

## HO CHI MINH AND 'VIETNAM DOC LAP' 1941-1942

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### Abstract

Viet Nam Doc Lap was a little newspaper of two-four pages which was published at the Viet Minh headquarters in Pac Bo from 1941 to 1945. During the first year of its existence, Ho Chi Minh himself was editor. From August 1942, while Ho languished in the Chinese prisons, Viet Nam Doc Lap was edited by Pham Van Dong.

The paper gives a marvellous introduction to Ho Chi Minh's psychological insight and instinct for agitation and propaganda. At the time it was published, Vo Nguyen Giap and other comrades found that the articles in Viet Nam Doc Lap were too short, and asked Ho Chi Minh to use smaller letters in order to include more text, 'but Uncle Ho defended his preference for short articles with big types', says Giap in his memoirs. Ho Chi Minh published his articles only after they had been tested on persons with little education. The result was a newspaper which is not only simpler and much easier to read than other Viet Minh or ICP organs, but also of higher literary quality. From the columns of Viet Nam Doc Lap one rapidly gets a sensation of Ho Chi Minh's warmth, experience and dedication.

In his paper, Stein Tønnesson is going to address some of the following questions: Why did Ho Chi Minh prefer to establish a local paper rather than a national Viet Minh mouthpiece? How did the newspaper present to its readers the development of World War II? Who were seen as enemies and who as friends? What sort of ideology did the paper represent? Did Ho Chi Minh have a journalistic style of his own? How did Doc Lap tackle the great issues of how to get arms and when to launch the insurrection?

In the author's view, Viet Nam Doc Lap is an invaluable source for the study of Viet Minh's early history, as well as of Ho Chi Minh's fabulous talent for popular organizing. He thinks the newspaper can give a new stimulus to the scholarly discussion of peasant organizing in Vietnam. The construction of the first guerrilla bases in Viet Bac from 1941 to 1945 provides an eloquent example of such organizing. It is particularly well suited for study because not only Ho Chi Minh, but several other central Vietnamese communist leaders were active in local organizing. In this connection, Viet Nam Doc Lap, of which most issues are preserved in the collection of the Museum of Revolution, Hanoi, will probably be the crucial source - at least until the central Party Archives in Hanoi open their Viet Minh collection to researchers.

## HO CHI MINH AND 'VIETNAM DOC LAP' 1941-1942

### Full Text

In imperialist countries paper, ink, printers and workers are available in abundance. So it is easy for them to make and publish newspapers. In our country we have to act clandestinely. It's a great effort to make and publish such a newspaper. So when you read the newspaper you must estimate and preserve it. When looking at it you must read it again and again, study it until you have understood and remembered its contents. Each locality should have a section in charge of explaining the newspaper to smaller groups .... When you have finished it, you must hide it in a secret place so that whenever it is necessary you can find it and read it again.<sup>1</sup>

This is a quotation from a <sup>one of the</sup> 1943 issue<sup>s</sup> of Viet Nam Doc Lap, a little newspaper of two-four pages which was published with altogether 126 issues at the Viet Minh headquarters in Pac Bo, <sup>Car Bong</sup> from August 1941 until the August Revolution in 1945. After that it continued as a local newspaper. During the first year of its existence, it was Ho Chi Minh himself who edited the paper. From September 1942, while Ho languished in the Chinese prisons, Viet Nam Doc Lap was edited by Pham Van Dong.

Reading this simple little publication in 1989, in the Hanoi Museum of Revolution, was a marvellous introduction for me to Ho Chi Minh's psychological insight and instinct for agitation and propaganda.\* At the time when it was published, Vo Nguyen Giap and other comrades found that the articles in Viet Nam Doc Lap were too short, and asked Ho Chi Minh to use smaller letters in order to include more text, 'but Uncle Ho defended his preference for short articles with big types', says Giap in his memoirs.<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh would publish his articles only if they were immediately

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<sup>1</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 153, 21.2.43.

<sup>2</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, 'Naissance d'une armée', in L. Puisseux (ed.), Récits de la résistance vietnamienne, p. 71. See also a translation of Le Quang Ba's 'reminiscences' about Doc Lap in Th. Hodgkin, Vietnam - the Revolutionary Past, pp. 300-301.

