanical trouble, the driver stayed behind, alone with her truck, while the convoy moved on. Nguyễn Thị Kim Quý remembers: "I would spread out my poncho and sleep in the forest or in the truck. At that time, I had no fear of bombs or shells and no fear of death. My only fear was ghosts" (Women's Museum 2014, 131).

Dr. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Toàn (1930–) speaks of a different fear amidst American bombing. She was an OB/GYN surgeon at Hà Nội's premier 108 Military Hospital. Ngọc Toàn was the first person to notice the unusual birth defects among babies born to women veterans returning from the Hồ Chí Minh Trail and to wives of soldiers who had fought in the South. She remains to this day one of Việt Nam's strongest activists against the lingering and profound effects of Agent Orange.

During U.S. bombing, most non-emergency services were evacuated from Hà Nội. Ngọc Toàn stayed behind as part of the military hospital's emergency medical team for the city. She says she wasn't afraid of bombs. For her, terror lurked elsewhere:

We would be in surgery. The incision might be gaping when we would hear the loudspeakers announce approaching bombers. "Keep working," we'd say. "They're not here yet." Then we'd hear another announcement with the bombers even closer. "Keep working," we'd say. "They're not here yet." But then the bombs would be dropping. "Keep working," we'd say. "They haven't hit us yet."

American pilots who were shot down and survived complain that they were “tortured” by being held captive with only the most rudimentary first-aid treatment until 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. However, Dr. Ngọc Toàn tells a different story:

I'll tell you what terrified me. We would rotate assignments for night duty. I'd be responsible at night for wards of soldiers with the worst of wounds. We didn't have pain killers. Those patients were in agony. I'm a doctor. I will treat anyone in need. A patient is a patient, American, whoever. That's our doctor's oath. I could treat Americans with skill and gentleness. My hands knew what to do.

So why was I terrified? Because the 108 was the best hospital in Hà Nội. That's why they always brought the captured Americans pilots to us. The first-aid crews would arrive around 2:00 AM, in the dead of the night, hoping none of our patients would see their American prisoners. I was terrified that just one soldier wild with pain would see an American POW and go crazy with rage. I'm a colonel! I worried I couldn't control my own troops! I was fortunate. No patient noticed an American prisoner brought in during my watch, but Oh, oh! I did worry. (Ngọc Toàn 2002, 2012)



Illus. #14: Among the military's most challenging tasks was to transfer coordinates for U.S. bombers radioed from Vietnamese radar onto a *reversed* Plexiglas map so Vietnamese Air Force commanders on the other side of the Plexiglas could easily read the information and track the bombers. Vietnamese women had a reputation for the intense concentration needed for this task. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

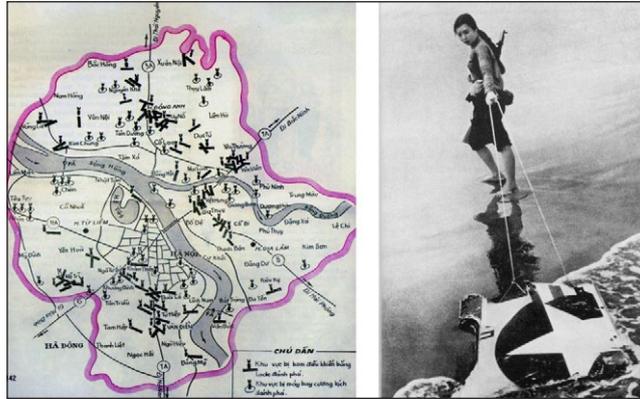


Illus. #15: Many women served in Hà Nội's self-defense forces during the 1972 "Christmas Bombing," which Vietnamese, asserting victory over American B-52s, call "Điện Biên Phủ in the Air." *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

American prisoners-of-war and Vietnamese political prisoners were always a major on-going issue, with profound effects on the lives of anyone involved, regardless of side, as Mme. Nguyễn Thị Bình (signatory to the Paris Agreement, see **Illus. #9, #10, #18–#23, #25**) points out. In 1954, after her release as a political prisoner, Mme. Bình re-grouped to North Việt Nam, working as personal assistant to Nguyễn Thị Thập (See **Illus. #7**), the Women's Union's president and a fellow southerner. Because Mme. Bình spoke excellent French, she later transferred to the Committee for Re-Unification and to the NLF Committee for Foreign Affairs (See **Illus. #18**).

