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Entrepreneurs of Disorder: Gangsters, Revolutionaries, and Collaborators during the
Decolonization of Vietnam (1945-1955)

By

Kevin Li

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

Professor Yuri Slezkine

Professor Penny Edwards

Professor Christopher Goscha

Summer 2020

Entrepreneurs of Disorder: Gangsters, Revolutionaries, and Collaborators during the
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By

Kevin Li

Abstract

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Kevin Li

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

This study centers on the rise and fall of a major political-military force called the Bình Xuyên. At the end of World War II, members of the Saigon underworld, seeking to thwart French reoccupation, organized local toughs, farmers, laborers, fugitives, and military deserters into a confederation of armed bands. Between 1945 and 1955, the Bình Xuyên played a key military and political role on both sides of the First Indochina War—first as part of the communist-led Việt Minh insurgency, then as an anticommunist bulwark against it. In its latter role under the auspices of the French military, the Bình Xuyên fielded an army of over three thousand, gained command of the national police, cultivated a six-thousand-member political mass organization, and built a lucrative business portfolio—all in the heart of Saigon-Cholon. As insurgent and pacifier, the group harnessed its military capacity, economic resources, and patriotic reputation to vie for political power. In the process, these erstwhile criminals came to assume the mantle of nationalism and the guise of the state.

Conventionally, the study of modern Vietnam has focused on elite politics and narratives of collaboration and resistance. This study in contrast decenters traditional protagonists, complicates familiar cleavages, and in turn reframes 20th century Vietnamese political history. I trace the unheralded rise of colonial-era violence entrepreneurs—*anh chị*, as they were called—who came to reconfigure political and state power in the postcolony. I foreground the convergence between the political and criminal milieux, as common criminals often mingled with nationalists of all stripes inside colonial prisons and beyond. This political-criminal nexus was one of the key legacies of French colonial power.

This project aims to explain what made the Bình Xuyên's path to power possible and how this new reality shaped political authority, governance, and war. The first part of the dissertation, comprising two chapters, examines the transformation of gangsters into insurgents. I show that links forged between nationalist activists and criminals in the face of colonial repression laid the foundation for the political-criminal nexus of the post-1945 period. The civil war between competing nationalists amplified the importance of violence specialists. I argue that pre-1945 relations with both communist and anticommunist activists played a significant role in the empowerment and legitimation of the Bình Xuyên as a nationalist force. The second part of the

dissertation, made up of three chapters, tracks the Bình Xuyên's partnership with the non-communist Vietnamese state and its French backers. As the group cleared the city and the countryside of insurgents, it grew rapidly in manpower, wealth, and influence through clever politicking and brute force. I show how the Bình Xuyên steadily encroached on and ultimately assumed key state functions as it exposed intrastate competition and elevated its own political profile.

For Trinh

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Introduction

At the end of World War II, colonial-era wielders of unsanctioned violence—gangsters, racketeers, labor bosses—organized local farmers, laborers, fugitives, and military deserters into a confederation of armed groups calling itself the Bình Xuyên, in reference to a hamlet outside Saigon that had earned a reputation as a “bandits’ lair.” Between 1945 and 1955, the Bình Xuyên played a key military and political role on both sides of the First Indochina War (1946-54)—first as part of the communist-led Viet Minh insurgency, then as a nationalist bulwark against it. The Bình Xuyên upended categorical distinctions between the political and criminal. Its successive integration into competing state projects—by turns the southern Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRV] and iterations of the Franco-Vietnamese hybrid state—threw into relief the complications arising from the nascent political-criminal nexus. The inherent tension in the arrangement became all the more salient as the Bình Xuyên achieved unprecedented notoriety, wealth, and power after joining the non-communist government. It managed to secure a significant level of local sovereignty over Saigon-Cholon and its hinterland, fielded an army of thirty-five hundred, cultivated a political mass organization, and gained command of the national police, while building a lucrative business portfolio. As both insurgent and pacifier, the Bình Xuyên harnessed its military capacity, economic resources, and patriotic reputation to become a major nationalist force vying for power in southern Vietnam. If not for its defeat at the hands of the State of Vietnam’s prime minister Ngô Đình Diệm in 1955, the group may very well have continued to be an entrenched part of South Vietnam’s power structure.

The Bình Xuyên fits uneasily into the narrative of Vietnamese political history. It belongs in neither the communists’ triumphant tale of revolution nor the equally powerful narrative of anticommunist nationalism. It is remembered as a “gang of river pirates” that nearly plunged south Vietnam into civil war. Its swift military defeat, which marked a major turning point for the fledgling Ngô Đình Diệm government, was followed by a concerted campaign to paint Lê Văn Viễn (known as Bảy Viễn), the Bình Xuyên leader, and his lieutenants as depraved and greedy traitors who collaborated with the Japanese, the communists, and the French for personal gain.¹ Numerous stories appeared in the press reporting salacious details of the leadership. This campaign was not unprecedented. It echoed similar propaganda deployed by the DRV in 1948, when Bảy Viễn and his Bình Xuyên faction were purged by the southern Việt Minh general Nguyễn Bình, also pegging them as traitors who were bought off by “reactionaries” and French colonialists.² Western journalists and scholars, echoing these narratives, perpetuated these images of the group. The cumulative effect is to push the Bình Xuyên to the margins of Vietnamese political history. So, despite its central role during a decade of decolonization and

¹ Tran, Nu-Anh, “Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963)” (Ph.D. dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2013), 65-67; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950’s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2013), 139-141. The narratives of collaboration, however, ignore the agency that the Bình Xuyên leadership nonetheless possessed and, more importantly, deployed for their own ends. As Stathis Kalyvas argues, we need to conceptualize “collaboration as a relation of exchange between two principals rather than as a unidirectional relation between a principal and an agent, as characterised by the popular term ‘puppet’.” In occupation regimes, ‘puppets’ have their own agenda and volition and they try to manipulate their principals, often with success.” Stathis Kalyvas, “Armed Collaboration in Greece, 1941-1944,” *European Review of History—Revue européen d’histoire*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2008): 129-142.

² Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s Commentaires V.M. sur la reddition des Bình Xuyên, traduction d’un communiqué de Nguyen Binh, No.4679, August 3, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

nationalist politics, the Bình Xuyên appears merely as a sideshow in a state-centric story of decolonizing Vietnam.

State of Knowledge

In spite of the Bình Xuyên's notoriety and importance in Vietnam's modern history, the group has not received the scholarly attention it deserves.³ The dearth of empirically grounded studies seriously mars the existing historiography. There is information of uneven quality about the Bình Xuyên in French, English, and Vietnamese-language writings about the First Indochina War. French-language accounts, unsurprisingly, offer the most detailed portraits of the Bình Xuyên. These works come in diverse forms. Pierre Darcourt's *Bay Vien: Le Maître de Cholon* offers a dramatized biography of the Bình Xuyên leader while Lucien Bodard enlivens his reportage in the multi-volume *La Guerre d'Indochine* with lurid details about the group.⁴ Though his reflections are marred by certain idiosyncrasies, they nonetheless offer one of the most detailed descriptions of Bình Xuyên economic activities. In sharp contrast, *Notes sur les Binh-Xuyen* by Antoine Marie Savani, head of French military intelligence in southern Vietnam, gives a comprehensive account of the group's formation and evolution. Using the full range of French, Bình Xuyên, and captured Việt Minh documents available to him, Savani describes a sophisticated and politically aware organization.⁵ Subsequent studies, such as Philippe Hubert's, have relied heavily on Savani's account and the French military archive.⁶

The literature in English has been much more superficial in coverage and limited in scope. They focus on the confrontation between the Bình Xuyên and Ngô Đình Diệm, largely ignoring the group's complex history. This approach sensationalized not only the group's criminal character, but also discounted its political role. Journalists and historians writing in the 1950s-1970s echoed this representation of the Bình Xuyên as a nefarious and self-serving entity. Joseph Buttinger claimed that "murder was the only political weapon they knew."⁷ Bernard Fall and Frances Hill compared it to the Mafia and Murder, Inc.⁸ Ellen Hammer portrayed it as a mercenary force.⁹ In his work on the heroin trade in Southeast Asia, Alfred McCoy departs from these earlier efforts. Based on Savani's report and a number of interviews with key actors,

³ The absence of scholarly work on the Bình Xuyên is made all the more puzzling in light of the fact that the other two "sects" that figured prominently in southern Vietnamese politics—the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo—both have received sustained scholarly attention. See Jayne Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976); Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983). See also Pascal Bourdeaux, "Émergence et constitution de la communauté du Bouddhisme Hoà Hảo: Contribution à l'histoire sociale du delta du Mékong (1935-1955)" (Thèse de doctorat, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2003); Jérémy Jammes, *Les Oracles du Cao Dai: Étude d'un Mouvement Religieux Vietnamien et Ses Réseaux* (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2014).

⁴ See Pierre Darcourt, *Bay Vien: Le maître de Cholon* (Paris: Hachette, 1977); Lucien Bodard, *La Guerre d'Indochine: L'Enlèvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

⁵ A.M. Savani, *Notes sur les Binh-Xuyen* (Sài Gòn: Mimeographed, 1954).

⁶ Philippe Hubert, "Les Binh Xuyen: Étude d'un Groupement Politico-Militaire au Sud Vietnam, 1925-1955" (Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université Paris VII Jussieu, 1990).

⁷ Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 411.

⁸ Bernard Fall, "The political-religious sects of Viet-Nam," *Pacific Affairs* v. 28, no. 3 (1955): 235-253; Frances Hill, "Millenarian machines in South Vietnam," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v. 13, no. 13 (1971): 325-50.

⁹ Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1954), 230; Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987), 67.

McCoy's account of the Bình Xuyên in English was the most complete at the time.¹⁰ More recently, Edward Miller and Jessica Chapman have produced important studies of southern Vietnam, the first offering a revisionist account of Ngô Đình Diệm's rise while the other re-evaluates the "sects as genuine political actors." These monographs have drawn attention to the complex political landscape in which the Bình Xuyên, along with other "sects" and political parties, operated. Like earlier studies, both largely relied on Savani's report.¹¹

Inside Vietnam, the Bình Xuyên occupies an uncomfortable position in the communist historiography. On the one hand, the group closely cooperated with the Việt Minh in its early efforts to fight French reconquest. On the other hand, some members defected to the enemy and proceeded to sabotage resistance efforts while enriching themselves. Because Vietnam's communist historiographical tradition has constructed a whole sub-genre out of "resistance war history" [*lịch sử kháng chiến*] in which the Bình Xuyên played an integral role in the initial phase, historians cannot simply erase it from the record.¹² For that reason, they are constantly dealing with the tension between justifying the party's wisdom in recruiting these "gangsters" and condemning the group's eventual betrayal. Complementing this genre is another called the "documentary novel" [*tiểu thuyết tư liệu*]. Foremost among these works are the half dozen books by Nguyễn Hùng, such as *Người Bình Xuyên* and *Sư Thúc Hoà Hảo*. While clearly novelistic in form and style, these works nonetheless drew on party documents (virtually none of them cited) and interviews with key Việt Minh figures and former Bình Xuyên leaders who stayed in the maquis.¹³ Overall, military historians and Nguyễn Hùng reinforce a narrative of betrayal, which the DRV has consistently peddled since 1948.

Reframing the Bình Xuyên

There is a paradox in the study of modern Vietnam. While scholars have produced study upon study about anticolonialism, nationalism, revolution, and civil war, they have neglected an important part of that history—the vital role of violence entrepreneurs in mobilizing, organizing,

¹⁰ Alfred McCoy, *The politics of heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 131. Based on interviews conducted with former intelligence officers and exiled Bình Xuyên leaders in France, McCoy reconstructs the informal, yet institutionalized arrangements of Operation X between French intelligence and a variety of Vietnamese and highland opium producers and distributors. In McCoy's account, the Mixed Airborne Commando Group (MACG) was responsible for securing opium in Hmong areas and transporting it to Vũng Tàu on the southeastern coast. Deuxième Bureau agents would then deliver it to Saigon for the Bình Xuyên to distribute through its network of opium dens. While McCoy's account of the transactions between the group and French intelligence is undeniably valuable, his account of the confrontation between Diem's government and various sects is suspect. He argues that the conflict between the Bình Xuyên and the Vietnamese army was essentially a war by proxy. The Bình Xuyên, according to him, were "stand-ins, mere pawns, in a power struggle between the French Deuxième Bureau and the American CIA."

¹¹ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2013), especially Ch. 3; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013).

¹² See Hồ Sơn Đài, Tầm Đồ Chương, and Hồ Khang, *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên: Liên Chi Đội 2 và 3* (TP HCM: nxb TP HCM, 1991); Hồ Xuân Đài, *Lịch sử Bà Rịa--Vũng Tàu kháng chiến, 1945-1975* (Hà Nội: Quân đội nhân dân, 1995); Lương Văn Nho, *Chiến khu rừng sát* (TP HCM: Đồng Nai, 1983); Trần, Hải Phụng and Phương Thanh Lưu, *Lịch sử Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định kháng chiến, 1945-1975* (TP HCM: nxb Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1994); Trần Phần Chấn, *Lịch sử lực lượng vũ trang Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1945-1995* (Hà Nội: nxb Quân đội nhân dân, 1998).

¹³ See, for example, Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên* (TP HCM: nxb Công An Nhân Dân, 1988) and *Sư Thúc Hoà Hảo: Tiểu Thuyết Tư Liệu* (Hậu Giang: nxb Tổng Hợp Hậu Giang, 1990).

and deploying violence in the name of nationalist struggle. The Bình Xuyên, in particular, was at the center of mid-century Vietnamese politics, yet it remains relegated to the margins of history. While recent studies have underscored the Bình Xuyên's political significance, there is still no study in English that examines the Bình Xuyên as an economic, political, and social force in its own right. By shedding light on the “figures of criminality” that built up the Bình Xuyên, this dissertation brings the ostensibly “criminal” into focus as a constitutive part of modern Vietnam.¹⁴

Wielders of violence have historically maintained an ambiguous relationship to the prevailing structures of power. As Janice Thomson has shown, up until the twentieth century, European monarchs routinely employed non-state violent actors to attack their adversaries and realize their territorial ambitions.¹⁵ A key question that inspired a range of empirical studies on outlaws was over the nature of the bandit. Eric Hobsbawm argued that a distinct category of violent actors—termed social bandits—came from the peasantry, upheld its values, and represented agents of redistributive justice.¹⁶ The illegal activities of social bandits constituted “social crime”—unlawful acts that contain a “distinctive element of social protest” rooted in a conflict between laws and popular values.¹⁷

Hobsbawm's groundbreaking work prompted critics to ask whether bandits were “primitive rebels” or facilitators of exploitation.¹⁸ Anton Blok, the famed scholar of the Sicilian mafia, argues: “Rather than promoting the articulation of peasant interests within a national context, bandits tend to obstruct or to deviate concerted peasant action. They may do so directly by means of physical violence and intimidation.”¹⁹ Blok, along with Thomas Gallant, describe these actors instead as “entrepreneurs” of violence, primarily concerned with self-enrichment and social mobility.²⁰ Gallant further contends that bandits on the periphery in fact facilitated the penetration of capitalism and the state into the hinterland.²¹ Similarly, Paul Vanderwood's study of bandits and police asserts that the bandits he studied did not inspire admiration among the peasantry, but rather fear and loathing. These bandits were aspiring capitalists and were primarily interested in upward mobility, not social justice.²²

Under conditions of economic change and weak state control, violence entrepreneurs came to play decisive roles in the configuration of power as states engaged in what Karen Barkey calls a process of “bargained incorporation.”²³ Studies of the yakuza in Japan, the Green Gang in China, gangsters in revolutionary Jakarta, among others, demonstrate that criminal groups came to play

¹⁴ Vincente Rafael, ed., *Figures of criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell UP, 2004).

¹⁵ Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 19.

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1981), 31-40.

¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, “Conference Report,” *Society for the Study of Labour History* (1972), 5-6.

¹⁸ Kim Wagner, “Thuggee and social banditry reconsidered,” *The Historical Journal* 50:2 (2007): 357.

¹⁹ Anton Blok, “The peasant and the brigand: Social banditry reconsidered,” *Comparative studies in society and history* 14:4 (1972), 496. See also Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian village, 1860-1960: a study of violent peasant entrepreneurs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

²⁰ See Thomas Gallant, “Brigandage, piracy, capitalism, and state-formation: Transnational crime from a historical world-systems perspective,” in *States and illegal practices*, eds. Josiah McC. Heyman (Oxford: Berg 1999), 25-62.

²¹ Gallant, 30.

²² Paul Vanderwood, *Disorder and progress: bandits, police, and Mexican development* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 57.

²³ Karen Barkey, *Bandits and bureaucrats: the Ottoman route to state centralization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 9. Also see Charles Tilly, “War making and state making as organized crime,” in *Bringing the State back in*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

important roles as “guardians” of nationalism in the service of modern nation-states.²⁴ The result was a powerful yet often volatile political-criminal nexus.²⁵ As this study will illustrate, the relationship between states (or aspiring quasi-states) and the putatively criminal was a blurred one. Anthropologists of crime have been at the forefront of rethinking such normative divisions, delineating the entanglements between the illicit and the postcolony.²⁶ Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff observe that criminal violence does not simply challenge the legitimacy of the state, but also creates alternative modes of governance as “simulacra of social order.”²⁷ In some instances, the state “outsources” its sovereignty, such as policing and the conduct of warfare, becoming less a governing institution than a “licensing-and-franchising authority.”²⁸ Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat called such extra-state and the legally ambiguous actors “informal sovereigns.”²⁹

Moving beyond state-centric conceptions of political order, this study examines the Bình Xuyên not as a “feudal” appendage of warring states, but as a claimant of Vietnamese sovereignty. The Bình Xuyên leadership embodied what political theorist Carl Schmitt imagined as the modern partisan. This figure, personified by the guerrilla fighter, is distinguished from other armed actors—and criminals—by his “intense political commitment,”³⁰ animated by a deep bond with the soil. This “tellurian character”³¹ is the partisans’ key source of legitimacy as “autochthonous defenders of the home soil.”³² According to Eva Horn, the Schmittian partisan emerged as part of a broader discourse among German intellectuals in the 1950s-1960s about the “possibility of regaining a position of autonomy beyond the binarism of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. conflict.” As a figure that transgresses the structure of Cold War enmity, the partisan “radiates the glamour—and the danger—of total political autonomy, of *résistance*, or, as Carl Schmitt puts it, of political ‘irregularity.’”³³ Jan-Werner Müller observes that partisans are inherently ambiguous actors who blur the boundaries of conventional politics, confound legal categories and political distinctions to “make states misapprehend their nature.”³⁴ Schmitt’s theory of the partisan captures the Bình Xuyên’s fierce engagement in armed resistance, its machinations for local power, as well as its politically ambivalent relationship with state authorities.

²⁴ Eiko Maruko Siniawer, *Ruffians, yakuza, nationalists: the violent politics of modern Japan, 1860-1960* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2008); Brian G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: politics and organized crime, 1919-1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁵ Barkey, 9; R. Godson, et al, “Political-criminal nexus,” *Trends in organized crime* 3:1 (1997): 4-7.

²⁶ Jean Comaroff, “Anthropology and crime: An interview with Jean Comaroff,” *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 33:1 (2010):133; Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider, “The anthropology of crime and criminalization interview,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2008): 352. See also Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of war : violence, power, and international profiteering in the twenty-first century* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2004). Josiah McC. Heyman, ed., *States and illegal practices* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

²⁷ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Introduction to Law and disorder in the postcolony* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2008), 5.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

²⁹ Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat, “Sovereignty revisited,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006), 305.

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan: A Commentary/Remark on the Concept of the Political*, trans. A.C. Goodson (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2004), 10.

³¹ Schmitt, 13.

³² *Ibid*, 52.

³³ Eva Horn, “‘Waldgänger,’ Traitor, Partisan: Figures of Political Irregularity in West German Postwar Thought,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004): 125-126.

³⁴ Jan-Werner Müller, “‘An Irregularity that Cannot Be Regulated’: Carl Schmitt’s Theory of the Partisan and the ‘War on Terror,’” *Notizie di Politeia: Rivista di Etica e Scelte Pubbliche* Vol. 12 (2006): 16. Emphasis in the original.

Roadmap

This study, comprising two parts, traces the formation, evolution, and demise of the Bình Xuyên. The first part, comprising the first two chapters, examines the transformation of violence entrepreneurs into nationalist insurgents. It covers the period between the 1930s and 1948. I argue that links forged between nationalist activists and violent entrepreneurs in the face of colonial repression (on the run from the Sûreté or inside prison walls) laid the foundation for a political-criminal nexus. The violent competition between nationalists from 1945 onward amplified the importance of violence specialists, as the need for an armed force became a prerequisite to nationalist political jostling in a multi-front conflict. I show that pre-1945 links with both communist and anticommunist activists played a significant role in the empowerment and legitimation of the Bình Xuyên as a nationalist force. Chapter 1 draws on police records, period newspapers, memoirs, historical fiction, and other archival materials to understand how outlaws and revolutionaries joined together in the fight against French reconquest. Chapter 2 examines the Bình Xuyên's rise to prominence as a resistance force. Between 1946 and 1948, Bảy Viễn quickly climbed the ranks of the insurgent military, acquiring great power and legitimacy with support from his revolutionary partners. His prominence granted him political cachet as a nationalist political figure. I show that increasing competition inside the Việt Minh catapulted Bảy Viễn up the ranks of the insurgency. But the fractionalization that had helped bring him to power also spelled his doom. This chapter challenges the dominant narrative, which frames the split between the Bình Xuyên and the Việt Minh as above all a matter of loyalty versus betrayal, nationalism versus communism.