## Lenin on the need for an 'All-Russian Newspaper'

In the article 'Where To Begin', Iskra, No. 4, May 1901, Lenin affirmed: '...the starting-point of our activities, the first step towards creating the desired organisation ... should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper ... our newspaper must be All-Russian ... Our movement suffers in the first place, ideologically, as well as in practical and organisational respects, from its state of fragmentation, from the almost complete immersion of the overwhelming majority of Social-Democrats in local work, which narrows their outlook ... The first step towards eliminating this short-coming, towards transforming diverse local movements into a single, All-Russian movement, must be the founding of an All-Russian newspaper.' Other Russian social democrats disagreed, so the following year Lenin had to insist in What Is To Be Done: 'But the whole point is that there is no other way of training strong political organisations ~~except~~ through the medium of an All-Russian newspaper.' V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 5, pp. 20-21, 499.

understood by test persons with little education. The result was a newspaper which is not only simpler and much easier to read than other Viet Minh or ICP organs, like Cuu Quoc or Co Giai Phong, but also of higher literary quality. From the columns of Viet Nam Doc Lap one rapidly gets a sensation of Ho Chi Minh's warmth, experience and dedication.

When founding parties or fronts, most political leaders hasten to create a national newspaper. Not so Ho Chi Minh - he started a local newspaper, only for Cao Bang province. From 1942 it also covered Bac Can province, and from 1944 even Lang Son - as a mouthpiece of the Viet Minh Inter-Provincial Committee.

### **Why a Local Paper?**

Why did Ho Chi Minh prefer to establish a local paper rather than a national Viet Minh mouthpiece? The reason is obvious. In 1941 Viet Minh was only able to print and distribute some 400 copies of a newspaper, mainly in the region surrounding the Pac Bo base. The types were carved by hand into stone or hard earth, and printed on paper collected from local sympathizers. To create a national newspaper with such a primitive technique and such a limited circulation would have been a sign of weakness. It would have conveyed the impression that Viet Minh was just one of many groups competing for national leadership. Instead Ho Chi Minh therefore created a local newspaper, pretending - without saying so explicitly - that it was just a little wheel in a big revolutionary machinery. He even feigned that the journal had already existed for some time by calling the first issue, dated 1 August 1941, 'Number 101' (OVERHEADS 'The first issues').

Everything was done to avoid giving people the impression that they were pioneers or participating in an experiment - which they definitely were. Instead the paper told its readers that they were lagging behind. At other places - Nam Ky, Nghe An, Bac Son - there had already been full scale insurrections, but the French had prevented the people of Cao Bang from learning such news in order to keep them ignorant and inferior. The mission of

Doc Lap was to 'abolish such ignorance and inferiority', the newspaper announced.

This strategy of telling people that they were being mobilized for a movement well established in the rest of the country, was followed up in the most ingenious way in the fifth issue, dated 10 September 1941. A drawing showed a well lined procession of peasants bringing gifts and holding banners of welcome to a group of visitors. In the text the readers were told that the leaders of the movement had sent 'highly important cadres to Cao Bang province' and that they had been warmly welcomed everywhere by the population, who had shouted: 'Fight France! Fight Japan! Unite with China! Vietnamese independence quickly! Support the leaders of our Front!' (OVERHEAD 'Demonstration').

The 'local' newspaper also printed a letter of gratitude from the same high level cadres asking for forgiveness from the villages they had not had time to visit. Later issues reverted to the good impression the high level cadres had got of Cao Bang province. The few who knew that the top leader of the organization had his headquarters in a cave in that very province must have smiled, but the ordinary reader may well have started to doubt if French control of Indochina was as firm as it seemed.

### **Winners and Losers in the World War**

For a movement to succeed, it is not enough to propagandize its own strength. It is also necessary to show that the enemy is weak and that one has powerful Allies. World War II gave Doc Lap ample opportunity for such propaganda. The newspaper repeatedly told its readers how weak the French and Japanese were, and how strong the Chinese and Russians had become: 'The French lost their country after only 45 days of fighting' (1.8.41); 'Although the French enemies appear to suppress our people severely, they have in fact become very weak' (11.8.41); 'In France the French are Germany's slaves. In our country they serve Japan'; 'Russia is a revolutionary country with a huge territory, a big population,

and better soldiers than Germany, so Russia will certainly win...' (11.8.41); 'During four years of fighting in China, Japan has had 1,994,000 people killed and wounded .... But France had to surrender to Japan. So it is clear that France has become very weak' (21.8.41); 'Now the countries of the world have been divided into two camps: the fascist camp which is extremely barbarous and consists of three countries, Germany, Italy, Japan. France follows these countries. The anti-fascist camp consists of many countries, Russia, Britain, America, China, and all countries wanting democracy - our country belongs to this camp. It has more people and is more powerful, so Germany and Japan will certainly lose, and Russia and China will certainly win' (1.9.41).