When the Paris Conference on Việt Nam opened in May of 1968, Mme. Bình was chosen as deputy representative for the NLF delegation. Then, when the NLF re-formed as the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in 1969, she became its foreign minister and head of the PRG delegation. That assignment lasted through the signing of the Paris Agreement (January 27, 1973) and until the American War ended.

The other representatives on the North Vietnamese (DRVN) and NLF/PRG delegations at Paris point out that Hồ Chí Minh directed the entire negotiation



Illus. #16 and #17: *Left:* The legend's top image in this 1972 map of the Hà Nội Christmas Bombing represents U.S. laser-guided bombs; the bottom image, U.S. fighter-plane bombs. *Right:* A woman from Nam Định Province, North Việt Nam, retrieves scrap metal from a downed U.S. bomber, 1972. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].



Illus. #18: President Hồ Chí Minh with Mme. Bình and the NLF Committee for Foreign Affairs, Hà Nội, October 1962. Most committee members left shortly thereafter to staff NLF offices in foreign capitals. Three diplomats in the photo served on the NLF/PRG delegation in Paris. *Source:* Nguyễn Thị Bình.

process, seemingly even after his death. “All of us,” they insist, “including Mme. Bình, were only actors on the world stage. President Hồ cast us in our parts. He was the director” (Paris diplomats 2008–2013).

Indeed, only Hồ Chí Minh would have chosen a woman as deputy head and then as head of the NLF/PRG delegation. His decision was astute. The Americans’

stereotype of the southern revolutionary was an uncouth, uneducated Việt Cộng wearing black pajamas, yet the Việt Cộng representative who arrived in Paris was a petite, demure woman of startling elegance and presence in an *áo dài*, a southerner fluent in French. Mme. Nguyễn Thị Bình spoke quietly and calmly but also forcefully. The world was captivated; the world listened (See **Illus. #21**, Borton 2015, 7–23).

Westerners wonder about the relationship between the DRVN and NLF/PRG delegations. Mme. Bình, a former math teacher, laughs, saying, “Although two, we were one; although one, we were two.” She adds, “The two delegations were closely coordinated under one source of flexible, precise guidance, which came from inside our country” (Bình 2015, 158; *Paris Conference* 2013, 25–29, 53–55, 60–63, 77).

For the Vietnamese DRVN and NLF/PRG delegations, the Paris Conference on Việt Nam was *not* about negotiations. How could Việt Nam—a tiny, battle-weary country—negotiate with the United States—the world’s wealthiest, most-armed nation (See **Illus. #14–#17**)? Impossible. Instead, the Vietnamese goal for the Paris Conference was to align the world behind Việt Nam’s cause (See **Illus. #19**). Hồ Chí Minh had set up the NLF (and, later, the PRG) differently from the DRVN. The NFL/PRG was neutral—that is, neither officially allied with the Soviet-Chinese bloc nor with the Western bloc. This made it possible for Mme. Bình and her staff to



Illus. #19: Nguyễn Thị Bình headed the NLF Committee for Foreign Affairs delegation at its first meeting with the U.S. Peace and Anti-War Movements, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, September 1967. *Source:* Tom Gardner.

join events organized by the then-influential Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (*Paris Conference* 2013, 29, 62–63).

Of course, as might be expected, week after week, the Thursday-morning regularly scheduled negotiations went nowhere. But each Thursday provided a chance for Mme. Bình, wearing an elegant *áo dài*, to step out in front of Kléber Conference Center in Paris and captivate the male international press corps as she conveyed news about the war in South Việt Nam (See **Illus #22**). When the conference deadlocked, she and her team took to the road and to the air. They had no money, but they would go anywhere they were invited if the hosts provided tickets. Mme. Bình traveled the world—to NAM nations and to Western countries—with the exception of the U.S.A., although she did speak by telephone to a Women Strike for Peace conference in New York (Bình 2015, 181).



Illus. #20: Nguyễn Thị Bình in traditional southern dress, 1968, before arriving in Paris. *Source:* Nguyễn Thị Bình.



Illus. #21: Nguyễn Thị Bình arriving in Paris for the Paris Conference on Việt Nam, May 1968. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].