The second part of this study, also made up of two chapters, follows Bảy Viễn and his partisans out of the maquis as they embarked on a partnership with the non-communist Vietnamese government and its French backers. Despite defecting, the Bình Xuyên maintained a posture of resistance. As it cleared the city and the countryside of insurgents, it grew rapidly in manpower, wealth, and influence through clever politicking and brute force. The Bình Xuyên elicited apprehension from government administrators, police officers, and French intelligence as the group repeatedly used violence and coercion against state authorities when they encroached on its local sovereignty.³⁵ Chapter 3 examines the Bình Xuyên's reinvention as a counter-revolutionary nationalist force. But who was Bảy Viễn without the two thousand-strong Bình army, without his impregnable base in Rừng Sác, or the prestige that the Việt Minh gave him? And yet, he and his men rebuilt the Bình Xuyên. As this chapter shows, their effectiveness earned cachet with the French military, while their anti-communism and a commitment to Bảo Đại ensured tolerance, if not goodwill, from successive Vietnamese government. So insulated was the group that it frequently imposed its authority and challenged the police with virtual impunity. Chapter 4 tracks the Bình Xuyên's soaring economic and political fortunes as it became a major player in nationalist politics. Its rapid rise, bookended by two confrontations with the state in 1951 and 1955, was a function of its continued military and political importance. In these four years, the Bình Xuyên was able to further expand its economic reach and political influence. One of its leaders was even named director of the national security service. The

³⁵ Staniland finds that a lacuna exists in scholarship on the relationship between armed groups and states, which overwhelmingly view the former as mere proxies of the latter and the relationship as defined by materialist calculations. He proposes that that relationship takes diverse forms, often contingent upon the ideological preferences/make-up of both the state and the armed group. See Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 59 (5) (2015): 770-793.

chapter ends with the group's defeat by Ngô Đình Diệm and the National Army. In the aftermath of the Bình Xuyên's collapse, as discussed in the epilogue, a portion of the group's armed force rejoined the Việt Minh insurgency. Existing accounts of the Bình Xuyên have been preoccupied with its confrontation with Diệm, framing the event as the foundational moment of the Republic of Vietnam. This dissertation, on the other hand, offers a history of the group prior to and in the aftermath of that turning point. In a later work, I will re-examine this pivotal moment in Vietnam's postcolonial history.

Chapter 1: Revolutionary Transfigurations

This chapter traces the origins of the Bình Xuyên. Despite its widely acknowledged significance in the First Indochina War, history of the Bình Xuyên remains shrouded in popular lore and propaganda. We still know little about the men wielding arms in its name beyond what the occasional news article, police bulletin, intelligence report, or anecdotal account suggests. The vast majority of Bình Xuyên leaders and rank-and-file left little if any written record. Moreover, origin narratives of the group have often been sensationalized, or ideologically straitjacketed. One such narrative casts these violence entrepreneurs as opportunists who exploited the changing political winds to gain power. Another depicts them as inherently revolutionary, as “primitive rebels” whose crimes only expressed their disaffection with colonialism. Both narratives reduce the Bình Xuyên to a type. This chapter, in contrast, delves into the personalities and historical contingencies that gave rise to the group. It argues that the Bình Xuyên, contrary to the refrain in western scholarship, was not a criminal organization formed in the 1920’s. There was a place called Bình Xuyên. Numerous criminal bands operated there and nearby. And some of them later took up arms as part of the Việt Minh. The Bình Xuyên, as an organization however, did not appear until 1945, and even then only by fits and starts. Rebuilding the Bình Xuyên’s prehistory, this chapter delves into the complexities and false starts that marked the group’s formation in 1945.

This chapter will show how the tumult that gripped Indochina in 1945 created the Bình Xuyên.¹ A loose assemblage of small armed bands that sprang up in and around Saigon-Cholon to join the frenzied August Revolution, it would later become a foundational part of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s National Defense Force [Vệ Quốc Đoàn] in the south. The Bình Xuyên’s defining character has been its origins in the *anh chị* milieu, a colloquial reference to the criminal world. At the outbreak of conflict in late September 1945, these colonial-era violence entrepreneurs—from labor bosses and martial arts teachers to bandits and river pirates—mobilized their followers along with local farmers and laborers into armed groups to fight the French. Once French and British troops took control of the city and its surroundings, these outlaw-led groups retreated to Saigon-Cholon’s suburbs, then deep into the sprawling mangrove forest southeast of the city known as Rừng Sác. From isolated and inaccessible pockets outside Saigon-Cholon, they launched sabotage and ambush operations against a numerically and technologically superior enemy. By late 1947, French military intelligence estimated that the Bình Xuyên had a highly mobile force of over two thousand, spread over seven detachments.² As military historian Yves Gras notes, the Bình Xuyên was “one of the most robust elements” of the fledgling DRV army in southern Vietnam.³

The Exigencies of War

The Indochina War started in the early hours of 23 September 1945. British and French troops took over major government installations—including police stations, the treasury, the Sûreté headquarters, and later the Hôtel de Ville—occupied by the Việt Minh since it seized

¹ Hồ Sơn Đài, Đỗ Tâm Chương, Hồ Khang, *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên: Liên Chi Đội 2 và 3* (TP HCM: nxb Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1991), 34.

² A.M. Savani, *Notes sur les Binh-Xuyen* (Saigon: Mimeographed, 1954), 34.

³ Yves Gras, *Histoire de la Guerre d’Indochine* (Paris: Denoël, 1992), 56.

power less than a month earlier.⁴ This joint action came on the heels of an increasingly contentious interlude following Japanese capitulation in mid-August, as throngs of Vietnamese marched through city streets in successive mass rallies organized by nationalist groups.⁵ Having retaken the city, Allied troops carried out patrols throughout the night. “Gunfire erupted, increasing by the minute,” Trần Văn Giàu recalls, “Each [Việt Minh] squad defending the offices resisted until the last bullet, neighborhood self-defense [units] also aggressively opened fire on French patrols. All of Saigon lay awake.”⁶ The Việt Minh leadership gathered at No. 629 rue de Cây Mai.⁷ Trần Văn Giàu wanted to immediately issue a call to arms, which he had already drafted. He met strong opposition from Hoàng Quốc Việt, the ICP Central Committee’s representative who reasoned that because the Việt Minh was still organizationally weak and lacked armed forces, declaring a resistance war risked isolating themselves and damaging the prospects for negotiation.⁸ According to David Marr, Trần Văn Giàu nonetheless put his text to a vote; “it passed, and within hours thousands of leaflets were spread across the city.”⁹ In the name of the Resistance Committee, he called on southerners to drive out the invaders: “From this moment, our first responsibility is to eliminate the French bandits and their henchmen. Soldiers, militiamen, self-defense fighters, take your weapons, attack the French colonialists, [and] save the nation. The resistance war has begun!”¹⁰

Saigon-Cholon would become a city leading two lives—by day, it fell under the control of Allied troops, and by night, it was in the hands of insurgents.¹¹ As violent clashes intensified, the city was gripped by gunfire and choked with smoke from burning buildings, cars, and ships.¹² And though the Allied forces had retaken the city center, Saigon-Cholon was in the Việt Minh’s stranglehold. Insurgent forces withdrew to the suburbs, erecting a blockade to isolate the occupied city.¹³ The strategy—to suffocate the city and to block Allied incursion beyond it—relied on four “fronts” [*mặt trận*]. Front No. 1, stretching from Thị Nghè to Bông Bridge, blocked access to and from the city on the eastside via the Saigon River and the Arroyo de l’Avalanche; Front No. 2 on the northside obstructed the Route Nationale 1 leading to Tây Ninh and Cambodia, and covered parts of Bà Điểm, Hóc Môn, and Tham Lương Bridge; Front No. 3 on the westside stretched from Phú Lâm to An Lạc and Chợ Đệm, obstructing Route Coloniale 16 connecting Saigon to Mỹ Tho; and Front No. 4 covered the entire southern flank of Saigon-Cholon, running the length of the Canal de Doublement and Canal de Dérivation, from Bình Đông in the west to Tân Thuận and Thủ Thiêm in the east. This stretch included key installations like the Port of Saigon, the Tân Quy docks, and the Chợ Quán power station.¹⁴ By late September, the blockade tightened. The fighting came to a brief halt when General Douglas Gracey brokered a ceasefire, during which the French and the Việt Minh engaged in tense

⁴ Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Việt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 159.

⁵ Nguyễn Long Thành Nam, *Phật Giáo Hoà Hảo trong Dòng Lịch Sử Dân Tộc* (Santa Fe Springs, CA: Đuốc Từ Bi, 1991), 355.

⁶ Trần Văn Giàu, *Hồi Ký 1940-1945* (Dayton, OH: Thời Đại Mới, 2011), 331.

⁷ Trần Hải Phụng & Phương Thanh Lưu, eds., *Lịch Sử Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến, 1947-1975* (TP HCM: nxb Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1994), 43-44.

⁸ Trần Văn Giàu, 333.

⁹ David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2013), 116.

¹⁰ Trần Văn Giàu, 341.

¹¹ Trần Tấn Quốc, *Saigon Septembre 45* (Saigon: Việt Thanh, 1947), 59.

¹² *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến, 1947-1975*, 53.

¹³ Trần Tấn Quốc, 55.

¹⁴ *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 58-61.

negotiations.¹⁵ While the two sides, after three unfruitful meetings, remained at an impasse, the “ratio of [military] forces was changing in favor of the [French and British].”¹⁶ With reinforcements at the ready, Gracey issued an ultimatum on 9 October: They had twenty-four hours to lay down their arms and cease attacking Allied troops. The following day, fighting resumed.¹⁷

The Việt Minh was ill-equipped for armed conflict. Though it had seized the reins of the nationalist movement, outmaneuvering better positioned but politically vulnerable rivals, it was far from a dominant force.¹⁸ The southern ICP, after all, had never recovered from its disastrous uprising in 1940.¹⁹ “At this point no ICP activist seems to have led any armed group larger than one hundred or two hundred men,” David Marr notes, and “no one had ever commanded a unit in battle, no overall plan of operations had been agreed upon, and provisions for communication and resupply under fire were nonexistent.”²⁰ No doubt aware of such glaring weaknesses, Trần Văn Giàu and his deputies had devoted themselves to building a Việt Minh armed force [*lực lượng vũ trang*]. On 25 August, the Southern Regional Administrative Committee announced the formation of the “revolutionary militia” [*dân quân cách mạng*], calling on the people, particularly those with military experience, to join its ranks.²¹ Trần Văn Giàu also enlisted the participation of existing armed organizations in the region, most of which had been associated with the Japanese.²² A mishmash of armed groups came to constitute the revolutionary militia organized into four so-called divisions [*sư đoàn*]. These were aspirational rather than technical designations. Broadly speaking, the First Division was made up of former Garde Indochinoise units that became the Republican Guard [Cộng Hoà Vệ Binh], the Second was organized by Đại Việt elements, and the Third and Fourth included pro-Japanese paramilitaries as well as Cao Đài contingents.²³ Vietnamese historians estimate that, in total, the four divisions had up to eighteen thousand men.²⁴ Trần Văn Giàu debuted the newly formed revolutionary militia in a “military parade” [*cuộc biểu diễn võ trang*] during the mass rally on 2 September.²⁵

It is unsurprising, then, that armed groups of a putatively criminal type were also part of the Việt Minh at the same time. In the growing chaos of the August Revolution, Philippe Devillers observes, “the underworld of Khánh Hội, of Cholon, [and] of Đa Kao, spread across the [Saigon-Cholon] urban region.”²⁶ Despite instructing such “bandit gangs” [*đảng cướp*] to disband, turn over their arms, and self-reform [*tự sửa mình*],²⁷ Trần Văn Giàu actively recruited hundreds of

¹⁵ Trần Tấn Quốc, 61; Nguyễn Kỳ Nam, *Hồi Ký, Tập 2 1945-1954* (Saigon: Dân Chủ Mới, 1964), 88

¹⁶ Gras, 52. After 9-30, military advantage shifted to the Franco-British forces. That day, a flotilla of dredgers and transports arrived in SG with the 20th Indian Division began to debark. On 10-3 two British liners and a destroyer dropped off the 5th Colonial Infantry Regiment (RIC) and the commando of commandant Ponchardier. Paratroopers and marines took back rue Catinat, and decorated it with the tricolors. On the afternoon of 10-5 Leclerc arrived in Tân Sơn Nhất.

¹⁷ Marr, *State, War, and Revolution*, 116-17.

¹⁸ Gras, 47; Devillers, 141. Trần Văn Giàu, 257, 263.

¹⁹ Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (NY: Basic Books, 2016), 197.

²⁰ Marr, *State, War, and Revolution*, 115-16.

²¹ Trần Văn Giàu, 294-95.

²² Ibid, 289-90.

²³ Marr, *State, War, and Revolution*, 115; Gras, 56.

²⁴ *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 36.

²⁵ Trần Tấn Quốc, 5.

²⁶ Devillers, 154.

²⁷ Trần Văn Giàu, 295.

“pirates and ex-convicts” to join the revolution.²⁸ Just as he willingly welcomed paramilitaries with questionable histories and holding contrary ideologies, it was clear that the Việt Minh chief had few qualms about employing reputedly unsavory characters. “I was friends with virtually all of the Bình Xuyên leaders,” he recalls. For Trần Văn Giàu, “to make revolution, one must dare to trust and know to doubt. . . . If one is obsessed with suspicion, then [he] cannot make any friends, and would thus be isolated and powerless.”²⁹ So the question was not whether the Việt Minh should employ such violence entrepreneurs—cast as “the patriotic forces of the people” in 1945—to fight the French. The question was why not.³⁰ Neither was it surprising that these armed groups flocked to the cause of national resistance. The men who became the most prominent Bình Xuyên commanders forged strong ties with intellectuals and political activists—both communist and non-communist—operating in Cochinchina.³¹ Pursued by the French colonial state throughout the 1930s and facing the threat of that enemy’s return, activist and outlaw came together out of a sense of solidarity and in the interest of their collective survival.

Bình Xuyên in Embryo

By the time war recommenced on 10 October 1945, outlaw groups had gravitated to their home turfs in Saigon-Cholon’s hinterland. A large contingent took up position in the marshy region south of the city, which had been designated Front No. 4. Vocationally, they varied. Some had provided security to illicit businesses, such as gambling dens or brothels, while others worked as hired thugs. Still others specialized in kidnapping and robbery, targeting wealthy residents, commercial establishments, as well as cargo traffic on the road and the waterways. These typically smaller bands proliferated near local markets, wharfs, bridges, coach stations, as well as highways and canals.³² Positioned across from the city’s commercial center, the ragtag groups ambushed supply vehicles, collapsed bridges, destroyed roads, and attacked busy waterways.³³

Trần Văn Giàu at first placed Front No. 4 under the command of Nguyễn Văn Trân (Bảy Trân).³⁴ Born in 1908 in Bình Đăng, a village outside Cholon, he had left Cochinchina at the age of fifteen to study in France.³⁵ It was a rite of passage for children of prosperous landowning families, though due to his father’s early death, Bảy Trân’s circumstances were comparatively more strained.³⁶ After landing in Marseille, he enrolled in an Aix-en-Provence secondary school.³⁷ By 1925, he had joined the youth wing of the French Communist Party; two years after that, he was a full-fledged member. With the FCP’s help, Bảy Trân soon set off for Moscow where he joined a cohort of Vietnamese communists, including such future luminaries as Trần Phú, Lê Hồng Phong, and Dương Bạch Mai. In 1930, Bảy Trân was secretly shuttled back to

²⁸ Gras, 56.

²⁹ Trần Văn Giàu, 290

³⁰ Ibid, 291.

³¹ Nguyễn Hùng, *Bảy Viễn: Thủ lĩnh Bình Xuyên* (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1999), 76. Trần Kim Trúc, *Tôi Giết Nguyễn Bình: Hồi ký của Tham mưu Trưởng Trung đoàn 25 Bình Xuyên* (Sài Gòn: Đồng Nai, 1972), 43. Pierre Darcourt, *Bay Vien: Le Maitre de Cholon* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 140, 169, 181.

³² *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 16-20.

³³ *Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 38-39.

³⁴ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 38.

³⁵ Nguyễn Hùng, *Nam Bộ: Những Nhân Vật Lịch Sử* (Hanoi: nxb Công An Nhân Dân, 2015), 54.

³⁶ Lê Phú Khải, *Lời Ai Điều: Hồi Ký* (Charleston, SC: nxb Người Việt Books, 2016), 443.

³⁷ Nguyễn Hùng names Collège de Mignet as the school.

Indochina at the Comintern's behest, where he joined the ICP's Regional Committee for Cochinchina.³⁸ Though he repeatedly found himself in the Sûreté's crosshairs, Bảy Tr  n's criminal record [*sommier judiciaire*] indicates that he evaded the long prison sentences endured by many of his colleagues. He was arrested three times—in January 1933, June 1935, and October 1939—for “subversive schemes” and “plots against the state,” but each case resulted in dismissal or acquittal.³⁹

B  y Tr  n seemed uniquely qualified to lead Front No. 4. Not only was he a native of the region, he had experience working with criminal elements there. In 1940, as the Regional Committee set about planning the disastrous Southern Uprising, B  y Tr  n began to recruit criminal elements in the region. He reached out to a martial arts master in Ch  nh Hung named Nguy  n V  n M  nh (T  m M  nh), whose family reputedly ran a sizable criminal enterprise. His martial arts academy served as the “nerve center” of a gang led by his son and two brothers-in-law—infamous bandits in the region.⁴⁰ B  y Tr  n was able to secure T  m M  nh's commitment by appealing to his anti-French sentiment.⁴¹ On the night of 22 November, as insurgents in B  nh Đ  ng and Ch  nh Hung waited for the signal to launch the uprising—the shutting down of the city's main power station followed by gunfire—none came. Except for scattered and quixotic rebellions in the north of the city, the Southern Uprising was stillborn.⁴² So, B  y Tr  n called off the uprising and told the men to return to their normal lives. Decades later, a confidant recalls, he intimidated the risks of enlisting outlaws. When a number of these zealous men, “itching to fight the French [...] heard B  y Tr  n's order to disperse, they were ready to tie him up and shoot him.” He escaped thanks only to their leader's intervention.⁴³ Despite this brush with death, B  y Tr  n would renew his relationship with T  m M  nh in 1945. The latter would be charged with organizing a local wing of the ICP-controlled Vanguard Youth and would himself secretly join the ICP.⁴⁴

But problems arose almost immediately. There were more than a dozen groups nominally under Front No. 4 operating more or less autonomously, but only a platoon-sized unit was at B  y Tr  n's disposal. As a Vietnamese historian remarks, the *ad hoc* nature of cooperation between these groups and the absence of a unified command hurt the resistance efforts. Worse, the outlaws' “tendency toward impulsive violence and tribalism,” made conflict seem inevitable.⁴⁵ For this reason, over forty Front No. 4 commanders gathered in Ph   c C   hamlet to address the issue of disunity. L   V  n Vi  n, another major outlaw-turned-partisan leader in Ph    Th  , on the northern outskirts of Cholon. It is unclear what they discussed, but Vietnamese historians tell us that it was filled with “heated arguments.” It appears that much of the anger was directed at B  y Tr  n, since by the end of the meeting, the attendees had voted in a new leadership with Đ  ng V  n Đ  ng (Ba Đ  ng) as Front commander, and T  m M  nh as chief of staff.

³⁸ Nguy  n H  ng, *Nam B   Nh  n V  t*, 59; L   Ph   Kh  i, 443.

³⁹ Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3  me DIC    Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, Service Historique de la D  fense (SHD).

⁴⁰ Nguy  n H  ng, *Ng  i B  nh Xuy  n* (TP HCM: C  ng An Nh  n D  n, 1988), 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴² H  i Đ  ng Chi Đ  o Bi  n So  n L  ch S   Kh  i Ngh  a Nam K  , *L  ch S   Kh  i Ngh  a Nam K  * (H   N  i: nxb Ch  nh Tr   Qu  c Gia, 2002), 186.

⁴³ L   Ph   Kh  i, 445.

⁴⁴ Nguy  n H  ng, *Ng  i B  nh Xuy  n*, 86; 103.

⁴⁵ *B   Đ  i B  nh Xuy  n*, 45.