This optimistic two-camp statement was made three months before the USA entered the war, and at a time when the German war machine was crushing Stalin's armies. After Pearl Harbour, Doc Lap reported that Britain, USA and many other states had begun to fight Japan, but said nothing about de Gaulle's declaration of war. Instead it stated: 'There are two camps in this world war: the camp of aggressors consisting of Germany, Italy, Japan, France; the camp against the aggressors, consisting of Russia, China, Britain, America and many other countries.'<sup>3</sup> The journal was full of figures of dead and killed soldiers, destroyed tanks and planes, and raped women. Such reports were generally exaggerated, as when it was claimed that more than 100,000 women and girls around Paris had been raped and executed by German soldiers, that 60-70,000 Vietnamese soldiers had died in France, 'leaving their bones abroad', and that 'all fish, meat and blankets in Norway had been confiscated by the Germans'.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1941, while the German armies were still very much on the offensive, Ho Chi Minh printed a drawing of Stalin beating up Hitler. In May 1945, after Hitler's suicide, Pham Van Dong reprinted this drawing as an indication of the paper's

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<sup>3</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 113, 21.12.41.

<sup>4</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, Nos. 107, 1.10.41; 108, 11.10.41; 111, 21.11.41.

capacity for correct predictions (OVERHEAD 'Stalin/Hitler'). This capacity may not be as impressive as it seems since Ho Chi Minh always predicted the victory of those he was hoping would win; perhaps he was more lucky than prophetic, but he not only announced his predictions, he also argued for them. In April 1942 he predicted: 'Japan will certainly lose':

Now Japan has captured Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and many people start to waver, thinking that Japan may win ... It is wrong to think that way! We can be sure, no matter how aggressive Japan is, that Japan will certainly lose ... Old people who have studied Han language may still remember that, a long time ago, Hang Vu had won hundreds of battles when he lost only one, but then he lost his whole country. Those who have studied French may remember that Napoleon and France won wherever they attacked, but when they lost only one battle, everything was smashed to pieces. Therefore, he who wants to know who will win and who will lose in a war should not base his judgement on the first battles, but on the final ones. In war, the one who is most consistent and durable in strength will win ... the longer the war lasts, the more will it benefit Britain and America and harm Japan. Japan's victories are preliminary, like a straw catching fire - it burns quickly, and is quickly extinguished.<sup>5</sup>

### **Organizational Principles**

Viet Nam Doc Lap actively promoted a sense of belonging to particular groups, like workers, soldiers, women, children. Special issues were published for each group (OVERHEAD 'Children'). This, of course, was linked to Viet Minh's structure as a sort of 'umbrella' for a range of Associations of National Salvation. The statutes of the Viet Minh, which were distributed to members together with the program, prescribed a double organizational structure with, on the one hand, Committees in each hamlet, village and province, and, on the other hand, the corporatively organized Associations of National Salvation. At the summit there was to be a Central Committee, the Trung Uong

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<sup>5</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 122, 1.4.42.

Chap Uy, or Tong Bo. Village committees were to be reelected every 6 months, the Tong Bo every 18 months. Elections were to take place in accordance with a representative system: each level of the membership organizations - the Associations for National Salvation - should elect their representatives to the Viet Minh Committee on the corresponding level.<sup>6</sup> This was an intricate system which could easily be controlled from above.

No names of leaders were mentioned in Doc Lap during the whole period from 1941 to 1945 (except those who had been killed), and the first time Doc Lap referred to the existence of the Tong Bo was in August 1942, around the time when Ho Chi Minh left and Pham Van Dong took over as editor. The readers were informed that the Tong Bo had dispatched medals to some of the best organized villages in Cao Bang province.<sup>7</sup>

## **Ideology**

Viet Nam Doc Lap was a local organ with a nationalist ideology. An important point in its propaganda was to make the local minority people in Cao Bang province consider themselves as Vietnamese, as members of the Vietnamese nation on an equal footing with the Viet, or Kinh. In order to achieve this, the newspaper tried to make people identify their country with a geographical abstraction, the S-shaped image which can be seen on maps. Doc Lap also tried to create a sense of history. On 1 February 1942, it reminded its readers of the great national heroes who had fought against China in former times, and at the same time announced the publication of a booklet with a long

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<sup>6</sup> I rely on a French translation of Viet Minh's programs and statues, included in Nolde to 'Conseiller Politique du Haut-Commissaire', No. 676/2, 11.12.45, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, fonds Conseiller Politique, Carton 21, dossier 'Organisation'. An English translation of excerpts from the same program can be found in: OSS Report from Kunming, 23.10.44, U.S. National Archives, Record Group 226, OSS Records, Doc. L 47504.