Illus. #22: Nguyễn Thị Bình at a Thursday press briefing, Paris. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

Mme. Bình must have been thinking of her next youngest sibling, Hà, whenever she spoke out about torture in the American-backed prisons and American-backed tiger cages on Côn Đảo Island east of Sài Gòn. But she concealed her own sorrow. In *Family, Friends and Country*, she describes her search for Hà in 1975, as soon as the American War ended:

My most pressing task was to search for my younger brother, Hà, whom the Sài Gòn authorities had imprisoned on Côn Đảo Island in 1968, when I began participating in the Paris Conference. At that time, Hà was an activist in Sài Gòn.

The gang of informers knew Hà was the younger brother of Nguyễn Thị Bình. The Sài Gòn police arrested him. Hà endured every type of corporal punishment during the fierce questioning before they exiled him to Côn Đảo. For nearly seven years, he lived there in a “tiger cage,” a far crueler cell than those of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps my younger brother's pain was not just that he was tortured from the outset but, rather, a deeper, far sharper pain. His wife, Tư Sương, was also arrested, because she was Hà's wife and because Hà was the younger brother of Mme. Bình and a grandson of Phan Châu Trinh. Hà's wife had just given birth. Their baby, who was not yet two months old, was also taken to prison. Tư Sương was in prison for six years, including two years at Côn Đảo.

Theirs was the pain of so many families during the Resistance. With mothers and fathers both in prison, the children also became prisoners, or the children were sent to relatives for a time here, for a time there (Bình 2015, 298–99).

With formal re-unification of Việt Nam in 1976, Mme. Bình became minister of education for ten years. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture (also led by a southerner) were the two key governmental branches for re-uniting the country, which war had divided for a generation. After another ten years as vice-president of Việt Nam, Mme. Bình and other retired activists established the Foundation for Peace and Development, a think tank concentrating on issues such as education, GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), Agent Orange, and the East Sea. As Mme. Bình says, "I started as an activist when I was sixteen. I'm ninety-one. That's seventy-five years as an activist. I'm not stopping now!"

Although the U.S. delegation in Paris had no women, several other women did represent the NLF/PRG. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung (1927–2014, see **Illus. #23, #24**), a spritely graduate of Sài Gòn's Madame Curie School, had trusted her two-year-old daughter to her sister's care while she attended a revolutionary training session in Mỹ Tho Province. When Ngọc Dung next saw her daughter, her "two-year-old" was herself the mother of a two-year-old. That detail, like Mme. Bình's description of Tư Sương's story (and even Mme. Bình's own story of her years in Paris, away from her children), resonates with the sacrifices made by the many women (and men) who gave up raising their own children to work for the Resistance so that *no* children would live under French colonialism or American occupation (Borton 1995, 87).



Illus. #23: Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung (far right) at a PRG delegation meeting, Paris, with Mme. Bình chairing. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].



Illus. #24: After the Paris Agreement signing, Ngọc Dung became a PRG Army major on the Joint Commission from 1973 to 1975 at Sài Gòn's airport, a few miles away from her undercover activist daughter, whom she couldn't meet until May 1975, after the American War had ended. *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

At Paris, Mme. Ngọc Dung took basic responsibility for “meet and greet.” In their attempt to garner the world’s support for their cause, NLF/PRG and DRVN delegates would meet with anyone, particularly Americans, and not only those from the Peace and Anti-War Movements, but also with veterans and the wives of prisoners-of-war held at the Hà Nội Hilton. After Paris, Mme. Ngọc Dung served a term as Việt Nam’s representative to the United Nations, where she became the first Vietnamese on a U.N. commission, in this case the commission that established CEDAW (the

United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

After her retirement from the Foreign Ministry, Ngọc Dung and other women in Hồ Chí Minh City/Sài Gòn created an NGO to address children's rights. Women, particularly retired women diplomats, established the first Vietnamese NGOs. These women had lived overseas, including in the West. They had observed Western civil society, knew foreign languages, and had earned their right to continue as revolutionary activists.

Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung attended the United Nations 1985 NGO Forum on Women in Nairobi. At the time, the heavy U.S. embargo against Việt Nam kept Vietnamese women out of touch with potential colleagues in neighboring countries. However, in Nairobi, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung and Dương Thị Duyen (See **Illus. #25**) met with women from Grameen Bank (Bangladesh) and the Gabriella Alliance of Filipino Women (Philippines). The Vietnamese invited those colleagues to visit Việt Nam. Subsequently, the Việt Nam Women's Union established pilot development projects based on their international colleagues' models. Ngọc Dung also attended the United Nations 1995 NGO Forum on Women in Beijing. She was the only Vietnamese woman



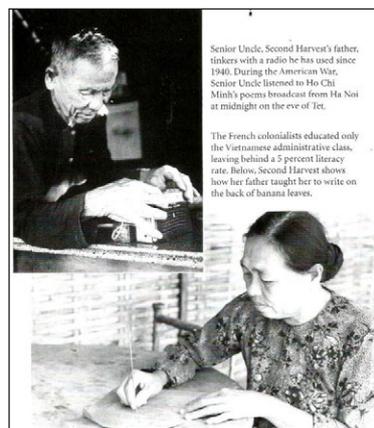
Illus. #25: Meeting with representatives from French and international women's organizations, Paris, early 1970s, left to right: a French organizer, Mme. Mai Văn Bộ (wife of the DRVN delegate general), Nguyễn Thị Bình (head, PRG delegation), Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung ("meet and greet," PRG), Dương Thị Duyện (journalist, DRVN), and Vũ Thị Đạt (head of protocol, DRVN). *Source:* NXB Thế Giới [World Publishers].

to join both events. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Dung was also the first person in Việt Nam to advocate for girls who had been molested, raped, or taken into prostitution. “They have a disability,” she said, “which may be hidden from our sight but is as disabling as any physical handicap” (Ngọc Dung 1988–2009, 1988; Borton 1995, 87).

“This Is All We Wanted”

Many women on the revolutionary side in South Việt Nam were underground local organizers relying on women’s subservient role in society to slip about unnoticed. Nguyễn Thị Hai Giàu (1938–, see **Illus. #7, #11, #26**) grew up close to what would become the U.S. Division 9 Headquarters in Mỹ Tho Province. During World War II, Hai Giàu’s village was bombed by the French, the Japanese, and then the Americans. The villagers owned nothing, not even cloth. They made clothes from leaves they stitched together with banana-leaf veins. A husband and wife might own one pair of shorts between them. When the wife wore the shorts outside, the husband hid inside.

Hai Giàu’s father was a teacher in the literacy program started by Hồ Chí Minh on September 3, 1945, the day after the Declaration of Independence. However, the French invaded southern Việt Nam three weeks later and marched into the Mekong Delta, which is famous for its rich rice fields. Once again, war intervened.



Illus. #26: Even though her father (*above*) was a teacher, because of war, Hai Giàu never learned to write more than her name until 1956, when she was eighteen. Here, she shows how she learned to write her letters on a banana leaf. *Source:* Lady Borton, from *After Sorrow*.



Illus. #27: When the war ended, Lê Đức Thọ (U.S. negotiator Henry Kissinger's nemesis at the Paris Conference) asked Lê Văn Lợi to find Mother Sừ, who had harbored Lê Đức Thọ as her adopted son while he worked as an undercover Party activist in southern Việt Nam from 1948 until 1968, when he left for Hà Nội and Paris. During the American War, Mother Sừ's son was an ARVN soldier. Having sons and other relatives on both sides was common during the French-American War and the American War. *Source:* Lê Văn Lợi.

“How could we study?” Hai Giàu asks. “Our village faced war again. I didn’t have clothes to wear to school. I had only one pair of shorts. No shirt! We didn’t have paper. I learned to write my letters on the backs of banana leaves, their veins for lines, a sliver of bamboo for a pen.”

Hai Giàu joined the Resistance when she was ten, during French colonialism. She came home one day to find her beloved grandfather shot dead by the French, bullets holes through his hands covering the bullet holes through his eyes. She became a child runner, a messenger, a guerrilla, and then a key organizer. She was so effective as a local organizer that the CIA-based Phoenix Program, which had been designed to exterminate the Việt Cộng’s infrastructure, placed a bounty on Hai Giàu’s head equivalent to a teacher’s salary for one hundred years. Local villagers nicknamed her “Sixth Sense” because, they said, she had an extra set of eyes. Once, Sài Gòn troops rounded up villagers, demanding that the assembled peasants lead them to Hai Giàu, who was in the crowd. No one fingered her.