Ba Dương moved the command headquarters out of Bình Đăng—Bảy Trân’s natal village—to his own home base near the Rạch Đĩa Bridge.⁴⁶ Not long after, he called another meeting to enact the unification Front commanders had agreed to. They decided that administrative organs, such as a general staff as well as supply and communication services, needed to be created to coordinate military action. Ba Dương’s group would be relied upon to provide the personnel and resources for this effort.⁴⁷ According to Vietnamese historians, this is also when they settled on a collective moniker. One group advocated the name of a national hero, another group pushed for a historical site, and a third suggested looking closer to home. Reportedly, one obvious name was Dừa Xúp, a marshy area south of the city that was sparsely populated by fishermen, duck farmers, and firewood collectors, along with outlaws and clandestine communist activists. Though it “represents a tradition of unyielding resistance,” many thought the name, which means “fallen coconut,” failed to convey solidity and strength. They eventually landed on Bình Xuyên. Like Dừa Xúp, it referred to a place, a refuge for those who “refused to submit to the colonial order.” It also happened to be the home of Tám Mạnh. “In the end,” we are told, “[those at] the conference chose Bình Xuyên as their name.”⁴⁸

The Changing Meaning of Bình Xuyên

Before 1945, representation of Bình Xuyên was overwhelmingly negative. Meaning “open country,” it was once a village on the southern outskirts Saigon. This marshy expanse—carved up by canals large and small, their banks dotted with hamlets, and the waters ferrying cargo from the provinces to the city—abutted the bustling markets of Cholon. In 1888, Bình Xuyên, along with several other villages in its vicinity, was administratively fused with its larger neighbor, Chánh Hưng. By the 20th century, Bình Xuyên as a distinct place had largely ceased to appear on maps of the area.⁴⁹ But it would become in the popular imagination a place of danger. The major purveyor of this image was Saigon’s press, which frequently evoked Bình Xuyên in news stories about the rural demimonde. Over time, the name became a reference to a site of criminality, an isolated lair of outlaws—bandits, pirates, highwaymen, and fugitives. Geography was a factor. Despite physical proximity to the urban center—arguably the most important city of French Indochina—the region was viewed as a remote backwater. “Bình Xuyên is a densely wooded area, a difficult terrain with endless obstacles,” wrote one reporter.⁵⁰ The region’s terrain—covered in shrubs, dotted with marshes, and crisscrossed with canals—and its unique position at the intersection of vital waterways feeding the city made it an ideal springboard for organized predation.

Many stories linking Bình Xuyên to criminality appeared in the 1930’s and early 1940’s. “It’s a world of wicked gangs that live on the blood and money of ordinary people,” asserted one article in 1942, “Hearing the names Bình Xuyên, Xóm Cỏ, Chánh Hưng provokes in us fear and suspicion, and [we] immediately think of the ruthless and violent deeds of the people in this cruel place.”⁵¹ In 1937, for instance, Saigon dailies reported that a group of river pirates seized a junk

⁴⁶ Ibid, 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 34-35. For a slightly different version of this account, see Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 110-111.

⁴⁹ Répertoire alphabétique de législation et de réglementation de la Cochinchine : arrêté au 1er janvier 1889. T3 (D-F), 120.

⁵⁰ “Nhà chuyên trách bao vây sào huyệt đảng cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Sài Gòn*, 2 April 1942.

⁵¹ “Lần thứ nhất, sở Mật thám Saigon và ty cảnh sát Cholon huy động toàn thể lực lượng để diệt trừ Đảng Cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Điện Tín*, 2 April 1942.

carrying silk, worth one thousand piasters, in the Bình Xuyên section of Rạch Cây Khô. A Triều Châu merchant was killed in the process.⁵² *Công Luận Báo* described the leader Năm Xây as “a famous pirate chief in Bình Xuyên.”⁵³ In 1940, *L’Echo Annamite* reported that a group boarded a junk carrying coal from Rạch Giá to the Cầu Ông Lãnh Market. This time, the police were able to track down one of the suspects in Bình Xuyên, a fugitive previously convicted of “banditisme.”⁵⁴ City proper was also at the mercy of badland elements. This was apparent when Lê Văn Ty, a sometime laborer, nearly met his demise on Galliéni Boulevard, a major thoroughfare. Two men had stabbed him multiple times because, it turned out, “their gang leader in Bình Xuyên did not like [wa] him.”⁵⁵ Bình Xuyên also functioned as a refuge. When a group failed in its attempt to rob a barque docked on the Arroyo Chinois, its members simply escaped to the brushes surrounding Bình Xuyên.⁵⁶ And it was not the exclusive preserve of river pirates, either. In 1939, four gangsters hired a car to take them to Cù Chi, then proceeded to hijack the vehicle by tying up the two chauffeurs at gunpoint. When another chauffeur gave chase, the men left the car at Hoà Bình Market and paddled across the canal to Bình Xuyên.⁵⁷ These stories and others described a disparate range of actors and crimes, yet faithfully tied them all to a particular place.

On various occasions, the colonial police and security services vowed to eradicate the nuisances coming from Bình Xuyên. After the carjacking incident, for instance, the authorities “ordered a ‘crack down’ on the Bình Xuyên area in order to clear out the bandits’ dens.”⁵⁸ And when two men crossing through Chánh Hưng were accosted by a group of thirty-two on Pont en Y, the authorities reportedly launched an “intense investigation to tackle the gang of robbers and killers [who] regularly lurk in the countryside of Chánh Hưng, Bình Xuyên, harming ordinary people.”⁵⁹ Yet, the popular press frequently underscored the colonial authorities’ impotence: “There are police posts closely keeping watch night and day, but because they are in an isolated and sinuous area, the hoodlums continue to ‘work’ freely on land as they do on the waters.”⁶⁰

Not until 31 March 1942 did the French colonial authorities make a concerted effort to root out criminal elements in the area, not least because some had begun to work for Japanese interests there. Local news outlets enthusiastically covered the operation. “A Furious Hunt Eradicates the Bình Xuyên Gang!” read one local headline.⁶¹ Hiền Sĩ, known for his reporting on the demimonde, described the scene: “Around 2 o’clock in the afternoon, Bình Xuyên was surrounded in a half-circle... Many of the gang were snoring away when they suddenly woke to earth-shaking gunfire, [and] screaming... They tried to run, to run from death. [But] in the waters, there were agents. On the shore there were also agents.”⁶² According to the Governor of Cochinchina, a joint force of Sûreté, Police Régionale, and Garde Civile de Cholon personnel launched the raid because the region had been “overrun for several months by criminal bands

⁵² “Arrestations mouvementées de pirates: Deux bandits blessés à coups de fusil,” *La Dépêche d’Indochine*, 20 August 1937.

⁵³ “Cũng tại Bình Xuyên, Dư đảng của tướng cướp Năm Xây đã lọt vào lưới hết,” *Công Luận Báo*, 20 August 1937.

⁵⁴ “Arrestation d’une bande d’écumeurs de rivière,” *L’Echo Annamite*, 24 October, 1940.

⁵⁵ “Lê Văn Ty bị du côn Bình Xuyên hạ thủ,” *Diễn Tin*, 21 March 1938.

⁵⁶ “Un écumeur arrêté,” *L’Echo Annamite*, 17 October 1940.

⁵⁷ “Bốn tên ‘gang to’ mượn xe lô ở Chợ Lớn,” *Diễn Tin*, 27 September 1939.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Tại hộ 18 bên Chánh Hưng hai bót cảnh sát Cholon-Chợ quán giải tán 32 tên cướp,” *Sài Gòn*, 21 March 1942.

⁶⁰ “Một ổ côn đồ ở Hiệp An bị tóm cổ,” *Diễn Tin*, 4 March 1940.

⁶¹ “Tiêu trừ và quét sạch bọn cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Diễn Tin*, 1 April 1942.

⁶² “Lần thứ nhứt, sở Mật thám Saigon và ty cảnh sát Cholon huy động toàn thể lực lượng để diệt trừ Đảng Cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Diễn Tin*, 2 April 1942.

armed and organized under the leadership of convicts escaped from Poulo Condore.” This was done with the reluctant acquiescence of the Japanese, as many of the riffraff were working “under the protection” of their military. The operation yielded 163 arrests, including one escaped convict from Bà Rịa and three from Poulo Condore.⁶³ “This purge,” the Governor declared, “had the biggest impact on the indigenous population, for a long time victims of numerous acts of violence and robbery.”⁶⁴ Newspapers echoed this sentiment. Hiên Sĩ noted gleefully that after “leaders of the gang...were all arrested, ordinary people rose in celebration.”⁶⁵ *Sài Gòn* declared that “from this moment on, families of honest folk [*luong dân*] in the areas of Bình Xuyên, Chánh Hưng...[and] merchant junks passing through Rạch Ông, Canal de Doublement, etc. can be free of fear and worry about encountering the Bình Xuyên bandits—number one enemy of the people in this area.”⁶⁶

Coverage of the 1942 raid, above all, transformed the Bình Xuyên outlaw *milieu* into “the Bình Xuyên Gang” [*đảng cướp*]. Subsequent developments, however, undercut the idea of a unitary organization. Almost as soon as the authorities completed their clean-up operation, the region saw an alarming resurgence of predatory activities. ” *L’Echo Annamite* reported in May 1942: “Despite the vigorous clean-up of the Bình Xuyên region by the Sûreté, the pirates of the area, after a brief lull, have started their illicit exploits again... The malefactors, armed to the teeth, operated not far from the new tripodal bridge”—the Pont en Y.⁶⁷ In October, *Sài Gòn* pointed out that “despite the significant results of police operations, the outlaws have not been completely eliminated. Just a few days ago...a gang armed with rifles attacked a wealthy home in Khánh Bình near Bình Xuyên. The police arrested four of the men while an unknown number jumped into the canal and escaped.”⁶⁸ In truth, the popular press failed to grasp the nature, scale, and dynamics of Saigon-Cholon’s underbelly. As journalist Vũ Văn Vịnh conceded years later, “Several reporters of the vernacular press have tried to emulate...investigative journalists in France by risking their lives going to [Bình Xuyên and Chánh Hưng]. Among them was Hiên Sĩ who had had an opportunity to meet the gang leaders. He was lucky not to die [at their hands], though he uncovered none of ‘their’ secrets.”⁶⁹

With the outbreak of conflict in southern Vietnam, the loathsome “Bình Xuyên Gang” became the heroic “Bình Xuyên Army.” Little more than three years removed from the widely celebrated raid on the “bandits’ lair,” the bandits and pirates who had preyed on unsuspecting “honest folk” had become their unlikely protectors. This outlaw-turned-partisan narrative took hold early. One example appeared in November 1945, in the Hanoi journal *Thời Mới* [New Epoch]. “Having lived fearlessly like Al Capone in America, the 108 Heroes of Mount Liang in China, [or] the Robin Hoods in England, the Bình Xuyên gang—today the Bình Xuyên army—is an awesome force on the southern front,” wrote Hồ Dzếnh, a northern writer, upon his return from the south. With a flair for the sensational while recycling the familiar trope of latent danger, he introduced northern readers to the enigmatic Bình Xuyên: “Standing on Pont en Y and facing south...Bình Xuyên village seems as harmless as any other... That is until nighttime, [when] from those harmless places [emerges] a dark shadow, [then] two, three, four more, spilling into

⁶³ Rapport politique du mois de Mars 1942, 725/C/API, 3 April 1942, Goucoch D 06-171, TTLTQGII.

⁶⁴ Rapport politique du mois de Mars 1942, 725/C/API, 3 April 1942, Goucoch D 06-171, TTLTQGII.

⁶⁵ “Lần thứ nhất, sở Mật thám Saigon và ty cảnh sát Cholon huy động toàn thể lực lượng để diệt trừ Đảng Cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Diễn Tin*, 2 April 1942.

⁶⁶ “Nhà chuyên trách bao vây sào huyệt đảng cướp Bình Xuyên,” *Sài Gòn*, 2 April 1942.

⁶⁷ “Ecumeurs de rivièrre,” *L’Echo Annamite*, 27 May 1942.

⁶⁸ “Đầu đảng cướp Bình Xuyên và nhiều yếu nhon của đảng lọt lưới,” *Sài Gòn*, 5 October 1942.

⁶⁹ “Hoàn cảnh tạo anh hùng: Bảy Viễn, Đại tướng của đạo quân Bình Xuyên,” *Phục Hưng*, 16 December 1946.

the night, signaling to each other, silently moving in all directions.” In his account, these men—and women—were highly skilled in the use of firearms and routinely robbed unsuspecting residents. But, Hồ Dzếnh assured his readers, these erstwhile outlaws had left their criminal lives behind in the name of revolution. They “have washed their sins with blood.”⁷⁰

Ironically, the opposite side of the political spectrum was similarly enamored of the outlaw-turned-patriot narrative. *Phục Hưng* is a case in point. Between 1946 and 1947, the anti-DRV Saigon daily—a “reactionary newspaper,” according to communist historians—published a series of articles about the Bình Xuyên. One article noted that in the colonial period, “whenever there was an audacious robbery, or secret burglary, or [other] destructive actions with no regard for the law, ‘we’ immediately evoke Bình Xuyên-Chánh Hưng.”⁷¹ With the start of war, however, these criminals formed an “army of national salvation.” The author underscored the apparent irony: “The name Bình Xuyên [which] had aroused such loathing among the people back then, now inspires reverence. The commander of the Bình Xuyên has come to be seen as a heroic defender of the nation.”⁷²

DRV propagandists eventually abandoned the narrative of absolution. A 1947 issue of the southern DRV daily, *Nay...Mai* [*Today...Tomorrow*], was particularly revealing. “Who is still unfamiliar with the two words ‘Bình Xuyên,’” opened the lead article, “Over the past five, ten years, the Bình Xuyên brothers have formed a dangerous bandit group. But [it was] a special bandit group that did not pillage just anyone, and certainly not for private gain. What is special about the Bình Xuyên is that it took from evil capitalists who enriched themselves off the sweat of the powerless...and shared [their booty] with the poor to ease their hardship.” Casting them as veritable “social bandits,” the author asked: “In the Bà Quẹo area, what poor family has not received goods from the Bình Xuyên, be it money for rice, or some fabric to clothe one’s wife and kids?” These otherwise upstanding men were outlaws, he insisted, because they “refused to submit to the laws of a regime that exploited the people, [and] tolerated corrupt officials [*tham quan ô lại*]. Each of their major robberies was imbued with ‘knightly’ intentions.”⁷³ Crime became resistance; criminals became *résistants*. And in the time of revolution, these same men naturally became “the people’s fighters.”⁷⁴ In this role, it was declared, “the Bình Xuyên brothers set a shining example of courage and sacrifice.”⁷⁵

Unifying the Bình Xuyên

In November 1945, Nguyễn Bình arrived in southern Vietnam as the DRV representative [*đại diện trung ương*]. He faced the difficult task of corralling disparate insurgent groups into an army while fighting off the onslaught of the French Expeditionary Corps. In the months before Nguyễn Bình reached the south, the Trần Văn Giàu-led Việt Minh had been embroiled in a state of chaotic violence and fragmentation.⁷⁶ More troublesome still, with more reinforcements

⁷⁰ Hồ Dzếnh, “Mặt trận Nam bộ: Đoàn quân Bình Xuyên dưới mắt một trí thức Hoa Kiều vừa ở Nam bộ ra đây hôm 29 tháng 10,” *Thời Mới*, 11 November 1945.

⁷¹ “Hoàn cảnh tạo anh hùng: Bảy Viễn, Đại tướng của đạo quân Bình Xuyên,” *Phục Hưng*, 16 December 1946.

⁷² “Hoàn cảnh tạo anh hùng: Bảy Viễn, Đại tướng của đạo quân Bình Xuyên,” *Phục Hưng*, 17 December 1946.

⁷³ “Ba Ngày ở Bình Xuyên của Chú Tịch UBKCHC Saigon-Cholon Đặng Minh Trứ,” *Nay...Mai*, 15 November 1947.

⁷⁴ “Tâm lý Bình Xuyên,” *Nay...Mai*, 15 November 1947.

⁷⁵ “Chiến sĩ Bình Xuyên,” *Nay...Mai*, 10 November 1947.

⁷⁶ Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, Thường Vụ Tỉnh Ủy Long An, *Chợ Lớn: Lịch Sử Chín Năm Kháng Chiến* (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân), 54.

arriving starting in late October, the French military was able to “provoke the dispersion of Việt Minh leaders and numerous [associated] organizations and reoccupy the provincial seats of Tân An, Gò Công, Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long, Cần Thơ, Biên Hoà, and Thủ Dầu Một.”⁷⁷ In need of a unified military force, the DRV hoped that Nguyễn Bình’s “pre-war southern experience, military talents, charisma, non-communist credentials, and prison contacts would allow him to unite more easily [...] the various nationalist and religious groups together into one military force under the DRV’s control.”⁷⁸ As important as the embryonic Bình Xuyên’s militant zeal and firepower were to the war effort, Việt Minh recruiters were wary of the fighters’ potential unruliness. One observer recalled that while the groups had “adopted the Bình Xuyên moniker, [its constituent groups] remained discreet forces . . . whose activities were directed independently by their respective leaders.”⁷⁹ And French intelligence corroborated this view, describing the inter-group relationship as one based on mutual protection rather than on hierarchical command.⁸⁰ Though Ba Dương’s was the most important force, he still had trouble imposing his authority on insubordinate outlaw leaders.⁸¹ This diffuse structure hampered Nguyễn Bình’s mission to streamline military action. It was therefore pertinent to select a respected local figure to preside over the Bình Xuyên’s consolidation with the backing of the DRV state.

Ba Dương was the natural—and convenient—choice. His wartime exploits belie the fact that he left scarcely a trace in the pre-1945 historical record. Unlike some contemporaries, Ba Dương managed to avoid the scrutiny of the colonial state and the popular press. But he seems to make a fleeting appearance in an August 1935 issue of the *Bulletin de Police Criminelle*. A Dương, known also as Ba Dương, appears on a list of search requests as part of a four-man group sought by the police. The bare-bones entry lists him as a thirty-year-old resident of Tân Quý Đông. The accompanying physical description notes the man’s average size and build, bony, elongated face, and, notably, tattoos covering the neck and body.⁸² Details from Vietnamese biographical sketches, produced since the late 1980’s, suggest that this man was indeed the gangster revolutionary of lore. Though there remains disagreement over his birthplace, by most accounts, Ba Dương spent his formative years in Tân Quý Đông, a commune located in the southern hinterland of Saigon-Cholon.⁸³ He moved to the area in his youth, when his widowed mother married a man in Bến Đò hamlet, on the banks of Rạch Đĩa. Though a matter of conjecture, some historians describe Ba Dương’s stepfather as an important figure in his life: “[He] loved his

⁷⁷ “Etude de la Situation Politique en Cochinchine,” 9 May 1947, Conspol 102, CAOM; Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam, Thường Vụ Tỉnh Ủy Long An, *Chợ Lớn: Lịch Sử Chín Năm Kháng Chiến* (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân), 73-79.

⁷⁸ Christopher Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army: General Nguyễn Bình and War in the South,” in *Naissance d'un Etat-parti: le Việt Nam depuis 1945*, eds. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), 335.

⁷⁹ Lê Hồng Lĩnh, “Anh Ba Nguyễn Bình,” in *Xứ Ủy Nam Bộ với Chiến Khu Đồng Tháp Mười Huyện Thoại*, Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Đồng Tháp (TP HCM: nxb Trẻ, 2011).

⁸⁰ *Activité du Viet-Minh à Binh-Xuyen* (Service de la Sûreté), Note No.231/PSE, November 17, 1945, 10R 70, SHD.

⁸¹ *Activité du Viet Minh dans le secteur de Khanh Hoi, Vinh Hoi, Tan Thuan*, Note No.296/PSE, November 27, 1945, 10R 70, SHD. In one case, a Vanguard Youth contingent in Khánh Hội, led by labor corporal Nguyễn Văn Cường (alias Sáu Cường), broke off from the Bình Xuyên because he objected to burning his area’s thatched dwellings per Việt Minh orders. For good measure, he threatened to shoot any “Bình Xuyên” who crossed over to his zone.

⁸² *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 324, 17 August 1935, 12.