<sup>7</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 134, 12.8.42.



poem: Our history. The name of the author was not mentioned, but today we all know it as one of Ho Chi Minh's works.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from praise of 'Revolutionary Russia' or 'Communist Russia', where everyone was 'free, equal and happy', there was hardly any communist rhetoric in Doc Lap. The word 'revolution' (cach menh) was used frequently, and so were 'exploitation' and 'oppression', sometimes even 'imperialism', but words like 'feudalism', 'capitalism', 'socialism', 'internationalism', 'proletariat', and 'class' were conspicuously absent. The enemies were Japan and France (in that order), not feudalism or capitalism; the friends were China and Russia, not the international working class. As concerns Britain and the USA, Doc Lap acknowledged that they were 'imperialist countries like Japan', but while Japan was 'siding with the aggressors (Germany); Britain and America were siding with the anti-aggression countries (Russia).'

In Cao Bang and Bac Can provinces, the enemies were not capitalists or landowners, but secret informers of the enemy - and village notables collecting taxes for the French.

### **Taxes and Fees**

Doc Lap urged the villagers to refuse to pay taxes, and backed the appeal with a slightly self-contradictory argument: they should not believe the threats from the tax collectors; it was true that the French were cruel, but they would never kill the whole population of a village, for then there would be no one to pay taxes.<sup>9</sup> While urging the villagers not to pay taxes to the French, the Viet Minh struggled hard to make them submit 'monthly fees': 'For seven months the VM province committee has not received one penny (xu) in fees!!!', Doc Lap exclaimed in June

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<sup>8</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 117, 1.2.42.

<sup>9</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 108, 11.10.41.

1943.<sup>10</sup> A little afterwards, it had to reprimand the cadres of a certain district for having been 'too enthusiastic in raising money and materials to support us'.<sup>11</sup> Almost every issue of the newspaper included lists of people having made financial or other contributions (without full names): 'Ms L.A. and Ms. T.Y contributed 3 pairs of shoes. Ms. Ph. contributed a bottle of fish sauce.'<sup>12</sup>

## Arms

Arms were of course sparse in the movement, and this hampered its credibility as a force which was powerful enough to beat the enemy. Doc Lap confronted the issue, admitting that some cadres were worrying: - How can we fight the Japanese and French when we don't have weapons? The editor had the answer ready: 'Unity is more important than weapons .... If we are united, we will have guns .... In Cao Bang there are 3,000 soldiers of whom 2,700 belong to our people. If they join in, we will have a lot of guns.' Articles in the paper clearly show that Viet Minh reckoned with the soldiers of the French colonial army as a potential revolutionary force: 'Equipped as they are with weapons and military skills, the Vietnamese soldiers will form the vanguard of the revolutionary army.'<sup>13</sup> According to a French report, however, Viet Minh propaganda did not succeed very well in relation to the troops of the Colonial Army, who were too well paid and fed to be 'seduced', but the agitation was far more successful in the paramilitary militia, the Garde Indigène.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 165, 11.6.43.

<sup>11</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 181, 20.11.43.

<sup>12</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 132, 21.7.42.

<sup>13</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 120, 10.3.42, No. 142, 1.11.42.

<sup>14</sup> DGER Bulletin de renseignements No. EO/9-1158 SD, 1.6.45, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence), Indochine Nouveau Fonds, Carton 132, dossier 1192.

This was confirmed in 1945, when many soldiers of the former Garde Indigène defected to the Viet Minh.

### **Uncle's Advice**

Viet Nam Doc Lap was not first of all a propaganda organ. With its limited circulation it was rather a means for internal agitation. Most of the readers were no doubt people who had already been actively enrolled in the Viet Minh. But they could read the paper many times and passed it from one to the other. From the paper they learned the arguments to use in discussions with the population.

Part of the agitation was also to teach the cadre how to behave in order to deserve the people's respect. This was a task for which Uncle Ho was well suited with his rich personal experience. In the columns of Doc Lap he tried to solve many sorts of problems. One was that the young cadres of the organization tended to fall in love with local girls, and that the parents of the girls refused to acknowledge the union. Ho Chi Minh cited Confucius for the fact that love was unavoidable and urged the older generation to give up the ancient habit of selecting wives and husbands for their children. Couples were much happier when the choice of partner was based on love and free will. On the other hand he told the young cadres to report to the organization when they fell in love, to ask for permission from the parents, and to hold a proper wedding ceremony.<sup>15</sup>

A more critical problem with regard to the young cadres was their impatience to launch the insurrection. 'When will the insurrection break out?' asked the editorial of 21 March 1942 in response to a letter from a group of young front members. There were two conditions: First, France and Japan would have to be so confused and weak that they were unable to rule the Vietnamese people. Second, the whole people would have to be united in the struggle. Doc Lap could of course not admit to its readers that

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<sup>15</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 128, 11.6.42.

the French and Japanese were still too strong. Instead it contended that both the French and Japanese were already weak and confused: 'Now the first condition has been met, but not the second ... each cadre, each member has to do his best...'