For years, Hai Giàu and her father lived underground. “We lived like rats,” her father would say, “except we were smarter.” Other villagers were herded into strategic hamlets, which were prison camps cordoned off by barbed wire and guarded by ARVN soldiers. The women in the strategic hamlets would light small kerosene lamps as signals that it was safe for organizers like Hai Giàu to sneak into

the camp. One time, Hai Giàu ducked into a friend's hut inside a strategic hamlet, but her contact was away. Hai Giàu was shocked to find two ARVN soldiers sitting on her friend's bamboo bed. There was no escaping capture. But then, suddenly, her friend's four-year-old rushed up and grabbed Hai Giàu around the legs, calling out, "Mama!" and digging his face into her knees. The ARVN soldiers moved on to check another hut.

"How did he know to do that?" Hai Giàu asks, twenty years later. Lounging in a hammock, she nods toward the four-year-old hero, now an adult, who sits near her at a small tea table. His own two-year-old toddles between the hammock and table. "We never taught him that!"

The young father-hero laughs. "Honestly, I don't remember that incident, but I can tell you this. We children knew by intuition who was who, who was on this side, who was on that side. Even when we were very little, we knew when to charm and when to ad lib."

This conversation took place more than a decade after the American War ended. We were sitting in Hai Giàu's house on a stream flowing into the Mekong Delta's Tiền Giang River, now one of the most peaceful places on earth. Palms shade the wooden house with its thatched roof nestled inside a hibiscus hedge, its garden fresh with the fragrance of frangipani. Because this is a bayou, travel takes place on water in flat-bottomed canoes (see **Illus. #12**), which villagers paddle or drive using an outboard motor with a long propeller shaft perfect for shallows. The stream's water is sweet but tidal. Villagers organize tasks according to the tide. When the water is high, they set fishing weirs in the water-filled bomb craters along the stream and go by boat to market. When the tide is low, they tend to household chores and gather the fish trapped in mud in the empty bomb craters.

Like many women of her generation, Hai Giàu was not a communist, but, rather, a nationalist. She makes the same comment as many of the women with whom I have spoken over the years: "If we couldn't secure independence and peace in our lifetimes, then in our children's. If not in our children's lifetimes, then in their children's."

Sitting in the hammock, Hai Giàu pauses, lifting the toddler into her lap, cradling him, her foot gently pushing against the dirt floor so that the hammock sways with a lulling rhythm.



Illus. #28: Hằng, age five, had been held in prison for four years, when she met Lê Đức Thọ in May 1975. She calls Lê Đức Thọ “Grandfather.” His poem for Hằng begins:

So young, what was your crime?

Imprisoned from the cradle with your mother

Years in a dark, dank jail

Barbed-wire walls, steel doors, many floors.

Source: Lê Văn Lợi.

“I shot a gun,” she says, “but I never killed anyone. I fought with my mouth.”

“Don’t you see?” Hai Giàu adds, giving the hammock another gentle push as she shifts the child closer, “this is all we wanted” (See **Illus. #27, #28**, Borton 1995, 62, 64, 98–99).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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is the only living signatory to the Paris Agreement on Viet-Nam (January 27, 1973), 51–52, 67–68, 72, 158, 181, 298–99.

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Offensive as the world came to know it was the vision of Party General Secretary Lê Duẩn, a Maoist dedicated to class struggle and vehemently opposed to Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp.

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Paris diplomats. 2008–2013. Many conversations with the Vietnamese Paris diplomats in Hà Nội as we identified participants and roles in 150 photographs and as we drafted captions and text for *The Paris Conference on Việt Nam: Looking Back, 1968–1973* to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Paris Agreement on Viet-Nam.

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war re-education centers for officers from the defeated South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and officials from the former South Vietnamese government allied with the United States as prevention against the possibility of a counter-revolution. She worked on the lowest level for ten years. After Renovation/Renewal began in late 1986, Mme. Phước Đại opened La Bibliotheque de Madame Đại, which became a favorite restaurant for visiting Western journalists.

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