⁸³ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 20; Nguyễn Hữu Vĩ, “Dương Văn Dương: Vĩ Thiếu tướng đầu tiên ở Nam Bộ,” *Cổng Thông Tin Điện Tử Tỉnh Bến Tre*, 20 August 2007 (<http://www.bentre.gov.vn/Lists/ThongTinDoiNgoai/DispForm.aspx?ID=224>).

wife's child as his own. He placed a lot of hope in Ba Dương, sending him to learn martial arts at renowned academies, then giving him funds to raise ducks."⁸⁴ On account of his occupation, Ba Dương lived a peripatetic life herding ducks from the outskirts of Saigon south to Cần Giuộc, Cần Đức, and as far as Gò Công and Bến Tre. All the while, he continued to train in martial arts. Self-defense was a useful skill, as friction between duck herder and farmer, whose field the ducks traversed, could sometimes turn deadly.⁸⁵

In the wake of his stepfather's death around 1936, Ba Dương returned to Tân Quý Đông.⁸⁶ He opened a martial arts training hall [*lò dạy võ*] in the Rạch Đĩa area, ostensibly to teach ordinary people self-defense.⁸⁷ His pupils, though, were by and large local ruffians, the so-called *dân anh chị*.⁸⁸ Ba Dương the teacher became a gang boss, and the pupils his underlings [*em út*]. There is likely no official record of the goings-on directly implicating Ba Dương, but Nguyễn Hùng's documentary novel does hint at the nature of his illicit enterprise. Given Ba Dương's growing prestige as a martial arts master and a gang leader [*tay anh chị*], he writes, the "various bands [in the area] specializing in theft and robbery elevated him to the status of 'big brother' [*đại ca*]. From then on, anyone who was robbed would come to him for intervention... Gradually, Ba Dương's operation became an unlicensed ... security agency [*sở bảo hiểm*]... Boats transporting rice [and] hogs from the six provinces, robbed on their way to Cholon, often headed straight to the Rạch Đĩa Bridge," where Ba Dương had set up shop.⁸⁹

This enterprise was short-lived, however. In the aftermath of the ICP's unsanctioned and woefully premature Southern Uprising, blowback from the colonial state nearly decimated the ICP apparatus in Cochinchina. Common criminals, too, would get swept up in the crackdown on political subversion. It was in the aftermath of state repression, communist Vietnamese historians claim, that Ba Dương was arrested. In their accounts, "village bullies, [and] landlords" denounced him to the authorities for hoarding arms, resulting in Ba Dương's imprisonment and torture. In 1942, he stole away to the Cochinchina-Cambodia border where his sister and her husband were working at a rubber plantation.⁹⁰ It is unclear if he was released or escaped. When Ba Dương slipped back to the Rạch Đĩa Bridge area in 1943, the situation was much changed. The French, despite maintaining nominal sovereignty over Indochina, had become more or less an administrative instrument of the Japanese military. An array of nationalist groups would try to turn the occupation to their advantage. For Ba Dương, though, the Japanese offered practical benefits—employment and refuge. He took his reassembled gang to work for the Japanese shipbuilding firm Nichinan Shosen near Rạch Ông Bridge. Ba Dương's crew included Dương Văn Hà (Năm Hà), Ba Dương's half-brother, and Lê Văn Chưởng (Năm Chưởng), two men who would later become prominent Bình Xuyên commanders. Nichinan hired them through an intermediary to guard against the pilfering of lumber from the shipyard.⁹¹ A local informant working for French military intelligence in late 1945 also noted that criminal types in the Bình

⁸⁴ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 20.

⁸⁵ "Khách trú giết Annam vì vô ý để vịt chạy vào ruộng của người mà một người bị vong mạng," *Công Luận Báo*, 13 January 1930.

⁸⁶ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 20; Nguyễn Hữu Vĩ.

⁸⁷ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 20

⁸⁸ Trương Nguyên Tuệ, "Dương Văn Dương: Từ Thủ lĩnh Bình Xuyên đến Khu bộ phó Khu 7," *Sự Kiến & Nhân Chứng*, 2009.

⁸⁹ Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 19.

⁹⁰ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 22.

⁹¹ Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 85.

Xuyên area were readily incorporated by the Japanese into their labor-starved enterprises.⁹² And starting in May 1945, Ba Dương linked up with local offshoots of the Vanguard Youth. With the backing of criminal elements, the latter openly engaged in reprisals against collaborators and informants. In three months, hundreds of purported traitors were killed.⁹³

Given his criminal past, Ba Dương was not an ideal leader for the DRV. Then again, neither was Nguyễn Bình. His biography, as detailed by Christopher Goscha, probably tracks Ba Dương's more closely than other ICP or DRV military leaders, like the elite Võ Nguyên Giáp. Nguyễn Bình, too, grew up poor, dabbled in the underworld, served time in prison, and finally became a committed anti-French partisan. He picked Ba Dương despite the misgivings of ICP members, including Bảy Trần's.⁹⁴ Urging the Bình Xuyên chief to consolidate control over the group, he wrote: "You and your comrades should establish a Bình Xuyên Inter-Zone [Liên Khu Bình Xuyên] and form a solid bloc rather than remain scattered . . . I was charged with unifying forces in eastern Nam Bộ. To help me fulfill my mission, unify all the units [so we can] achieve victory."⁹⁵ Shortly after assuming command of Zone 7 (covering the southeastern region) in December, Nguyễn Bình also named Ba Dương Deputy Deputy Chief [Khu bộ Phó] to further shore up the Bình Xuyên's relationship with the Việt Minh.⁹⁶ The armed groups vowing allegiance to Ba Dương were, in turn, reorganized into Detachments 2 and 3, jointly referred to as Unified Detachments 2-3 [Liên Chi Đội 2-3]. But not long after the promotion, Ba Dương was killed in Bến Tre Province during a French airstrike on February 16, 1946. His death dealt a serious blow to Nguyễn Bình's efforts. The Việt Minh initially even tried to hide the fact of his death to avoid "shocking" his troops.⁹⁷ Without Ba Dương as a galvanizing force, Nguyễn Bình faced the prospect of watching the confederation splinter.

Divergent Trajectories, Convergent Paths

In the wake of Ba Dương's death, as the fate of the embryonic confederation hung in the balance, Lê Văn Viễn (Bảy Viễn) and Huỳnh Văn Trí (Mười Trí)—two outlaw-turned-guerrilla commanders esconced in the city's northern suburbs—would emerge to fill the leadership void. They, more than any other figure, would come to be identified as the patriotic leaders of the Bình Xuyên. Bảy Viễn is the better known of the two owing to his privileged background and longer criminal record. Born in 1904, he was the sixth child of Nguyễn Thị Sách and Lê Văn Dậu, a *minh hương* of Triều Châu extraction. In his youth, Dậu had reportedly headed the Nghĩa Hoà Đoàn, a branch of the Thiên Địa Hội.⁹⁸ Such Chinese secret societies in Cochinchina had historically espoused the overthrow of the Qing and restoration of the Ming Dynasty, but by the late 19th century "its rank and file members turned more and more to criminal practices."⁹⁹ Dậu's

⁹² Note de Renseignements sur Bình Xuyên, No. 722/2, 14 December 1945, 10R 70, SHD.

⁹³ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 27.

⁹⁴ Nguyễn Hùng, *Nguyễn Bình: Huyền Thoại và Sự Thật* (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1995), 155-56. Nguyễn Hùng recounts an incident where a French doctor rushing across town to see a patient was executed despite ICP-member Nguyễn Văn Trần's admonishment to the contrary. The latter reportedly was deeply frustrated by the unruly nature of Bình Xuyên fighters.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162-63.

⁹⁶ Đảng Ủy, Bộ Chỉ Huy Quân Sự TP HCM, Quân Đội Nhân Dân, *Lịch Sử Lực Lượng Võ Trang Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1945-1995* (Hanoi: nxb Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1998), 65-66.

⁹⁷ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 103.

⁹⁸ Savani, 22; Darcourt 25; "Đây, Bảy Viễn lãnh tụ Bình Xuyên trong gia đình Minh Hương Triều Châu," *Dân Đen*, 13 June 1955.

⁹⁹ Nguyen The Anh, "Secret Societies: Some Reflections on the Court of Hue and the Government of Cochinchina

position in this shadowy world landed him in Poulo Condore after his underlings started a violent brawl.¹⁰⁰ It is believed that he spent between three to five years there.¹⁰¹ Upon returning to the mainland, he settled in the Rạch Cát area on the outskirts of Cholon, then married into a wealthy family in Phong Đức village.¹⁰² Bảy Viễn was therefore brought up in a prosperous and locally prominent family of landowners and government officials.¹⁰³ His maternal uncle, Cầu, was the village chief [*xã trưởng*] of Phong Đức; one elder brother was a village notable and a candidate for canton chief [*cai tổng*], while another was village chief of nearby Hưng Long.¹⁰⁴

The young man of privilege would, however, trade a life of genteel comfort for one on the rougher side of society. Bảy Viễn was reputedly a wayward youth—stubborn and violent—who eschewed study for mischief.¹⁰⁵ After his father's death, Bảy Viễn reportedly fell in with a group of “unsavory” [*bất hảo*] characters and followed them to Saigon-Cholon.¹⁰⁶ By his early twenties, he had already flirted with petty crime; he was convicted of theft in 1921 and 1927, serving sentences of twenty days, then two months.¹⁰⁷ According to Savani, an inheritance dispute led a 17-year-old Bảy Viễn to strike out on his own.¹⁰⁸ In fact, this episode became part of Bảy Viễn's defense during his 1936 trial for armed robbery. His attorney, Albert Viviers, told the court that his client had been a “man of standing” [*nhà danh vọng*] in Cholon until his father's death, when his elder brother's refusal to provide financial support forced him into a life of crime.¹⁰⁹ This was dubious on its face, and the court was apparently not sold. According to Bảy Viễn in a 1963 interview, he had actually received a sizable inheritance at nineteen that included several rice mills, which eventually fetched him a sum of 150,000 piasters. With this money, he had bought three cars to start a taxi business.¹¹⁰ He was no pauper. But, he vaguely mentioned in the same interview, “at twenty-six, I was ruined.”¹¹¹ Bảy Viễn did not elaborate on the reasons, though given the year—1930—we may surmise that he was caught up in the economic depression that gripped the rest of Indochina.¹¹² Perhaps due to his financial distress, he allegedly joined three others—including a 30-year-old from Bình Xuyên—to carry out a

on the Eve of Tu-Duc's Death (1882-1883),” *Asian Affairs*, Volume IX (1978): 179.

¹⁰⁰ Savani, 24.

¹⁰¹ Savani, 24; “Đây, Bảy Viễn lãnh tù Bình Xuyên trong gia đình Minh Hương Triều Châu,” *Dân Đen*, 13 June 1955.

¹⁰² Savani 24; “Đây, Bảy Viễn lãnh tù Bình Xuyên mỗi bước giang hồ người trai tứ chiếng lập gia đình,” *Dân Đen*, 14 June 1955.

¹⁰³ Bulletin de Police Criminelle No. 328, 14 September 1935; Nguyên Hùng, *Sư Thúc Hoà Hảo: Tiểu Thuyết Tư Liệu* (Hậu Giang: nxb Tổng Hợp Hậu Giang, 1990), 22.

¹⁰⁴ Bulletin de Police Criminelle No. 328, 14 September 1935; “Bảy Viễn, lãnh tù Bình Xuyên: Buổi Thiếu Thời trong Khung Cảnh Nề Nếp,” *Dân Đen*, 16 June 1955; Nguyên Hùng, *Sư Thúc Hoà Hảo*, 22; “Hoàn cảnh tạo anh hùng: Bảy Viễn, Đại tướng của đạo quân Bình Xuyên,” *Phục Hưng*, 17 December 1946.

¹⁰⁵ Savani, 24; Darcourt, 25. See *Dân Đen* feature on Bảy Viễn published on 16, 17, 18, 20, and 22 June 1955.

¹⁰⁶ “Bảy Viễn lãnh tù Bình Xuyên: Gặp Mười Trí và đi học võ với ông thầy nước Hẹ,” *Dân Đen*, 23 June 1955.

¹⁰⁷ Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, SHD; Objet: Au sujet d'une demande d'arrestation concernant un officier demandée par le Général Vietnamien Le Van Vien,” 13 September 1952, Préfecture de Police, Dossier 70720, Archive de la Prefecture de Police, Paris.

¹⁰⁸ Savani, 25.

¹⁰⁹ “Phiên chốt toà Đại hình Saigon: Hai vụ cướp tại làng Bình Đăng (Cholon) và trại của ông Huỳnh Văn Thái,” *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, 30 October 1936.

¹¹⁰ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 138.

¹¹¹ “Le général Le Van Vien a réserve à ‘Rivarol’ sa première interview,” *Rivarol*, 22 December 1966.

¹¹² Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2011), 266-69.

robbery in Hung Long, grabbing eighty-two piasters and some clothing.¹¹³ According to the police, he was residing in his natal village of Phong Đức at the time. Bảy Viễn's brushes with the law likely strained his relationship with his straight-laced family. According to an unattributed anecdote that appeared in 1955, Bảy Viễn remained financially dependent on his mother well into his twenties. He even resorted to pawning items in the house when short on cash. Tired of his "merrymaking," his mother reportedly "kicked him out of the house, vowing to never see him again."¹¹⁴

Bảy Viễn had by then immersed himself in Saigon-Cholon's underworld. Tellingly, he had gone to work for Hà Văn Lượng (Hai Luông), a labor contractor of some stature.¹¹⁵ It is unclear when Bảy Viễn entered the latter's employ; Savani and Pierre Darcourt indicate 1921, but other sources suggest sometime between 1931 and 1935.¹¹⁶ Darcourt claims that Hai Luông brought the brash youngster under his wing out of gratitude for the protection his father provided many years before.¹¹⁷ Bảy Viễn would cut his teeth as Hai Luông's chauffeur before rising to become a full-fledged *caporal d'usine*.¹¹⁸ Hai Luông was a unique mentor who straddled the domains of business, crime, and politics. Despite, or perhaps because of, his professional reputation, information about him is scarce. Sûreté reports provide two snapshots of the man. In 1927, the security service reported that Hai Luông and another labor overseer for local rice mills [*caporaux de rizeries*] were "laying the groundwork for a vast union encompassing the majority of steersmen, boatmen, and coolie rice porters of Saigon-Cholon, estimated at roughly fifteen thousand." Particularly alarming for the security services, they were at the same time local leaders of a proto-nationalist organization called Jeune Annam [Thanh Niên Đảng] in Chanh Hung. Hai Luông, moreover, was pegged as the "recognized leader of a group of hoodlums and ex-convicts" engaged in river piracy.¹¹⁹ Later that year, according to the Sûreté, Hai Luông was spotted visiting the tomb of Phan Chu Trinh on the second anniversary of the patriotic leader's death. Among the other attendees were well-known nationalists Nguyễn An Ninh, Bùi Thế Mỹ, Nguyễn Văn Bá, and Dương Văn Giáo.¹²⁰

A second snapshot of Hai Luông comes nearly a decade later in the radical newspaper, *La Lutte*. By then, he had become a well-connected labor boss and a major supplier of workers to Chinese rice mills. Between 1935 and 1936, an exposé on the plight of coolie labor in Cholon singled him out for derision. It accused Hai Luông and other high-profile "*marchands d'hommes*" of exploiting laborers, using police connections to do so. "In 1936, in an industrial city like Cholon, five kilometers from Saigon... twelve to thirteen thousand workers live under the laws of the underworld," the paper lamented. Hai Luông, an enforcer of those "laws," was ridiculed as a "*vulgaire enrichi*" who dined with officials and traveled with a "gang of

¹¹³ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 129, 21 November 1931.

¹¹⁴ "Bảy Viễn lãnh tụ Bình Xuyên: Bị đuổi nra khỏi nhà, Viễn lên Cholon theo Ba Hoà học nghề lái xe," *Dân Đen*, 24 June 1955.

¹¹⁵ Savani, 25. Darcourt, 67. Trần Văn Giàu, *Giai Cấp Công Nhân Việt Nam: Từ Đảng Cộng Sản Thành Lập đến Cách Mạng Thành Công, Tập II 1936-39* (Hanoi: Sự Thật, 1963), 112.

¹¹⁶ Darcourt, 26; Savani, 25. The police bulletin on Bảy Viễn's 1931 robbery makes no mention of his employment by Hai Luông while a 1935 bulletin lists him as a former chauffeur and ex-labor overseer under Hai Luông. Though far from a perfectly reliable source, these police bulletins do provide additional data points to corroborate or challenge chronologically muddled narratives about Bảy Viễn.

¹¹⁷ Darcourt, 69.

¹¹⁸ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 328, 14 September 1935.

¹¹⁹ Note Mensuelle du moi de Janvier 1928, Goucoch Service de la Sûreté, GGI 65477, CAOM, 22.

¹²⁰ Note Confidentielle: Rapport sur la célébration, le 2 mars 1928, du 2ème anniversaire de la mort de Phan Chau Trinh, No. 736/S, 12 March 1928, SPCE 38, CAOM, 4.

henchmen.”¹²¹ Bảy Viễn left his mentor’s service sometime before 1935 for reasons that are unclear.¹²² We cannot say to what extent Hai Luông’s political sympathies left a mark on his protégé, but Bảy Viễn no doubt received a valuable education in using gangland tactics in the service of politics and business.

Bảy Viễn likely met Mười Trí around this time, their friendship growing out of a shared interest in martial arts while training under a local Hakka master.¹²³ And their lives remained entwined well into the First Indochina War and after. According to police records, Mười Trí was born in 1908 in Tân Sơn Nhì, the ninth child of Huỳnh Văn Túc and Nguyễn Thị Dước.¹²⁴ Father and son were both carpenters by trade; both also spent time on Poulo Condore. Huỳnh Văn Túc appears in an 1885 dossier on the “Hóc Môn Affair” as a participant in the local insurrection that resulted in widespread arson, looting, and murder. Notably, the district chief [*đốc phủ sứ*] Trần Tử Ca and his wife, residing in Tân Sơn Nhì, were among those killed, and many buildings in the area, including the Presbyterian church, were burned down.¹²⁵ Túc was promptly arrested, found guilty of “arson in the suburbs of Saigon,” and sentenced on 31 March 1885 to ten years on Poulo Condore.¹²⁶ In the aftermath, officials blamed the villages for the violence and subjected the entire area to punitive taxation.¹²⁷ After prison, Túc settled in Bà Quẹo and did not appear again in the documentary record until his son’s run-ins with the law. It is apparent that father and son shared experiences in their encounters with the colonial police and penal systems, but we have no way of knowing if and how events that took place two decades before Mười Trí’s birth could have shaped him. Some Vietnamese sources have made claims about the political nature of his activities. Nguyễn Hùng, for instance, writes that Mười Trí had spent time in both the Maison Centrale and Poulo Condore before 1936 on account of his organizing an anti-poll tax group called the Nine Dragons [Cửu Long Chín Rồng].¹²⁸ One Vietnamese historian also notes that in 1931, Mười Trí was held at the Maison Centrale, where he met communist agitator Phạm Hùng.¹²⁹ But as far as we can tell from official sources, Mười Trí did not have a criminal record until 1936.

¹²¹ “La vie des travailleurs: Les marchands d’hommes à Cholon,” *La Lutte* 21 January 1921. In a series of articles published in *Dân Đen* after the Bình Xuyên’s defeat described Hai Luông as possessing an ability to deal with government officials [*giới cầm quyền*], as enjoying the respect of business owners, as a prominent gang leader [*anh chị bự*] with a solid reputation in the criminal world [*làng dao búa*], and as having at his disposal a large number of henchmen [*tay chun bộ hạ*]. See *Dân Đen*, 24 June 1955.

¹²² Curiously, the only time we see Hai Luông’s name associated with Bảy Viễn again is when the latter admitted to the police that his revolver belonged to Hai Luông in Long Hải, Bà Rịa. See “Trước công lý: Bị 12 năm khổ sai vượt ngục về ở Gò Vấp,” *Điện Tín*, 27 January 1940.

¹²³ Savani, 25; Darcourt, 71; *Dân Đen*, 23 June 1955. By some accounts, Hai Luông, knowing that the ability to wield violence was essential to their profession, brought his protégé to a Hakka master for training. There, Bảy Viễn first met Mười Trí and several other men who would become leaders of the Bình Xuyên. A 1955 biographical sketch published in *Dân Đen*, however, suggests that Mười Trí was the one who introduced Bảy Viễn to the martial arts teacher.

¹²⁴ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 598, 14 December 1940.

¹²⁵ Rapport sur la conséquence de l’Affaire d’Hoc Môn, No. 1339, 12 August 1885, Folder 5083, Goucoch (Nouveau), Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II (TTLTQGII), Ho Chi Minh City.

¹²⁶ État nominatif des prisonniers condamnés à l’internement par mesure administrative à la suite de l’affaire d’Hoc Môn, Unnumbered, 21 January 1887, Folder 5083, Goucoch (Nouveau), TTLTQGII.

¹²⁷ Rapport sur la conséquence de l’Affaire d’Hoc Môn, No. 216, 18 March 1885, Folder 5083, Goucoch (Nouveau), TTLTQGII.

¹²⁸ Nguyễn Hùng, *Sự Thúc Hoà Hảo*, 18-27.

¹²⁹ Trần Giang, *Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa: 23 Tháng Mười Một Năm 1940* (Hanoi: nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 1996), fn. 1, 167.