The young cadres were not satisfied. They sent a second letter to the paper, declaring their disagreement: if Japan is weak, it is high time to launch the insurrection, for otherwise Japan may grow more powerful. Ho Chi Minh's Doc Lap answered by comparing Viet Minh to a baby elephant, still quite small, but growing stronger every day: Japan was an old buffalo which was sure to be ailing all the time. The journal also used another image: to carry out a revolt before the people had united was like eating fruit before it was ripe. Three tasks had to be accomplished first: (1) to organize, (2) to organize, (3) to organize. Then time would be ripe for the insurrection.<sup>16</sup> The paper hammered again and again on the necessity of unity: 'Separate and isolated a chop-stick can easily be broken, but if many chop-sticks are held tightly together, it is impossible to break them.'<sup>17</sup> (OVERHEAD 'lifting rock')

In this period, however, Ho Chi Minh had little success in his attempts to achieve unity between the Communists and the non-communist exile groups in China. Truong Boi Cong, one of the VNQDD leaders, was put in custody for some time by the Chinese under the accusation of having worked too closely with the Communists. He must subsequently have broken off his relations with them, for in May 1942, Doc Lap warned its readers against 'the Truong Boi Cong group'.<sup>18</sup> The situation was confused, and when Ho Chi Minh went to China in August 1942, the purpose was probably to rebuild the broken bridges. As we know, he was captured by the Kwangsi police immediately after having entered Chinese territory, and for 14 months was shuttled through thirty

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<sup>16</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 121, 21.3.42, No. 125, 11.5.42.

<sup>17</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 129, 21.6.42.

<sup>18</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 126, 21.5.42.

different jails in the 13 districts of the province.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly before Ho Chi Minh's departure, the articles in Doc Lap started to carry signatures, mainly 'B.V.' or 'Bac Vong'. This was probably one of the pseudonyms used by Pham Van Dong. In August, the journal made a book edition of all the poems it had published during its first year and urged its readers to grasp the importance of poems: 'Once upon a time, the Chinese invaded our country. Then a learned scholar wrote a heartfelt poem which was cited by everybody. The Chinese soldiers were moved by the poem, left their weapons behind and went back to China. Our country won.'<sup>20</sup> This may well have been the last article Ho Chi Minh wrote for Doc Lap before he went to China (OVERHEAD 'Flag').

After Ho's departure, Doc Lap continued to publish simple, effective propaganda and agitation, but the style was now more matter-of-fact, organizational, less personal and with fewer literary images. While Ho was in China, trying to move his Chinese captors with the poems which would later be published in the Prison Diary, little was seen in the columns of Doc Lap of 'chop-sticks', 'burning straw' or 'baby elephants'.

### **Doc Lap as a Source**

In my view, Viet Nam Doc Lap is an invaluable source for the study of Viet Minh's early history, as well as of Ho Chi Minh's fabulous talent for popular organizing. Indeed I think that the newspaper can give a new stimulus to the scholarly discussion of peasant organizing. In the long debate between protagonists of the 'moral economy' school and the 'rational peasant' school - and other schools - concerning the reasons for the incredible ability of the Indochinese Communists to organize the peasants and achieve their support in the struggle against French

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<sup>19</sup> D.G. Marr's introduction in Phan Boi Chau and Ho Chi Minh, Reflections from Captivity, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Viet Nam Doc Lap, No. 135, 21.8.42.

colonialism and United States imperialism, the main focus points have been: the Nghe Tinh Soviets of 1930, the resistance struggle in the North from 1947 to 1954, and the growth of the NLF in the South from 1965 to 1968. I think the construction of the first guerrilla bases in Viet Bac from 1941 to 1945, in competition with authorities loyal to the French administrative system, and under constant pressure from armed French repression, provides another eloquent example. It is a particularly well suited example because not only Ho Chi Minh, but several other central Vietnamese communist leaders were active in local organizing.

In this connection, Viet Nam Doc Lap, of which most issues are present in the collection of the Museum of Revolution, Hanoi, will probably be the crucial source - at least until the central Party Archives in Hanoi open their Viet Minh collection to researchers.

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