A Failed Getaway

Nearly a decade before war catapulted Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí to the upper echelons of the DRV military, their names had graced the pages of Saigon newspapers in infamy. They were among eight men marched into a Saigon courtroom on 29 October 1936 to stand trial for a pair of home invasion robberies. The popular press covered it with great interest; some delved deep into the minutiae of the crimes. According to these reports, the first attack occurred on 21 July 1935. That evening, at around 5 p.m., a sedan pulled up to the home of Nguyễn Thế Khai, a retired government clerk, in Bình Đăng. Four men, all clad in black, stepped out of the vehicle and headed toward the house. The driver remained in the car while another man, armed with a double-barrel rifle, kept watch outside. They reportedly warned bystanders: “If you want to live, to take care of your wife and kids, then don’t intervene, and die an unnecessary death.” Khai was inside lighting an oil lamp. His brother Nguyễn Văn Cao, a village elder who heard the car, stepped out to meet the unexpected visitors. By that point, the men had made their way past the open front gate. Cao grew suspicious on seeing their slovenly getup, but was struck repeatedly before he could react. As the men proceeded into the house, a bloodied Cao ran for help. Meanwhile, on hearing the violent encounter outside, Khai had crawled under a table inside. With great deliberateness, “as if they knew where the money was hidden,” Khai recalled, the perpetrators walked straight to a cabinet on top of which they found a safety box. After securing their booty—containing important papers and 850 piasters in retirement savings—the four men hurried into the still-running car and drove off. Cao managed to borrow a car to give chase, but failed to catch up.¹³⁰

The attack would have remained unsolved were it not for a botched getaway less than two months later. On the night of 7 September, a car pulled up outside Huỳnh Văn Thái’s furniture store, sawmill, and residence in Bình Lợi. Similar to the attack in Bình Đăng, the driver remained in the vehicle while three men clambered into the kitchen using large planks of wood strewn about the property. This time, they seemed to know exactly where to go, too. They entered Thái’s bedroom. As he opened his eyes, one robber seized his throat and held him down while another rummaged for valuables. The old man broke loose momentarily to let out a cry, waking his son in another room. When he rushed to his father, the third intruder kept him at bay with his gun.¹³¹ The men managed to grab ninety-five piasters and an expensive watch worth fifty-three piasters, a comparatively meager haul, before fleeing. The car was already running. Though the assailants managed to slip away, a M. Lambert driving through the area had stopped to inquire about the commotion. On learning of what had happened, he immediately took sped off in pursuit. The robbers sped across the Saigon River on Bình Lợi Bridge toward Bà Quẹo, a northern suburb of Saigon-Cholon. But they must have been flustered by the fast-approaching Frenchman, for the getaway car slid into a ditch as it crossed one of the city’s many canals, then made a sharp turn off the Bông Ky Bridge. When M. Lambert reached the crash site, he saw no sign of the men.¹³²

The vehicle, a Vermorel sedan initially mistaken for a Renault, abandoned at the site would be enough to unravel the entire criminal venture. The car was traced to Mme. Lâm Bắc of Cholon, and the police soon trained their sights on her husband, a Chinese resident [*khách trú*] named Trần Tăng. Brought in for questioning, the suspected accomplice claimed that his

¹³⁰ “Một bọn cướp đem xe hơi tới đánh nhà ông cựu thông phán Nguyễn Đoan Khai,” *Diễn Tin*, 23 July 1935.

¹³¹ “Trước Tòa Đại hình,” *Diễn Tin*, 30 October 1936.

¹³² “Một chiếc xe hơi chở ba tên cướp tới đánh người bán đồ gỗ ở Bình Triệu,” *Diễn Tin*, 9 September 1935.

Vermorel was stolen on 7 September—a Saturday—outside Phước Lý while he sought shelter from torrential rain. He insisted that he was about to report the theft when he was apprehended for questioning. His cover story fell apart almost immediately though. The owner of the house where Trần Tăng claimed to have waited flatly denied seeing him on Saturday. In fact, he showed up at the house on Sunday with another man, later identified as Pierre Nhon (aka Nguyễn Hữu Nhon). Confronted with this testimony, Trần Tăng finally confessed. By his account, on Saturday afternoon, a group of five men asked to rent his car for thirty-six piasters, as they had done in the past. But on Sunday morning, the men, accompanied by Pierre Nhon, came to inform him that they had crashed the car and even suggested that he should flee to China to avoid arrest. In the end, Pierre Nhon helped concoct the story of the stolen Vermorel. Boxed in by investigators, Trần Tăng eventually revealed the group's hideout. By 10 September, the police had arrested three of the perpetrators along with Pierre Nhon. More confessions followed. Nhon, a naturalized French citizen who was an avid hunter, admitted that he regularly lent his two rifles to the group. After the car crash, the men had fled to Bà Quẹo and contacted Nhon for help. The three others reportedly admitted to the crime and confessed that their group had many members in and around Saigon-Cholon, including Xóm Cũi, Ba Quẹo, rue Général Lizé, and Cần Đước. It was in Cần Đước where the police apprehended the remaining suspects.¹³³ One still had his handgun when the police picked him up.¹³⁴

The audaciousness of the crimes—two of 195 robberies in 1935¹³⁵—had prompted comparisons to American gangsters. "A Chicago crime film is playing out on the Cochinchinese stage," ran one *Diễn Tín* headline.¹³⁶ The trial itself proved a brief affair. Avocat Générale M. Vidil presented a compelling case buttressed not only by testimony from the victims, eyewitnesses, and M. Lambert, but also by the defendants' own confessions. The prosecutor urged the court to show no leniency.¹³⁷ As the trial clarified each man's culpability, two emerged as ringleaders. Bảy Viễn had been the getaway driver while Mười Trí had spearheaded the incursions on both occasions.¹³⁸ The judicial proceeding also exposed the looseness of this particular criminal association, as the men quickly turned on each other. Nguyễn Văn Nhị, who had stood watch in Bình Đăng, accused Bảy Viễn of setting him up out of vengeance. Lai Văn Rùm admitted to participating only in the Bình Đăng job, but insisted that he was manipulated.¹³⁹ Lê Văn Thi also blamed his involvement on others. Though all eight men were determined to be of "poor character," only three had prior convictions. Bảy Viễn was singled out as the "most dangerous." He was not only charged with robbery, but also with possession of a black-market revolver and with organizing the criminal band. Defense attorneys strained to minimize what were almost certainly long prison terms.¹⁴⁰ But the verdict was predictably harsh. Pierre Nhon and Trần Tăng, who both pleaded ignorance of any criminal activity, were sentenced to five years of hard labor.¹⁴¹ Of the six other defendants, one received an eight-year hard labor sentence

¹³³ "Bọn cướp trại cưa cầu Bình Triệu đã lọt vào lưới pháp luật," *Diễn Tín*, 12 September 1935.

¹³⁴ "Trước Toà Đại hình," *Diễn Tín*, 30 October 1936.

¹³⁵ Rapports au Grand Conseil des Intérêts Economiques et Financiers et au Conseil de Gouvernement, Session Ordinaire de 1937, Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, 83.

¹³⁶ "Một bọn cướp đem xe hơi tới đánh nhà ông cựu thông phán Nguyễn Đuan Khai," *Diễn Tín*, 23 July 1935.

¹³⁷ "Hai vụ cướp tại làng Bình Đăng (Cholon) và trại cưa ông Huỳnh Văn Thái," *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, 30 June 1936.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ "Trước Toà Đại hình," *Diễn Tín*, 30 October 1936.

¹⁴⁰ "Hai vụ cướp tại làng Bình Đăng (Cholon) và trại cưa ông Huỳnh Văn Thái," *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, 30 June 1936.

¹⁴¹ "Hai vụ ăn cướp, một bọn thủ phạm: Có một người Annam dân Tây bị kêu án 5 năm cầm cố," *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*, 30 June 1936; "Les actes de piraterie de Binh Dang et Binh Loi," *La Press Indochinoise*, 30 June 1936.

for participation in the Bình Đăng robbery alone, while the rest each got twelve years of hard labor.¹⁴²



Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí after their capture in 1935 and prior to their transfer to the penal island of Poulo Condore. (Source: Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, SHD.)

In from the Margins

In this way, Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí briefly, and unwittingly, wandered into the public spotlight, only to fade back into obscurity once dispatched to faraway penitentiaries. While Saigon's reading public easily forgot their names, these men's lives would never be the same. The two would go on to lead a precarious existence. Once Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí were shipped off to commence their twelve-year sentences on Poulo Condore in 1937, they would not stay locked up for long. Mười Trí made his way out that July. He was able to evade the authorities until his recapture in Saigon in 1939, prompting the Cour d'Appel to increase his sentence by three years for the escape and the Tribunal de Saigon to add another year for possession of arms and fraudulent identification.¹⁴³ Flight from Poulo Condore was not uncommon, but incredibly risky. In 1937, Mười Trí's was among thirty-one "permanent escapes" compared to ninety-two recaptures and thirty-seven "voluntary returns." It is unclear if all thirty-one survived. Still, faced with a sixteen-year sentence, Mười Trí managed to escape again in March 1940—one of fifty-eight in that month alone—only to be captured in Trà Vinh.¹⁴⁴ According to the Governor of Cochinchina, all fifty-eight escapes occurred without a prison break per se; the majority slipped

¹⁴² "Trước Toà Đại hình," *Diễn Tin*, 30 October 1936.

¹⁴³ Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, SHD.

¹⁴⁴ *Bulletin de Poilce Criminelle* No. 598, 14 December 1940.

away while logging far beyond prison walls.¹⁴⁵ In fact, the risk of escape during *corvée* had been a perennial issue.¹⁴⁶ From Trà Vinh, Mười Trí was brought before the Cour d'Appel. Another two years were tacked onto his sentence.¹⁴⁷

Bảy Viễn's post-1936 itinerary is equally unclear. We do not know exactly when he first escaped from Poulo Condore. Pierre Darcourt's semi-fictionalized biography suggests February 1940, when Bảy Viễn and a fellow inmate—a certain Nhan—took flight just before the Lunar New Year.¹⁴⁸ It was apparently Bảy Viễn's fourth try.¹⁴⁹ According to Nguyễn Hùng, on the other hand, Bảy Viễn made his first getaway with his onetime partners Mười Trí and Sáu Nhị.¹⁵⁰ If that were the case, the men would have fled the island in July 1937. Bảy Viễn himself has stated—or perhaps exaggerated—that he escaped within fifteen days of arrival; he was recaptured and sent back to Poulo Condore a year later.¹⁵¹ What we do know is that Bảy Viễn was arrested in December 1939 in Cochinchina.¹⁵² For the second time, he made the news. Press coverage of the subsequent trial revealed that after returning to the mainland, Bảy Viễn and Trần Văn Danh (also known as Paul Danh, and possibly an alternative spelling of “Nhan”), a fellow escapee, took up residence on the northern outskirts of Saigon-Cholon and carried out a number of robberies in the Gò Vấp area. Sûreté agents soon discovered their hideout in a “remote area of Hạnh Thông Xã (Gò Vấp District)” and easily captured the men.¹⁵³ Also swept up in the raid was Bảy Viễn's wife and two-year-old child, as well as two other accomplices. Bảy Viễn and Paul Danh each received five years of forced labor and ten years of “*interdiction de séjour*”—which prohibited travel to “forbidden places.”¹⁵⁴ Bảy Viễn also received six months for “*falsification de carte d'impôt*” and another two years for the prison escape in separate proceedings. He was sent back to Poulo Condore in March 1940.¹⁵⁵ Bảy Viễn would not remain long there. On 29 October, in the company of two other inmates, he again set off for the mainland, this time for good.¹⁵⁶

Bảy Viễn once boasted that when he first arrived in Poulo Condore, “everyone there knew who I was, a little like Al Capone.”¹⁵⁷ While his gangland status at that time is debatable, he did

¹⁴⁵ Évasions à Poulo Condore, No. 967-B, 5 June 1940, Folder 5104, Goucoch (Nouveau), TTLTQGII.

¹⁴⁶ Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001), 154.

¹⁴⁷ Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, SHD.

¹⁴⁸ Darcourt could be referring to Nhan, an An Phú native and one of Bảy Viễn's accomplices in the 1931 Hung Long robbery. See Bulletin de Police Criminelle No. 129, 21 November 1931.

¹⁴⁹ Darcourt, 109-122.

¹⁵⁰ Nguyễn Hùng, *Sự Thúc Hoà Hảo*, 101-104; Nguyễn Hùng, *Giang Hồ Lục Tỉnh: Truyện Ngắn, Tập 1* (Cà Mau: nxb Mũi Cà Mau, 1998), 146-47.

¹⁵¹ Rivarol, 1966.

¹⁵² Objet: Au sujet d'une demande d'arrestation concernant un officier demandée par le Général Vietnamien Le Van Vien,” 13 September 1952, Préfecture de Police, Dossier 70720, Archive de la Préfecture de Police, Paris.

¹⁵³ Also swept up in the raid were another member of the gang Nguyễn Văn Cung, the home's proprietor Nguyễn Thị Cơ, and Bảy Viễn's wife Nguyễn Thị Tư and their two-year-old son.

¹⁵⁴ Zinoman, 281; “Trước công lý: Bị 12 năm khổ sai vượt ngục về ở Gò Vấp,” *Điện Tín*, 27 January 1940; “Au Palais correctionnelle indigène: Un beau coup de filet,” *La Dépêche d'Indochine*, 27 January 1940; “Chez Thémis,” *L'Echo Annamite*, 29 January 1940.

¹⁵⁵ Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, SHD.

¹⁵⁶ Rapport: Octobre 1940, 2 November 1940, Etat nominatif des condamnés acquittés, transférés, évadés, libérés par anticipation, expulsés ou décédés du Pénitencier de Poulo-Condore année 1940, Folder G 82-11, Goucoch, TTLTQGII; Rivarol, 1966.

¹⁵⁷ Rivarol, 1966.

build up a certain infrastructure for illicit activities. It was no accident that time and again he escaped the remote penal island, undertakings that required both financial wherewithal and connections inside the prison and out. This is the impression we get from the press coverage of Bảy Viễn's 1939 arrest. It was reported that he and his gang had carried out a series of "gutsy" [*gan dạ*] robberies in the Gò Vấp area, and that even after Bảy Viễn's incarceration, "remnants" [*dư đảng*] of his gang continued to operate. They were credited with the June 1940 robbery of a Chinese pharmaceutical wholesaler in Hạnh Thông Tây.¹⁵⁸ After escaping Poulo Condore in October 1940, Bảy Viễn quickly partnered with another fugitive Huỳnh Văn Ty. Originally from the Chợ Đũi area of Saigon, he was serving a fifteen-year sentence on Poulo Condore for attempted murder before finding his way back to Cochinchina.¹⁵⁹ In December 1940, the two men were sought for questioning in two robberies. The police believed that Bảy Viễn was hiding in Mộc Hoá (Tân An) or Gò Dầu Hạ (Tây Ninh).¹⁶⁰

By 2 December 1940, Mười Trí had also escaped from Poulo Condore.¹⁶¹ The prison seemed incapable of containing this evasive inmate. We cannot account for his whereabouts for six months, though the authorities suspected he was in Bình Hưng Hoà, Phú Nhuận, or Cholon city.¹⁶² The date of this last escape is particularly significant because it lends some credence to the claim by communist historians that Mười Trí was involved in the ICP-organized Southern Uprising [Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa]. They place him in Truong Mít in early January 1941, among some 150 retreating insurgents [*ngheo quân*] drawn from Gò Vấp, Hóc Môn, and Đức Hoà.¹⁶³ Mười Trí would soon be rearrested and deposited on Poulo Condore, though it is unclear if he was charged with any political crimes. Official sources paint a more ambiguous picture. Police bulletins, despite their inherent limitations, provide an outline of Mười Trí's activities and a sense of the company he kept. After he escapes Poulo Condore again on 2 June 1941, he renewed his partnership with Bảy Viễn.¹⁶⁴ In August, they formed a group of eight to rob former provincial councilor Nguyễn Văn Hai in Tân Phước, Gò Công.¹⁶⁵ The two friends would collaborate on and off thereafter. These criminal assemblages appear ephemeral—forming, dissolving, and recombining as a matter of routine—though the two men remained friends and sometime partners. Mười Trí would subsequently join a separate group of mostly Chợ Lớn natives for a string of robberies across Gia Định, Chợ Lớn, and Mỹ Tho,¹⁶⁶ before teaming up with Bảy Viễn again on an armed robbery at the end of 1941.¹⁶⁷

It is unclear how criminal activity shaded into political subversion. Police records offer some clues. According to an early 1942 bulletin, Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí appear to have fallen in with a group led by Huỳnh Văn Cân (better known as Tư Phương), a figure described by the press as a

¹⁵⁸ "Tại Hạnh Thông Tây: Súng nổ rền trời thông đêm khuya," *Điện Tín*, 3 June 1940.

¹⁵⁹ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 380, 19 September 1936; *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 387, 7 November 1936.

¹⁶⁰ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 598, 14 December 1940.

¹⁶¹ Tableau des évactions pendant le mois de Décembre 1940, Iles & Penitencier de Poulo Condore, 1 January 1941, Folder 5054, Goucoch (Nouveau), TTLTQGII.

¹⁶² *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 628, 19 July 1941.

¹⁶³ *Lịch Sử Khởi Nghĩa Nam Kỳ*, 161-167. Mười Trí is credited with advocating for a retreat south to Đồng Tháp Mười [Plaine des Jongs] rather than north along the less familiar border between Cochinchina and Laos. These same historians insist that Mười Trí continued to wage battles against the French in Đồng Tháp Mười into 1942 and 1943.

¹⁶⁴ Bùi Văn Toàn, *Tù Nhân Côn Đảo, 1940-1945, Tập 1* (Hanoi: nxb Thanh Niên, 2010), 202.

¹⁶⁵ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 633, 23 August 1941; *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 635, 6 September 1941.

¹⁶⁶ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 648, 6 December 1941.

¹⁶⁷ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 652, 3 January 1942.

“dangerous bandit active in the backwaters of Bình Xuyên and Chánh Hưng.”¹⁶⁸ This reputation was well-deserved. *Công Luận Báo* had spotlighted him in 1937 as head of a gang engaged in river piracy on Cây Khô Canal, an important waterway connecting farmers to the markets of Cholon.¹⁶⁹ He was captured only after a dramatic crackdown by the police.¹⁷⁰ Tư Phương was also brother-in-law to Tám Mạnh, the martial arts master recruited by the ICP for the Southern Uprising.¹⁷¹ Tư Phương himself had pledged to join the effort.¹⁷² After Bảy Trân called off the rebellion in late 1940, the brigands returned to a life of crime. It was in this context that Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí joined with Tư Phương on a number of armed robberies. In 1944, the police would investigate Mười Trí for “criminal conspiracy for the purpose of anarchist activities,” involving some fifty-seven men.¹⁷³ This, too, was linked to Tám Mạnh’s clan; the ringleader’s partner was Mười Nhỏ, Tư Phương’s younger brother.¹⁷⁴ Mười Trí’s activities had by then taken on a distinctly political character. According to French intelligence, he had been involved in recruiting Cao Đài adherents—having converted to the religion in 1943—to be laborers for the Japanese Army.¹⁷⁵ Bảy Viễn may or may not have participated in these activities. He claims, in a 1963 interview, that he was “engaged in guerrilla [warfare] against” the Japanese because he thought they were “just like the French.” Consequently, the Japanese put a ten-million-piaster price on Bảy Viễn’s head in 1942.¹⁷⁶ Police bulletins, though, suggest that he continued to engage in unspecified acts of theft and robbery during this time.¹⁷⁷ We do not know what he did after 1943.

Bảy Viễn’s Ascent

By the time the Indochina War broke out in late September 1945, Bảy Viễn was no longer *just* a criminal. He was now a leading resistance fighter. According to Savani, Bảy Viễn’s path from brigand to insurgent was a circuitous one. After the 9 March Japanese coup against the French, Bảy Viễn made contact with pro-Japanese nationalist figures, including Nguyễn Văn Tuệ and Trần Văn Ân. The key intermediary was Nguyễn Văn Thiên, better known as Maurice Thiên, a one-time competitive cyclist with catholic connections among Vietnamese nationalists. He met Mười Trí as early as June 1940 in the course of an arms sale, probably making Bảy Viễn’s acquaintance soon after.¹⁷⁸ In July 1945, nearly four months after the coup, the Japanese handed control of the Cochinchinese Sûreté to two prominent nationalists, Huỳnh Văn Phuong and Hồ Vĩnh Ký. They promptly installed Lâm Ngọc Đường, a fellow nationalist who had returned from France a year prior, at the helm of the security service’s political arm, the Police

¹⁶⁸ “Đồn Nhơn Đức Nhà Bè bắt được 1 tướng cướp lợi hại,” *Sài Gòn*, 22 October 1942.

¹⁶⁹ “Cũng tại Bình Xuyên: Dư đảng của tướng cướp năm Xây đã lọt vào lưới hết,” *Công Luận Báo*, 20 August 1937.

¹⁷⁰ “Deux bandits blessés à coups de fusil,” *La Dépêche d’Indochine*, 20 August 1937.

¹⁷¹ “Đồn Nhơn Đức Nhà Bè bắt được 1 tướng cướp lợi hại,” *Sài Gòn*, 22 October 1942.

¹⁷² Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 40.

¹⁷³ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 784, 5 August 1944.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid; Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 37.

¹⁷⁵ Notice de renseignements: Concernant Nguyen Van Thien dit Maurice Thiên dit Tu Thien (SDECE), March 1951, 10R 96, SHD.

¹⁷⁶ *Rivarol*, 1966.

¹⁷⁷ *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 666, 18 April 1942; *Bulletin de Police Criminelle* No. 729, 10 July 1943; Renseignement de Fichier: Commandant de la 3ème DIC à Colonel Commandant la Zone Nord Cochinchine, No. 2664/2S, 9 August 1946, 10H 4089, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD).

¹⁷⁸ Notice de renseignements: Concernant Nguyen Van Thien dit Maurice Thiên dit Tu Thien (SDECE), March 1951, 10R 96, SHD.

Spéciale de l'Est (PSE).¹⁷⁹ Maurice Thiên, who was working both as a clerk at a Japanese sawmill and as an informant for the Japanese military, entered Lâm Ngọc Đường's service. He brokered an agreement with Bảy Viễn, whereby he and his men would join the Vietnamese-controlled police in exchange for protection and unofficial amnesty. Bảy Viễn set up his headquarters near the Phú Thọ Racecourse, in the northern suburbs of Saigon-Cholon.¹⁸⁰ Japanese surrender in mid-August threw a wrench into this arrangement. The ICP leader Trần Văn Giàu seized this opportunity to recruit Bảy Viễn, perhaps by promising financial support, or by appealing to his patriotism.¹⁸¹ Between 25 August and 23 September, Bảy Viễn remained in Phú Thọ, without an official role.¹⁸² After declaring the resistance war, however, Trần Văn Giàu made Bảy Viễn Chief of Military Affairs in Saigon-Cholon [Quân Sự Trưởng Địa Phương Saigon-Cholon].¹⁸³ In that role, he and Nguyễn Văn Trán, ICP cadre and head of the Việt Minh police (then called the National Defense Guard [Quốc Gia Tự Vệ Cuộc]), oversaw the war effort inside the city from their base in Đức Hoà.¹⁸⁴ Documents show that Ba Dương was in close contact with Bảy Viễn, and even attended a planning session in Cầu Xáng.¹⁸⁵

In late February 1946, Ba Dương's body was brought to Phước An, on the northern edge of Rừng Sác. Bình Xuyên commanders and their men had assembled there to honor him.¹⁸⁶ After the ceremony, they gathered to address the issue of succession. French sources indicate that although Bảy Viễn was the preferred candidate to lead the combined Bình Xuyên forces, he insisted that Năm Hà succeed his brother as chief of Detachments 2-3.¹⁸⁷ Communist historians, on the other hand, claim that Năm Hà, with the support of his brother's lieutenant Từ Văn Rì, won the support of a larger number of commanders than Bảy Viễn, thwarting the latter's attempt to seize the helm.¹⁸⁸ Both accounts agree that Năm Hà became chief of Detachments 2-3. But it appears that Bình Xuyên commanders postponed electing a leader to consolidate the group. In mid-June 1946, the same commanders gathered in Ba Giồng (an area of Rừng Sác near the Soài Rạp River) at Bảy Viễn's request. In light of military necessity, he told them, they should unify their forces against the French by creating the Bình Xuyên Interzone [Liên Khu Bình Xuyên]. The plan quickly won approval and Bảy Viễn was chosen as the commander in chief.¹⁸⁹ Nguyễn Bình, the DRV's war czar, approved the Ba Giồng decision. He also issued a communiqué on 10 July to announce Bảy Viễn's promotion to Deputy Chief of Zone 7, the same position that Ba Dương had briefly occupied.¹⁹⁰ With this, Bảy Viễn's ascent was complete.

Despite the orthodox narrative among Vietnamese historians that Bảy Viễn's ascent was a sinister plot facilitated by French spies, the same historians concede that Bảy Viễn gained the

¹⁷⁹ Annexe à l'envoi No. 5952-S du 11 Juillet 1944 de SSCo à Goucoch, Intendant et toutes Sûrétés, 11 July 1944, Conspol 127, CAOM.

¹⁸⁰ Savani, 11.

¹⁸¹ Savani, 13-14; Darcourt, 193.

¹⁸² Savani, 16.

¹⁸³ Savani, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Réorganisation du Viet Minh en Cochinchine, Note No. 336/PSE (Service de la Sûreté), 5 December 1945, 10R 70, SHD; Bulletin de reinseignements (2ème Bureau): Réunions tenues à Cau-Xang (Duc-Hoa) les 30-11 et 10-12, Procès verbal de la réunions, No. P23/2, December 14, 1945, 10H 528, SHD.

¹⁸⁵ BR (2ème Bureau): Réunions tenues à Cau-Xang (Duc-Hoa) les 30-11 et 10-12, Procès verbal de la réunions, No. P23/2, December 14, 1945, 10H 528, SHD; BR (2ème Bureau), No. 885/2, 29 December 1945, 10H 528, SHD.

¹⁸⁶ Savani, 37; *Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 88

¹⁸⁷ Savani, 37.

¹⁸⁸ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 110.

¹⁸⁹ *Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định Kháng chiến*, 112.

¹⁹⁰ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình, Communiqué, Unnumbered, July 10, 1946, 10H 4089, SHD.

backing of his fellow commanders and that Nguyễn Bình, facing intense military pressure and eager to win over the sizeable force and its leader, endorsed the results of the Ba Giồng gathering and promoted Bảy Viễn.¹⁹¹ Indeed, in one communist writers's estimation, Bảy Viễn was perhaps the only viable candidate to replace Ba Dương. Nguyễn Hùng sums up the situation this way:

Ba Dương was dead. The matter of [his brother] Năm Hà replacing him was not settled. [It was] because Năm Hà was not a gang leader of stature [...] The one who could replace Ba Dương was Tám Mạnh, but he was already too old, and had not done anything notable. Hai Vĩnh [Mai Văn Vĩnh] was possible but he still relied on [Tám Mạnh] his father-in-law's reputation. Therefore, the only one who could take over the Bình Xuyên was Bảy Viễn.¹⁹²

In fact, evidence suggests that Nguyễn Bình encouraged Bảy Viễn to consolidate the fragmented and unruly forces. In the months following the Phước An memorial, Bảy Viễn had informed Nguyễn Bình that he was moving his troops from the mountains of Bà Rịa, where the various Bình Xuyên groups had garrisoned, back to Saigon-Cholon's vicinities. The Zone Chief wrote back with a mix of surprise and consternation: "I thought you were going to stay and lead [Ba Dương's] fighters since [his brother] comrade Năm Hà . . . is still too young and inexperienced."¹⁹³ Although Nguyễn Bình approved Năm Hà ascension to commander of Detachments 2-3 in April 1946, the DRV military chief was hardly enthusiastic.¹⁹⁴ In contrast, in the same April letter, Nguyễn Bình was effusive in his praise of Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí, casting them as Ba Dương's worthy successors: "It is truly regrettable that comrade Dương Văn Vương [*sic*] has died, but his friends, comrades Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí, are still here. I have great faith in your loyalty during this protracted war."¹⁹⁵ In May, Lương Văn Trọng (alias Hai Trọng), Nguyễn Bình's liaison with the Bình Xuyên, informed him of Detachments 2-3's "pitiable" state.¹⁹⁶ Ba Dương's death and the absence of effective commanders had created a leadership void that could result in the units' disintegration.¹⁹⁷ It is notable that Dương Văn Hà, the nominal commander, was not mentioned once in this communication. With mounting French assaults, the precipitous collapse of the Third and Fourth Divisions, the January defection of Third Division chief Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp to the French,¹⁹⁸ and finally the potential collapse of Bình Xuyên forces, Nguyễn Bình not only accepted Bảy Viễn's ascension and consolidation of the armed groups, but facilitated it. As Tô Ký, former Detachment 12 commander and later Zone 8 chief, recalled, Nguyễn Bình appointed Bảy Viễn Deputy Zone Commander with the specific aim of unifying the Bình Xuyên forces.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹¹ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 142. *Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 112.

¹⁹² Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 159

¹⁹³ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí (Chi Đội 9), No. 924/NB, April 29, 1946, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹⁹⁴ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 140; Nguyễn Hùng, *Người Bình Xuyên*, 160.

¹⁹⁵ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí (Chi Đội 9), No. 924/NB, April 29, 1946, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹⁹⁶ Captured Document: Lương Văn Trọng letter to Nguyễn Bình (translation), No.1828/2.S., 10H 3825, SHD.

¹⁹⁷ Đinh Văn Nhị had asked to be sent to Saigon for medical treatment while Từ Văn Ri was under investigation, according to Lương Văn Trọng's letter.

¹⁹⁸ François Guillemot, *Dai Việt, Indépendance et Révolution au Viêt-Nam: L'Échec de la Troisième Voie, 1938-1955* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 366.

¹⁹⁹ Tô Ký, *Tô Ký: Vị Tướng Trung Kiên và Nghĩa Hiệp* (TP HCM: nxb Trẻ, 2003), 41.

Conclusion

What began as fractious criminal gangs in late 1945 had become by 1946 an army of seven detachments and a powerful bloc in the DRV's National Defense Force. The Bình Xuyên's consolidation was not at all straightforward. The post-World War II insurgent force was not simply a colonial-era criminal organization in new, political garb. The Bình Xuyên, as this chapter demonstrates, was a joint venture between violence entrepreneurs and political activists. This meant that the organization that emerged in the midst of the First Indochina War was inherently fragile, prone to not only internal competition but also susceptible to the vagaries of state intervention. As the next chapter will show, by helping to consolidate the Bình Xuyên, Nguyễn Bình, wittingly or not, had sowed the seeds for its disintegration.

Chapter 2: The Rise and Fall of the Bình Xuyên

Under Bảy Viễn's leadership, the Bình Xuyên came to play a prominent military and political role in the southern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). As chapter one shows, loosely affiliated outlaws in and around Saigon-Cholon became crucial allies for the ICP-led Việt Minh as it embarked on a war it was not equipped to fight. To turn the scrappy but fragile southern resistance force into a bona fide army, DRV leaders in Hanoi dispatched Nguyễn Bình, a proven military organizer, to corral the armed groups. The consolidation of the Bình Xuyên—first under Ba Dương, then Bảy Viễn—was a requisite step in this plan. At the same time, the Bình Xuyên's notoriety made it all the more important to nationalists who, opposing the communist DRV, were searching for an alternative path to independence. How did these outlaw partisans, with neither the mass appeal of a religious sect nor the ideological discipline of a political party, become so influential?

From 1946 to 1948—the period this chapter studies—Bảy Viễn and his outlaw partisans skillfully traversed the boundary between “resistance” and “collaboration.” Because they were seen as strategically important yet ideologically malleable militants, agents of the DRV, nationalists inside the French-backed Republic of Cochinchina, and officials of the French military—not to mention nationalist activists outside any government—vied to secure their allegiance. But rivalries and infighting bedeviled all major players in the war. This chapter argues that a convergence of interstate conflict and intrastate competition strengthened Bảy Viễn's de facto power and legitimated his role as an “informal sovereign.”¹ The political cachet he and his allies earned through opposing the French allowed them to move between communist and non-communist circles. Between 1946 and 1948, Bảy Viễn walked the tightrope. Communists, non-communists, anti-communists, and others all tried to harness the Bình Xuyên's reputation and military might for particular visions of decolonization. At the same time, they became Bảy Viễn's source of political, economic, and logistical support. In a state of “parcellized sovereignty,” Bảy Viễn and his partisans accrued increasing control over the Saigon-Cholon region, all the while asserting themselves as powerbrokers in Vietnam's struggle for independence. Bảy Viễn's maneuvers would, however, bring the Bình Xuyên to a sudden end.

A Complicated Relationship

In July 1946, Nguyễn Bình promoted Bảy Viễn to Deputy Chief of Zone 7 as a way to help the communists retain control of the Việt Minh. On April 20, at Nguyễn Bình's instigation, a diverse contingent of political and religious leaders—representatives of the Hoà Hảo, Cao Đài, Vietnam Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng], Greater Vietnam Nationalist Party [Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng], the Việt Minh, and others—established the broadly inclusive National United Front [Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Liên Hiệp] (MTQGLH) against the French.² Historians have seen this front's formation as Nguyễn Bình's attempt to win over and eventually neutralize non-communists fighting against the French.³ At a meeting held one day after the MTQGLH was

¹ Zachariah Mampilly, “Parcellized Sovereignty : The State, Non-State Actors and the Politics of Conflict in Africa,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 30(1) (2003).

² Trần Văn Ân, Brochure: “Fronts Historiques” [Những Mặt Trận Lịch Sử] (translation), July 23, 1947, No.9380/S, 10H 4201, SHD, p. 18

³ Christopher Goscha, “‘La Guerre par d’Autres Moyens’: Réflexions sur la Guerre du Việt Minh dans le Sud-Vietnam de 1945 à 1951,” *Guerre Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 51 (2006): 37. François Guillemot, *Dai Viet*,

created, its leaders openly criticized Hồ Chí Minh's DRV government. Huỳnh Phú Sổ, its president and leader of the armed Buddhist sect called the Hoà Hảo, excoriated the DRV for making concessions to the French in the March 6 Accord by abandoning the south, decrying it as a “diplomatic failure” [*thất bại về ngoại giao*]. MTQGLH members, including Mười Trí and Lai Hữu Tài (Bảy Viễn's proxy), also called for the dissolution of the People's Committees and the Resistance Committees, which, they claimed, “terrorized” the people.⁴ Despite pledging allegiance to the DRV and Hồ Chí Minh, the MTQGLH was a potentially disruptive adversary to Nguyễn Bình and the DRV. In May, disaffected front leaders even engaged in negotiations with the French on a ceasefire, but failed to reach an agreement.⁵ By late August, with the DRV's own front organization—the Association of United Vietnamese People [*Hội Liên Hiệp Quốc Dân Việt Nam* or *Liên Việt*]⁶—in place, Nguyễn Bình dissolved the MTQGLH on central government orders.⁶

It was during this period that Mười Trí emerged as an important oppositional figure. It was no accident that the MTQGLH was founded at his headquarters in Bà Quẹo, outside Saigon-Cholon. A Cao Đài adherent since 1943, he had befriended many non-communist nationalists, including the MTQGLH's president and vice president, Huỳnh Phú Sổ and Vũ Tam Anh. Within the front, he also acted as the de facto “Bình Xuyên Inter-Zone representative.”⁷ His friendship with non-communists would come to alienate Nguyễn Bình. The DRV military chief was particularly alarmed when he came across a MTQGLH communiqué designating Mười Trí as commander [*tư lệnh*] of a new armed force—independent of the DRV.⁸ In an August letter addressed to Mười Trí, Nguyễn Bình indicated that he was well aware of the front leaders' scheme to undermine the southern Việt Minh: “They claim . . . that I am insincere and intend to kill men of talent [i.e., non-communist nationalists], that I try to break up the forces of Detachments 4 [Mười Trí] and 5 [Phạm Hữu Đức]. They suggest that you build up a separate [armed] force to confront [the Việt Minh] one day.”⁹ Nguyễn Bình reminded Mười Trí that harboring men like Vũ Tam Anh in his ranks amounted to acting against the central government, and chided him for letting “sentimentality” override national interest.

Given the brewing conflict between Nguyễn Bình and Mười Trí, the timing of Bảy Viễn's appointment as Deputy Chief of Zone 7—a key position in the DRV's southern war effort—appears hardly coincidental. Ignoring Zone 7 administrator Võ Bá Nhạc's recommendation of Mười Trí as a candidate, Nguyễn Bình obliquely cited “present circumstances” for his choosing

Indépendance et Révolution au Viêt-Nam: L'Échec de la Troisième Voie, 1938-1955 (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 367. Yves Gras, *Histoire de la Guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1979), 111.

⁴ Captured Document: Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Liên Hiệp Nam Bộ, Tờ Biên Bản Cuộc hội nghị giữa các đoàn thể chánh trị, quân sự và tôn giáo hiện đang hoạt động ở Nam Bộ, April 21, 1946, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁵ See Vũ Tam Anh, “Front d'Union Nationale du Viet Nam: Projet de Creation d'une Zone Neutre,” No.1103bis, June 16, 1948, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁶ Guillemot, 373.

⁷ Even though Mười Trí is listed in the minutes to the meeting as representing the Bình Xuyên Inter-Zone, closer examination shows that only he, Bùi Hữu Phiệt (commander of Đại Việt-affiliated force, Bộ Đội An Điền, which became part of Bình Xuyên Detachment 25), and Bảy Viễn (via proxy) were involved with the Front. Dương Văn Hà (Detachments 2-3), Nguyễn Văn Mạnh, and Mai Văn Vĩnh (Detachment 7) did not appear on any meeting rosters.

⁸ Captured Document: Thông Cáo: Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Liên Hiệp Quyết Nghị Tổ Chức Quân Sự Tạm Thời, June 26, 1946, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁹ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Mười Trí and Tư Đức, Chi Đội 4 & 5, No.68/LD, August 14, 1946, 10H 4009, SHD.

Bảy Viễn instead.¹⁰ Certainly, Bảy Viễn had positioned himself, with the help of Lai Hữu Tài and other advisors, to win the backing of other Bình Xuyên leaders when he called for the group's unification.¹¹ But Nguyễn Bình's support after the fact was just as significant. It gave Bảy Viễn's institutional legitimacy within the broader resistance.

For Nguyễn Bình, the decision was motivated as much by military exigencies as by political calculation. If nationalists critical of the DRV—like Vũ Tam Anh and Huỳnh Phú Sổ—had the ear of Mười Trí, Nguyễn Bình would try to influence Bảy Viễn. In the ensuing months of 1946, even as Mười Trí became a target of Nguyễn Bình's threats, Bảy Viễn did not seem to intervene. The threats escalated. In September, two of Mười Trí's lieutenants (Lê Văn Trang and Hà Trọng Nguyên) were brought up on charges of “disloyalty.”¹² The next month, Zone 7 authorities started investigating the presence of “reactionaries” [*phản động*] in Mười Trí's Detachment 4. In response to the latter's complaint that such accusations were harming the unit's reputation, Nguyễn Bình curtly retorted: “It is not as if these [reactionary] factions are not in your midst, the negative public opinion is not groundless.” Nguyễn Bình believed Mười Trí and his staff knew exactly who the reactionaries were since “this faction had on many occasions addressed the fighters, intentionally trying to lead them astray [*cố ý lôi kéo họ đi sai lạc*].”¹³ Even as Nguyễn Bình casted aspersions at every turn and Mười Trí warily warded them off, Bảy Viễn stood on the sidelines. In late October 1946, an intermediary conveyed Bảy Viễn's concerns to Mười Trí: “Knowing about the disagreement between you and the Zone Chief [Nguyễn Bình], Bảy [Viễn] is saddened by the fratricidal atmosphere [*cánh nôi da xáo thịt*] and promises to do everything he can to find an amicable resolution.”¹⁴

In November 1946, Nguyễn Bình was wounded during an ambush.¹⁵ Vietnamese and French historians agree that the attempted assassination was carried out in response to Nguyễn Bình's handling of the MTQGLH.¹⁶ Though reliable information is scant, it appears that while trying to neutralize front-affiliated detractors of the DRV, Nguyễn Bình targeted two close allies of Mười Trí—Nguyễn Thành Long (known as Ba Hỷ) and Bùi Hữu Phiệt. Nguyễn Bình's concern was warranted. Ba Hỷ, described by French intelligence sources as a “notorious hoodlum from Bình Xuyên,”¹⁷ had been an important commander since the early months of the war. He had worked under Bảy Viễn when the latter oversaw insurgent activities in Saigon-Cholon, and briefly headed the Việt Minh police in the 4ème arrondissement in late 1945.¹⁸ In early 1946, he reportedly had also been a part of the Cao Đài faction of the Fourth Division in Tây Ninh.¹⁹ Bùi Hữu Phiệt, too, was an important Việt Minh commander. Having joined the

¹⁰ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Võ Bá Nhạc (Trường Văn Phòng Khu Bộ), No.69/L.D., August 14, 1946, 10H 4088, SHD.

¹¹ Pierre Darcourt, *Bay Vien: Le Maître de Cholon* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 262-63.

¹² Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Mười Trí (translation), No.1619/4.D., September 2, 1946, 10H 4009, SHD. Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Mười Trí (Detachment 4 commander) (translation), September 13, 1946, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹³ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter to Xã (Detachment 4 Staff), No.1212.QS, October 25, 1946, 10H 4009, SHD.

¹⁴ Captured Document: Lâm Văn Kết letter to Mười Trí, unnumbered, October 27, 1946, 10H 4009, SHD.

¹⁵ Hồ Sơn Đài, Đỗ Tầm Chương, Hồ Khang, *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên: Liên Chi Đội 2 và 3* (TP HCM: nxb Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1991), 150.

¹⁶ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 148-49. Philippe Hubert, “Les Binh Xuyen: Étude d'un Groupement Politico-Militaire au Sud Vietnam, 1925-1955” (Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université Paris VII Jussieu, 1990), 121-22.

¹⁷ Note: Activité du Viet Minh dans la Région Saigon-Cholon, No. 297/PSE, 17 November 1945, 10R 70, SHD.

¹⁸ BR: Réunions tenues à Cau Xang (Duc Hoa) les 30/11 et 10/12, No. P23/2, 14 December 1945, 10H 528, SHD.

¹⁹ BR (Sûreté de Cochinchine): Activités Annamites, No. 1189, 20 February 1946, 10H 4281, SHD.

anticommunist Greater Vietnam Nationalist Party [Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng] in 1945, he used party funds to organize a resistance force, called Bộ Đội An Điền [An Điền Army], at the outbreak of war. He and his men fought the French in Bà Quẹo—as part of Vũ Tam Anh’s Second Division—and alongside Mười Trí’s outlaw partisans.²⁰

Despite Nguyễn Bình’s transparent desire to swiftly deal with the men, Mười Trí was not cooperative. In fact, captured Việt Minh documents showed that Mười Trí and those Nguyễn Bình had explicitly deemed suspect—Vũ Tam Anh, Bùi Hữu Phiệt, and Lê Văn Trang—were actively consolidating their forces. Between September and November 1946, Mười Trí’s Detachment 4, Phạm Hữu Đức’s Detachment 5 (formerly part of the Third Division), and Bùi Hữu Phiệt’s Bộ Đội An Điền officially merged to form the Unified Detachments 4-5-An Điền, nominally in response to Nguyễn Bình’s call for self-sufficiency among military units.²¹ And it was on the suggestion of Mười Trí’s lieutenant, Sáu Section, that Nguyễn Bình traveled to a pagoda to meet with disaffected subordinates of Ba Hỷ and Bùi Hữu Phiệt to plan their commanders’ capture. It turned out to be a trap. Although it is unclear whether Mười Trí himself was involved in the scheme, the fact that his close associates carried out a plan to try to kill Nguyễn Bình exacerbated tensions.²²

It is even less clear if Bảy Viễn had knowledge of the ambush. But when he refused to hand Ba Hỷ and Bùi Hữu Phiệt over to the DRV’s Southern Public Security Service [Sở Công An Nam Bộ] for investigation, Bảy Viễn appeared to have drawn a line with Nguyễn Bình.²³ The damage to their relationship was irreparable. Months later, in a letter to Nguyễn Văn Trăn, longtime ICP member and Bảy Viễn’s friend, Nguyễn Bình accused Lai Hữu Tài of complicity in the attack and claimed that harboring Ba Hỷ and Bùi Hữu Phiệt was a stratagem to conceal evidence.²⁴ Whatever Nguyễn Bình’s suspicions may have been, Bảy Viễn’s refusal to cooperate is not surprising in light of the captured minutes to a December 1946 meeting of the Nhà Bè District Administrative Committee. They reveal that around the time of the assassination attempt, Nguyễn Bình started to clandestinely extend his influence inside the Bình Xuyên forces. It appears that a Việt Minh cadre, Lê Đức Tài, had been carrying out unspecified activities among Bình Xuyên fighters. His involvement was serious enough to require a fence-mending meeting with province- and county-level Việt Minh leaders. During the meeting, the vice chairman of the Gia Định Provincial Việt Minh tried to distance the government from the cadre, explaining that Lê Đức Tài’s “work vis-à-vis fighters of the Bình Xuyên” was on his personal initiative [*việc làm cá nhân tự động*] and that he had since been removed from all of his duties. Lai Hữu Tài, Bảy Viễn’s representative, in response, expressed willingness to forget “all regrettable incidents that had taken place.”²⁵ A French intelligence report from mid-1947 claims that the Zone Chief had tasked Lê Đức Tài with assassinating Bảy Viễn.²⁶

²⁰ Notes sur le Nommé Bui Van Phiet, QDD No. 23, 10 June 1948, 10H 4199, SHD.

²¹ Captured Document: Procès verbal de la reunion 1/9/46 (Ve Quoc Doan, Troupes unies, Chi Doi 4 et 5, An Dien-Binh Xuyen, VQD de la region Saigon/Cholon), No.280/2 CL 13 E, January 31, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD; Captured Document: Procès verbal de la réunion 6/11/46, No.194/2 CL 14 A, January 20, 1947, 10H 4009, SHD.

²² Trần Kim Trúc, *Tôi Giết Nguyễn Bình: Hồi ký của Tham mưu Trưởng Trung đoàn 25 Bình Xuyên*, (Sài Gòn: Đồng Nai, 1972), 1-28.

²³ Captured Document: Phạm Hùng letter to Nguyễn Văn Trăn, unnumbered note, January 31, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

²⁴ A.M. Savani, *Notes sur les Binh Xuyen* (Saigon: [s.n.] 1954), 86.

²⁵ Captured Document: Ủy Ban Hành Chánh Quận Nhà Bè, Biên Bản Hội Nghị Hành Chánh Quân Sự, December 12, 1946, 10H 4009, SHD.

²⁶ Vue d’ensemble de la situation militaire V.M. en Cochinchine (Service de la Sûreté), No.1604/PSE, June 13, 1947, SPCE 379, Centre d’Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM), Aix-en-Provence. See also Savani, 89.

Throughout much of 1946, then, Nguyễn Bình had been an enthusiastic champion of Bảy Viễn. The two strongmen seem to have had a mutually beneficial relationship. Nguyễn Bình supported Bảy Viễn's consolidation of power at the top of the Bình Xuyên, giving him invaluable official legitimacy by appointing him Deputy Chief of Zone 7. In return, Bảy Viễn would bring a potentially volatile force under control and aid Nguyễn Bình's mission to create a unified DRV army in the south. The latter also expected Bảy Viễn—and by extension the Bình Xuyên—to support efforts to neutralize the DRV's allies-turned-detractors, notably non-communist and religious groups. Bảy Viễn seems to have toed the party line, up to a point. He even tried to play mediator. But by 1947, what began as a fruitful collaboration came to an end.²⁷

Southern DRV's Internal Struggle by Proxy

By 1947, the Việt Minh-led southern resistance was on the brink of collapse. Nguyễn Bình found it increasingly difficult to corral the south's powerful armed groups. Indeed, as Christopher Goscha writes, the fragile resistance coalition descended into mass political violence. By May, Nguyễn Bình's troops were engaged in a civil war with the major factions of the Cao Đài in Tây Ninh and the Hoà Hảo in the southwest. Soldiers and adherents of both defected in droves.²⁸ Yet, these conflagrations in the south explain neither why Bảy Viễn ultimately left the resistance, nor why he waited until 1948 to do so. After all, the Bình Xuyên was the one of three major armed organizations that remained with the DRV when large contingents of both the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài rallied to the French. Observers and historians have described the blowup between the Bình Xuyên and the DRV as inevitable, but they overlook the complex dynamics at play inside the latter.²⁹ I argue that, more than political differences, the rivalry between Nguyễn Bình and Bảy Viễn was in part fueled by a contest for control of the resistance war. A bureaucratic battle was being waged between Nguyễn Bình, the military chief, and the rest of the southern DRV leadership, namely those heading the Administrative and (ICP) Territorial Committees.

One manifestation of the Nguyễn Bình-Bảy Viễn rivalry was the contest over Saigon-Cholon. As Christopher Goscha has noted, a “symbiosis developed between the *maquis* and the city” during the Indochina War, where Hanoi and Saigon played a pivotal role as battlefields and sources of materiel.³⁰ Jurisdiction over this key arena of the war was unclear. In March 1946, within months of traveling south, Nguyễn Bình began building a “special service” of the inchoate southern army, which came to be known as Action Committees [Ban Công Tác]. Unrivalled control over armed action was most important to him. The fractured nature of the southern resistance had prompted his own assignment to the south as the DRV's military delegate. Beginning in January 1946, Nguyễn Bình had decided to dissolve existing armed units in Saigon-Cholon—including the predecessor to the DRV Public Security [Công an], then known as the National Defense Guard [Quốc gia Tự vệ Cuộc]—and establish his own network.³¹

²⁷ According to François Guillemot, one of the reasons for Bảy Viễn's turning against Nguyễn Bình was the execution of Huỳnh Phú Sổ. Guillemot, 428.

²⁸ Christopher Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army: General Nguyễn Bình and War in the South,” in *Naissance d'un Etat-parti: le Việt Nam depuis 1945*, eds. Goscha and Benoît de Trégodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), 343.

²⁹ Savani, 72. Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army,” 346.

³⁰ Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État Né de la Guerre, 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 159.

³¹ Goscha, “La Guerre par d'Autres Moyens,” 40. It is interesting to note that Nguyễn Văn Trăn was made the Commissioner of the National Defense Guard [Ủy trưởng Quốc gia Tự vệ Cuộc] in late 1945. His deputy, Cao Đăng

Designed as a plainclothes wing of the army that could infiltrate the city to carry out assassinations, property confiscations, and sabotage, these units were instructed to bypass the “administrative organs” and report only to Nguyễn Bình.³²

Though intimidating, the six initial Action Committees proved less than effective on the urban battlefield. French intelligence in Saigon-Cholon noted that Nguyễn Bình lacked the capacity to attack with scale because the ragtag units routinely failed to execute orders, and frequently required reorganization due to arrests by French security forces.³³ Nguyễn Văn Hâm, their chief commander, had to issue a circular to rein in unruly units, chastising them for acting “contrary to principles and beyond their jurisdiction,” and reminding them that “once again, robberies, gambling, law and order” were outside their purview.³⁴ When assessing the Action Committees, he found them lacking organization, leadership, and discipline. Though the administrative organs were not necessarily averse to armed activity in the city, they likely chafed at Nguyễn Bình’s unilateral power there, especially given the urban units’ uneven effectiveness and lax discipline.³⁵ Moreover, throughout 1946, particularly between the signings of March 6 Accord and the September *modus vivendi*, Nguyễn Bình had to be reminded time and again to cease terrorist activities. In late 1946, with the start of hostilities in the north, the DRV had trouble “turning on and off” Nguyễn Bình’s “angry war.”³⁶

During this period of turmoil, southern DRV leaders began discussing plans to create an administrative-military organ to unify and regulate the array of urban armed groups that had carved up Saigon-Cholon. In retrospect, it was the DRV’s attempt to keep a volatile situation and a hotheaded military leader in check. A vocal proponent of this move was Nguyễn Văn Trăn (alias Bảy Trăn), former Commissioner of the National Defense Guard and a Territorial Committee member. A native of Chợ Đệm who attended the Lycée Pétrus Ký, he worked for the French-language communist paper *Le Peuple* [The People] and its clandestine Vietnamese-language counterpart *Dân Chúng* during the Popular Front period.³⁷ To escape the French Sûreté’s dragnet at the end of this period of relative openness, Nguyễn Văn Trăn fled into the mountains.³⁸ He reputedly befriended both Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí during this time of self-imposed exile,³⁹ and in late 1945, fought alongside the two men on the northern flank of Saigon-Cholon.⁴⁰ It was during this early period in the conflict that the idea of unifying Saigon-Cholon military activities under Bảy Viễn was initially broached. During a series of meetings in late November 1945 at Bảy Viễn’s headquarters in Cầu Xáng, Nguyễn Văn Trăn argued that in order

Chiếm became the chief of public security [Công an] in early 1946.

³² Étude sur les Ban Cong Tac (2ème Bureau), No.844/2, August 5, 1947, 10H 4090, SHD.

³³ Bulletin d’Information du Secteur Saigon-Cholon, Deuxième Quinzaine de Janvier 1947, No.110/2, January 27, 1947, 10H 4282, SHD.

³⁴ Nguyễn Văn Hâm, Trường Chi Huy Công Tác Saigon-Cholon, Thông Sứ, Số 26/TS, June 7, 1947, 10H 4090, SHD.

³⁵ It is likely that for these reasons—ineffectiveness and impunity—that the Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee reclassified the Action Committees as “guerrilla companies” [*đại đội du kích*] in November 1947. Vietnamese historians claim that this reclassification and reorganizations “unified the armed and quasi-armed forces active in the city, placing them under the direct command” of the Territorial Committee and the local urban authority. See *Lịch Sử Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định Kháng Chiến*, 141-142.

³⁶ Goscha, “A Popular Side of the Vietnamese Army,” 340-42.

³⁷ Nguyễn Công Khánh, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Sài Gòn-TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 1865-1995* (TP HCM: nxb Tổng Hợp TP HCM, 2006), 168.

³⁸ Trần Văn Giàu, *Hồi Ký 1940-1945* (Dayton, OH: Thời Đại Mới, 2011), 238; Nguyễn Văn Trăn, 67-68.

³⁹ Nguyễn Hùng, *Sư Thúc Hoà Hào: Tiểu Thuyết Tư Liệu [Hoà Hào Master and Disciple: A Documentary Novel]* (Hậu Giang: nxb Tổng Hợp Hậu Giang, 1990), 8.

⁴⁰ Nguyễn Văn Trăn, *Viết Cho Mẹ và Quốc Hội*, 130

to achieve quick results, a streamlining of military activities in Saigon-Cholon and Chợ Lớn Province was necessary. Armed group leaders gathered at the meeting (made up of neighborhood-level Vanguard Youth leaders but also including Bình Xuyên chiefs Dương Văn Dương, Mười Trí, Ba Hỷ, and Lâm Văn Đức) elected Bảy Viễn to be chief-of-staff. The retreat of major resistance forces from the city and its periphery forestalled the plan.⁴¹

A year later, Nguyễn Văn Trăn's idea was greeted with approbation from members of the Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee. From their perspective, the presence of four separate armed organizations—the DRV Public Security, Bảy Viễn's local guerrillas [*du kích địa phương*], suicide squads [*cắm tử*], and Nguyễn Bình's Action Committees—created jurisdictional overlap and frequent conflict. Nguyễn Bình and Bảy Viễn seemed reluctant to discuss the matter, however. The Saigon-Cholon administrators thus enlisted Nguyễn Văn Trăn as a go-between. With his intervention, the Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee, Huỳnh Văn Vàng (Saigon-Cholon Public Security Services [*Công an Ty*]), Nguyễn Văn Hâm (head of Nguyễn Bình's Action Committees), and representatives sent by Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí assembled to discuss the specifics for establishing the Urban Military Affairs Committee [*Ủy ban Quân sự Thành*]. The creation of this committee, the conveners explained, would address the “lack of cooperation,” which had often caused the units to “collide” with one another. The attendees elected Bảy Viễn as the committee's chief-of-staff, while Nguyễn Bình's man, Nguyễn Văn Hâm (alias Sáu Hâm) became his deputy.

This bureaucratic move strengthened Bảy Viễn's claim on Saigon-Cholon, cementing and legitimating his *de facto* influence there. Saigon-Cholon was Bảy Viễn's home turf—first as a local tough in the 1930s and 1940s, and then as a strongman Trần Văn Giàu tapped to become the military chief of the fledgling Saigon-Cholon Resistance Committee.⁴² Bảy Viễn and the substantial force under his command were not only a threat to Nguyễn Bình's control over military matters; the Urban Military Affairs Committee's responsibility to “regularize” tax collection by armed units also compromised his hold on the city's lucrative “tax base.” As much as Nguyễn Bình bemoaned the fact that the city was not razed in the early days of French reconquest, Saigon-Cholon was an integral part of the DRV political economy.⁴³ French journalist Lucien Bodard wrote that “Saigon above all is a ‘cash cow.’ To survive, Nguyễn Bình is literally grafted onto the prosperity brought by war.”⁴⁴ From both a military and economic perspective, Nguyễn Bình had little incentive to authorize a separate organ outside his immediate control.

In a March 1947 letter, Nguyễn Phú Hữu, vice chairman of the Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee, clearly frustrated by Nguyễn Bình's foot-dragging, urged him to “officially approve” [*chuẩn y chánh thức*] the establishment of the Urban Military Affairs Committee.⁴⁵ This committee did eventually come into being in the form of the Urban Command Committee [*Ban Chỉ huy Thành*]. But in spite of the Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee's maneuvers—with the connivance if not approval of the Territorial Committee—Nguyễn Bình

⁴¹ Bulletin de reinsegnements (2ème Bureau): Réunions tenues à Cau-Xang (Duc-Hoa) les 30-11 et 10-12, Procès verbal de la réunion, No. P23/2, December 14, 1945, 10H 528, SHD.

⁴² Ibid. See also Julie Pham, “Revolution, Communism, and History in the Thought of Trần Văn Giàu” (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2008), 143.

⁴³ Christopher Goscha, “Colonial Hanoi and Saigon at War: Social Dynamics of the Viet Minh's ‘Underground City,’” *War in History* 20(22) (2013): 245. Goscha, *Un État Né de la Guerre*, 130-31.

⁴⁴ Lucien Bodard, *La Guerre d'Indochine: L'Enlèvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 106

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Phú Hữu (Phó Chủ Tịch Ủy Ban Hành Chánh Địa Phương Saigon-Cholon) letter to Nguyễn Bình (Ủy Viên Quân Sự Nam Bộ), Số 167/TV, March 12, 1947, 10H 4282, SHD.

was able to thwart any attempted circumscriptions. In May, Nguyễn Bình set out to create a parallel organ called the Saigon-Cholon Military Command [Commandement Militaire de la Place], which would claim military, administrative, and civil powers. And it would answer directly to him because, he reasoned, the Urban Command Committee lacked the capacity to “handle military questions.”⁴⁶ So effective were Nguyễn Bình’s maneuvers that by October 1947, the Second Bureau [Deuxième Bureau, i.e., French military intelligence] reported that despite policies to make Saigon-Cholon independent of Nguyễn Bình, and notwithstanding successive reorganizations of the Urban Command Committee, Nguyễn Bình’s influence over the city remained “complete.” Officially, Bảy Viễn remained the president, but actual powers over the Self-Defense Force, National Defense Force, and the Action Committees rested with Nguyễn Bình and Nguyễn Văn Hâm. “One can say that Bảy Viễn has been practically pushed out from Saigon,” the report concluded.⁴⁷

Bảy Viễn’s Alternative Lifelines

Even with the backing of Nguyễn Văn Trán, whose influence at this time cannot be underestimated, Bảy Viễn found himself in a precarious position. His role in the Việt Minh’s internal power struggle, though empowering, placed him in the crosshairs of his fellow strongman. The rising tension magnified the importance of Bảy Viễn’s pre-1945 non-communist connections, especially his friendship with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu (alias Maurice Thiệu), which would prove vital to the creation of an alternative power base and a potential source of political leverage. As a nationalist militant, he used his position to help Bảy Viễn build his military, financial, and political network in Saigon-Cholon. Just as importantly, he shared and appealed to Bảy Viễn’s patriotic impulse while delivering him the concrete means to carry out his “heroic” struggle.

A competitive cyclist in his youth, Maurice Thiệu became well-known as a secretive nationalist operative in Saigon-Cholon. He dabbled in horse racing, gambling, and illicit trade. According to French intelligence, he first met underworld figures like Mười Trí and Bảy Viễn in 1940, during an arms sale.⁴⁸ World War II saw him working at a Japanese mill, a job he likely secured through a close friendship with Mitsushiro Matsushita, a Japanese businessman and a spy sympathetic to Vietnamese nationalism. Maurice Thiệu credited Matsushita with saving him from financial ruin.⁴⁹ After the March 9 *coup de force*, he entered the service of Lâm Ngọc Đường, who replaced Marcel Bazin at the helm of the Special Police of Eastern Cochinchina [Police Spéciale de l’Est] (PSE), the political arm of the Cochinchinese Sûreté. With the security services no longer under French control, Maurice Thiệu arranged for amnesty to be granted to those who would “serve the cause of the Fatherland,” including Bảy Viễn and his men.⁵⁰ Just before Japanese capitulation, Maurice Thiệu was a leader and primary arms supplier to the

⁴⁶ Fiche (2ème Bureau): Concernant l’organisation du Commandement Militaire rebelle dans la région de Saigon-Cholon, No.4420/2S, July 19, 1947, HCI Conseiller Politique (Conspol) 108, CAOM.

⁴⁷ Fiche de renseignements (2ème Bureau) sur la Cochinchine, No.5645/2.S, October 16, 1947, 10H 4221, SHD.

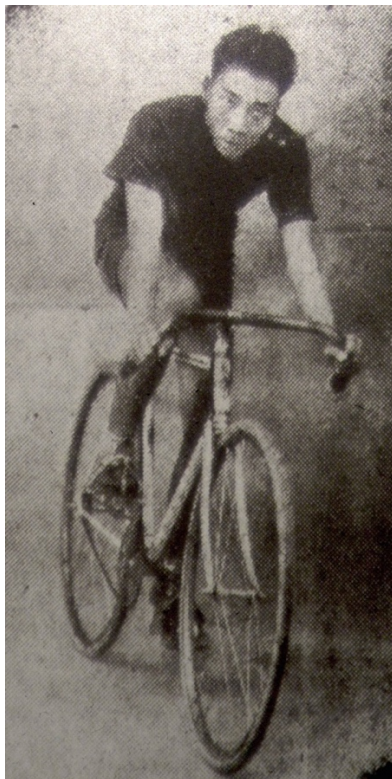
⁴⁸ Unless otherwise noted, information in this paragraph are drawn from Notice de renseignements: Concernant Nguyen Van Thien dit Maurice Thiệu dit Tu Thien (SDECE), March 1951, 10R 96, SHD.

⁴⁹ 9è Rapport (Service des déserteurs japonais): Concernant la recherché de 4 D.J., No.689/Z, October 7, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD. For more on Matsushita’s activities, particularly those involving the Cao Đài, see Dean Meyers and My-Van Tran, “The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month: The Cao Dai, Prince Cuong De and the Japanese in 1937-39,” *International Journal of Asian Pacific Studies* Vol.2, No.1 (2006).

⁵⁰ Savani, 11.

Saigon-Cholon armed groups.

By August 1945, he had joined the resistance led by Trần Văn Giàu and became Bảy Viễn's secretary. At the same time, according to François Guillemot, Maurice Thiên joined the Greater Vietnam Nationalist Party [Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng] (ĐVQDD) after meeting Phạm Huy Lễ, the party's leader in the south. He helped organize sabotage units as well as manage the party's finances for a time.⁵¹ In November, he accompanied ĐVQDD leader Phạm Cao Hùng to Hà Nội.⁵² French sources disagree over whether Maurice Thiên intended to ask the DRV for reinforcement or to propose to Nguyễn Hải Thần and other non-communist leaders a plan to oust Trần Văn Giàu.⁵³ In any case, he returned to Saigon-Cholon a few months later empty-handed, deliberating whether to leave the communist-led Việt Minh. In early March 1946, he was arrested by the PSE, now back in French hands, which handed him over to the Sûreté aux Armées.⁵⁴ During interrogation, he claimed to be in a position to rally the Bình Xuyên leaders Bảy Viễn, Mười Trí, and Lâm Văn Đức (alias Tư Ty). It appears that he was in custody until October 1946, when charges against him were dropped, though he remained beholden to his captors.



Maurice Thiên in 1930, shortly before departing for Shanghai. (Source: *La Dépêche d'Indochine* 19 May 1930.)

When Maurice Thiên's returned to action, Bảy Viễn's relationship with Nguyễn Bình had

⁵¹ Guillemot, 309.

⁵² Notice de renseignements: Concernant Mr. Pham-Cao Hung alias Truong Tuan Hung alias Cap Giang (Service de Sécurité du Haut-Commissariat au Nord Vietnam), unnumbered, August 1952, 10R 128, SHD.

⁵³ Note de renseignements sur Nguyen Van Thien dit Maurice Thiên [Intelligence note on Nguyễn Văn Thiên, aka Maurice Thiên], unnumbered, undated, 10H 5001, SHD.

⁵⁴ Renseignements (Sûreté aux Armées par Commissariat Police Spéciale de l'Est), No.1100, March 3, 1946, 10H 528, SHD.

begun to deteriorate and the battle for Saigon-Cholon was escalating. Nguyễn Văn Xuân had just months earlier replaced Le Văn Hoạch as Prime Minister of the Cochinchinese Republic, bringing noted nationalist Trần Văn Ân into his government. While Nguyễn Văn Trăn and his allies engaged in a cold war with Nguyễn Bình, Bảy Viễn used his official status to assert his presence in the city. Maurice Thiên emerged as a key player. His arrest and consequent role as an informant circumscribed his activities, but conversely, it was this unique position that enabled him to move in the interstices of the conflict in ways few could.

Maurice Thiên established his base at No.31 rue de Canton, from which he provided a key material and political lifeline to Bảy Viễn. He supplied Bảy Viễn's troops in Rừng Sác with fabric, vegetables, sugar, coffee, medicine, and arms and munitions via a cadre of agents.⁵⁵ Bảy Viễn's sprawling urban network—three Traitor Elimination Committees [Ban Trừ gian] and ten Military Espionage Committees [Ban Do thám Quân sự]—relied on Maurice Thiên to provide government-issued travel passes to help fighters infiltrate French military positions, and to intervene on behalf of arrested agents.⁵⁶ No doubt, Maurice Thiên's activities blurred the boundary between the warring parties. For example, the commander of the Traitor Elimination Committee 2 reported to Bảy Viễn that two agents were using French Second Bureau passes to carry out activities, and of two newly recruited agents, one had worked in the French Sûreté and the other in a Second Bureau Commando.⁵⁷ With a growing network of operatives and a strategically positioned collaborator, Bảy Viễn was in a stronger position than the French had thought when they pronounced his “elimination” from the city. To further fence his units off from Nguyễn Bình, Bảy Viễn informed his Traitor Elimination Committees that they did not have to report to Nguyễn Bình, effectively placing them outside the Zone Chief's purview.⁵⁸

Bảy Viễn's collaboration with Maurice Thiên was clearly a threat to Nguyễn Bình. In the latter's October 1947 arrest order, Maurice Thiên was described as an “extremely dangerous” operative sent by the French who not only extorted from the Grand Monde and leaked numerous secret DRV orders to the enemy, but also managed to gain the good graces of detained agents by intervening on their behalf.⁵⁹ Throughout that year, to facilitate the support activities, Maurice Thiên created vital revenue streams through protection rackets. Extortion, kidnapping, and boldfaced threats of terrorist attack were routine methods he and his men employed, not unlike Nguyễn Bình's own subordinates.⁶⁰ No “client” was more essential or lucrative than the gambling establishments. But his efforts encroached on existing financial arrangements. According to one Action Committee member under interrogation, Nguyễn Bình had extorted two million piasters from operators of the Grand Monde amusement park, who then decided to pay an additional five to ten thousand per day for “protection” of the gambling enterprise in Chợ

⁵⁵ Renseignements (2ème Bureau), No.1338/2S, December 30, 1947, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁵⁶ Tu Van Lang (Chef du Service d'Espionnage Militaire No.2) letter to Maurice Thiên, No.6, January 24, 1946, found in Bulletin de renseignements No.3446 a/s documents trouvés dans les papiers de Maurice Thien, No. 2053/2S, May 15, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁵⁷ Triệu Ngọc Long (Trưởng Ban Trừ Gian Số 2), Phúc trình báo cáo lên Khu Bộ Phó, November 18, 1947, 10H 4090, SHD.

⁵⁸ Document 5 in Traduction de documents trouvés le 24-12-1947 dans l'opération du Nhabe, 1319/2S, 27 December 1947, SHD 4090.

⁵⁹ Nguyen Binh (Commissaire Militaire), Ordre Secret, No.568/T5, October 14, 1947, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁶⁰ During a Saigon-Cholon Administrative Committee meeting, local military commanders “denounced the abuses committed by the Action Committees: arbitrary arrests, extortions, etc...and those by the committees placed under the orders of Bay Vien.” See Note (Sûreté Fédérale): Réunion de dirigeants “Viet Minh” de la Région Saigon-Cholon, No. 10842/SG/1, September 6, 1947, Conspol 108, CAOM.

Lớn.⁶¹ Merchants and pharmacists regularly made “donations” to ensure protection as well.⁶²

But it was not only the fight over control of Saigon-Cholon that drew Nguyễn Bình’s ire. By virtue of Maurice Thiên’s key role, the territorial struggle became inherently political. For reasons of both politics and self-preservation, he fanned the smoldering tension between Nguyễn Bình and Bảy Viễn. During this same period, Nguyễn Bình’s harsh measures to centralize authority and bring into line politicized religious sects caused massive defections. Similar attempts to increase control were also employed vis-à-vis the Bình Xuyên, such as integrating a Việt Minh-commanded regiment into the Bình Xuyên forces, or severely punishing Mười Trí for protecting Hoà Hảo leader Huỳnh Phú Sổ, who was later executed.⁶³ Amidst this political turbulence, Maurice Thiên vowed to win Bảy Viễn over to the non-communist ranks.⁶⁴ He and Lâm Ngọc Đường sought to impress upon non-communists and, above all, their French patrons, of the Bình Xuyên’s absolute commitment to the anti-DRV cause. Bảy Viễn, aware of Maurice Thiên’s uncompromising views and fearing for his safety, urged him to be “prudent” and refrain from “speaking against Nguyễn Bình”: He “knows you are my friend and that you are my ‘eyes and ears.’ Stay behind us so we can support you in the fight against him.”⁶⁵ An informant inside Action Committee 3 also warned Maurice Thiên that he was surrounded by Nguyễn Bình’s agents.⁶⁶

In spite of Bảy Viễn’s stated antipathy toward Nguyễn Bình’s “dictatorship” and the prominence of his name in non-communist plans for an anti-DRV front, the Bình Xuyên continued its fight against French troops.⁶⁷ Maurice Thiên must have realized that Bảy Viễn’s feelings did not translate to a rejection of the DRV leadership generally. There was little indication that he was committed to abandoning the *maquis* or that he disparaged communists from an ideological position. After all, Bảy Viễn’s other confidant, Nguyễn Văn Trấn, had gathered substantial support among DRV leaders to place him in command of Saigon-Cholon and, later, Zone 7. As Nguyễn Văn Sâm, a leader of the National Unification Front [Mặt trận Quốc gia Thống nhất] who claimed to have won over the Bình Xuyên, observed, Bảy Viễn lacked a precise “political tendency” and remained “submissive to Nguyễn Bình.”⁶⁸

In August 1947, Bảy Viễn also issued a proclamation denouncing the French, Cochinchinese “separatists,” and other “sycophants” [*vuốt đuôi lương*] and “war profiteers” [*dầu cơ kháng chiến*] who spread rumors of the Bình Xuyên’s support for them. He reiterated the group’s commitment to the DRV: “The Bình Xuyên belongs to the Bình Xuyên fighters. The Bình Xuyên belongs to the DRV. The Bình Xuyên belongs to all twenty-five million compatriots. . . . On behalf of the fighters, we affirm the Bình Xuyên’s genuine commitment to the

⁶¹ Goscha, *Un État Né de la Guerre*, 163.

⁶² Renseignements (2ème Bureau): Ravitaillement des rebelles en Cochinchine (Source: Sûreté Fédérale, interrogatoire d’un prévenu), No.1105/2, March 15, 1947, 10H 532, SHD.

⁶³ Bulletin de renseignements (2ème Bureau): Attitude du Viet Minh vis-à-vis des Binh Xuyen, No.3184/2S, April 30, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁶⁴ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s lutte d’influence entre Nguyen Binh et les Nationalistes, No.13826, April 18, 1947, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁶⁵ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s extraits d’une lettre écrite par Bay Vien à Maurice Thien (Traduction), No.16110, November 5, 1947, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁶⁶ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s condamnation a mort de Maurice Thien par les V.M., No.16131, November 4, 1947, 10H 4014, SHD.

⁶⁷ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s des Binh Xuyen, No.14540, August 2, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁶⁸ Renseignements (2ème Bureau): A/s du Thanh Bo Dia Phuong Dan Xa Dang, No.922/2/X, March 4, 1947, 10H 532, SHD.

war of national salvation.”⁶⁹ In practice, Bảy Viễn likewise complied with DRV policies, often against Maurice Thiên’s advice. This was evident in their disagreement over the Việt Minh’s blockade of rice transport into the city. While Bảy Viễn instructed his troops to strictly enforce the blockade, Maurice Thiên deliberately contradicted the order.⁷⁰ Months earlier, Bảy Viễn had flatly refused his request to circumvent the blockade, citing the Việt Minh’s law against the transport of paddy.⁷¹ When Bảy Viễn failed to listen to his entreaties and reiterated his order to destroy two cargo ships, Maurice Thiên swiftly issued a counter-order to block the action.⁷²

Choosing A Strongman

Bảy Viễn was no puppet; his indecision was studied. The delicate balancing act had provided reprieve from French attacks while yielding support from the DRV brass. By 1947, the DRV administrative and party organs had become weary of Nguyễn Bình’s unilateral approach and his Manichean mindset. Disagreements over treatment of the Bình Xuyên reflected a broader pattern of civil-military tension that permeated the resistance, one where the Southern Administrative Committee’s preferred policy of moderation and diplomacy ran up against Nguyễn Bình’s “policy of force.” According to Yves Gras, this disagreement in the DRV leadership led to “the only victory the French won on the field: the *ralliement* of the political-religious sects.”⁷³ In an effort to forestall another schism after the exodus of the Cao Đài and the Hoà Hảo, the Resistance Committee proposed naming Nguyễn Văn Trấn—known for his personal relationship with Mười Trí and Bảy Viễn—as its Military Inspector [Thanh Tra Quân Sự Ủy Ban Kháng Chiến]. He was tasked with “clearing up misunderstandings between different groups and unifying the resistance.”⁷⁴

The tension between the Việt Minh strongmen became so critical that Phạm Ngọc Thuần, vice chairman of the Southern Administrative Committee, and Ung Văn Khiêm, its head of internal affairs, privately met with Mười Trí, Tư Ty, and Lai Hữu Tài (Bảy Viễn’s representative) in April 1947. In their report, Phạm Ngọc Thuần and Ung Văn Khiêm noted the indignation [*nỗi lòng uất ức*] that had been festering for some time and underscored the need to resolve any misunderstandings [*ngộ nhận*] to better unify the forces in the fight for independence. They sent Nguyễn Văn Trấn to mediate between the two feuding parties. To maintain the peace, he and Phạm Ngọc Thuần would become the *de facto* decision makers on all matters related to the Bình Xuyên, though ostensibly in consultation with Nguyễn Bình.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Lê Văn Viễn (Khu Bộ Phó Khu 7, Nước Việt Nam), Bình Xuyên (Thanh Minh), August 10, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷⁰ Captured Document: Decree issued by Lê Văn Viễn (Zone 7 Deputy Chief) on October 26, 1947, found in Traduction des documents trouvés le 24.12.1947 dans l’opération du Nhabe, No.1319/2S, December 27, 1947, 10H 4090, SHD.

⁷¹ Renseignements (2ème Bureau): A/s lettre adressée par Bay Vien à Maurice Thien (translation), No. 2978/2, July 24, 1947, 10H 534, SHD.

⁷² Captured Document: Trình Van Quang (Ban Tru Gian No.1) letter to Maurice Thiên (alias Thong Che), No.T.G./52, November 20, 1947, found in Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG), November 24, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷³ Yves Gras, 180. Factions of the Cao Đài rallied to the French between November 1946 and January 1947, bringing along 4,500 men.

⁷⁴ Note de renseignement (2ème Bureau): Action politique et militaire du commandement Viet Minh en Indochine du Sud, No.706/2, February 18, 1947, 10H 4089, SHD.

⁷⁵ Phạm Ngọc Thuần (Phó Chủ Tịch), Ung Văn Khiêm (Ủy Viên Nội Vụ), Nguyễn Văn Trấn (Phái Viên Ủy Ban Kháng Chiến Miền Nam Việt Nam), Biên Bản [Phạm Ngọc Thuần (Vice Chairman), Ung Văn Khiêm

Nguyễn Văn Trán, more than any other in the resistance, appreciated the value of the Bình Xuyên to the viability of the southern resistance. Uniquely positioned as a credible voice vis-à-vis both the southern DRV leadership and the Bình Xuyên, he tried to solidify relations between the two. In a March report to the Southern Administrative and Resistance Committees, he wrote glowingly of the Bình Xuyên's commitment to the resistance: "The Bình Xuyên's political attitude remains the same—support the government, kill the enemy, eliminate traitors." He also tried to assuage fears that the Bình Xuyên would follow the Cao Đài to the French. According to the report, Bảy Viễn was supposed to have declared: "Who dares to say we [the Bình Xuyên] will not fight the reactionary Cao Đài? . . . If the Việt Minh is defeated and the French turn to eliminate the Bình Xuyên, how can the Bình Xuyên survive?" In an implicit criticism of Nguyễn Bình, Nguyễn Văn Trán stressed that "regarding [the Bình Xuyên's] political position, one cannot casually say that they will defect to the French, or be won over by the Tây Ninh Cao Đài or Huỳnh Phú Sổ."⁷⁶

Nguyễn Văn Trán was more direct in his criticism of Nguyễn Bình in a report he sent to the Territorial Committee in April 1947. In defense of the Bình Xuyên, he flatly dismissed the suspicion that the group was about to rally to the Cao Đài or to Huỳnh Phú Sổ, and emphasized its loyalty to the resistance. He explained that the Bình Xuyên chiefs did not respect Nguyễn Bình partly because the latter had not been "impartial" in his treatment of Mười Trĩ. Nguyễn Bình, the letter continues, must be reminded of his mission, which was to unify the southern armed forces. Nguyễn Văn Trán stressed that the cooperation of the Bình Xuyên was crucial to safeguarding the communication and transportation artery connecting central and southern Vietnam via Bà Rịa and Đồng Nai. He, along with the Southern Administrative Committee, thus advocated a "flexible method" to preserve the relationship, while Nguyễn Bình insisted on employing "absolutist methods."⁷⁷

In July 1947, the communist newspaper *Giải Phóng* published an open letter, penned by Eastern Zone Political Inspector Hồ Văn Long, trying to tactfully uphold the reputation of both Nguyễn Bình and the Bình Xuyên. He blamed the internal tensions on the provocation of the French and traitors while praising the rectitude of the Bình Xuyên: "Seeing that the Bình Xuyên fighters' patriotism could not be shaken, the French and its band of sell-outs created a plan to divide the Bình Xuyên fighters from the Zone 7 Chief. They sent secret agents into different organs of the army to instigate 'indiscipline' [*xúi dục làm những việc phạm kỷ luật*]*—banditry, murder, assassination of Zone Chief Nguyễn Bình, arrest and execution of government agents.*" Though careful to hold both sides accountable, the letter stressed that "it is important . . . to pierce through exaggerations large and small," and "to be fair and judicious" in resolving all conflicts.⁷⁸

Alarmed by successive breaks with the Cao Đài and the Hoà Hảo, and hardly comforted by Nguyễn Văn Trán's report on the Bình Xuyên, the Territorial Committee clarified its policy of cooperation at a conference in late December 1947. The resolution that emerged placed the focus on unity. French success in winning over the religious sects and the Franco-Vietnamese effort to rally the Bình Xuyên in order to create a "pure nationalist" [*quốc gia thuần túy*], anti-communist bloc exposed the need for the resistance to strictly follow a policy of unification.

(Commissioner of the Interior), Nguyễn Văn Trán (Envoy of the Resistance Committee of Southern Vietnam), Proceedings], April 27, 1947, 10H 4282, SHD.

⁷⁶ Phúc trình tháng 3 năm 1947 (Phái viên Ủy Ban Kháng Chiến Miền Nam Việt Nam), unnumbered, undated, Folder 130, Ủy Ban Kháng Chiến Hành Chánh Nam Bộ (UBKCHCNB), TTLTQG3, Hà Nội.

⁷⁷ Bulletin de renseignements (2ème Bureau): Attitude du Viet Minh vis-à-vis des Bình Xuyên, No.3184/2.S, April 30, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷⁸ Hồ Văn Long, "Giữa Chiến Sĩ Bình Xuyên và K.T. Khu 7," *Giải Phóng* 17 (July 27, 1947), 10H 4188, SHD.

More than ever, the Territorial Committee concluded, “we must lead the resistance war but we do not have to wield all authority. We must always be correct, generous, and sincere in our policy with other political groups. Close alliance and unity must be realized not just at the leadership level or at conferences, but also at lower levels, in the daily activities of the resistance. This and only this will prevent the French colonialists from exploiting or instigating rightists and the disaffected to divide and create conflicts between our organization and other genuinely patriotic groups.”⁷⁹

The Territorial Committee and Administrative Committee communicated their concerns about Nguyễn Bình to the leadership in Hà Nội. In March, Lê Duẩn warned Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp that strife between Nguyễn Bình and the Bình Xuyên had become dire and asked for immediate intervention without which, he cautioned, “total political and military failure” would result.⁸⁰ He suggested promoting Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí to higher posts to appease them. Likely with approval from above, plans were put in place to replace Nguyễn Bình with Bảy Viễn. Nguyễn Văn Trấn, in his memoir, claims that Bảy Viễn’s promotion was a major piece of Lê Duẩn’s plan to wrest control of the southern resistance from Nguyễn Bình. The plan was to promote Nguyễn Bình to Commander-in-Chief of southern forces [Tổng Tư lệnh] (with Lê Duẩn himself as political commissar) and thus “dislodge him from a position of real power.” Bảy Viễn would take his place as Zone 7 chief, with Nguyễn Văn Trấn as his political commissar.⁸¹

Failure of the “Neutral Zone”

Just as the DRV leadership moved to empower Bảy Viễn at Nguyễn Bình’s expense, the Republic of Cochinchina under Nguyễn Văn Xuân stepped up efforts to win over the Bình Xuyên chief. Until September 1947, when Nguyễn Văn Xuân rose to replace Lê Văn Hoạch as prime minister, French and non-communists of all stripes eagerly awaited a fallout between Nguyễn Bình and the Bình Xuyên that never took place. In the eyes of Trần Văn Ân, then the Minister of Information, however, the fact that Bảy Viễn had not compromised himself by rallying to the French (as the Cao Đài had done) was key to his potential effectiveness as a leader in a non-communist resistance. Trần Văn Ân believed that a viable nationalist resistance needed a non-ideological figure with military capability. Bảy Viễn, a hero of the resistance with neither religion nor party, fit the bill.⁸²

Indeed, Trần Văn Ân played a pivotal role in efforts to build a non-communist coalition independent of the French. He was already a staunch proponent of Vietnamese independence during his student days in Aix-en-Provence in the 1920s. In the 1930s, after returning from his studies in France, he, as many fellow nationalist intellectuals like Nguyễn An Ninh, Dương Văn Giáo, and Nguyễn Văn Tạo had done, became a newspaperman, working for *Đuốc Nhà Nam* [Southern Torch] and *La Lutte* [The Struggle]. The following year saw Trần Văn Ân devote himself to political organizing, which briefly landed him in prison. During the Japanese occupation, he was said to have entered the service of the Japanese military police while promoting Vietnamese independence as a leader of the Vietnam Restoration Association [Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội or Phục Quốc]. Unable to guarantee his safety in light of his

⁷⁹ Nghị Quyết Đại Biểu Hội Nghị Xứ Ủy ngày 16, 17, 18, 19, 20-12-1947.

http://dangcongsan.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30063&cn_id=97240, accessed 18-11-2016.

⁸⁰ Renseignements, No.232/D6.TS, April 12, 1948, Folder 344, HCI, CAOM.

⁸¹ Nguyễn Văn Trấn, 137-38.

⁸² Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s du plan de regroupement des résistances nationalistes qu’envisagerait le Ministre Tran Van An, No. 16749, December 8, 1947, 10H 4086, SHD.

anti-French activities, the Japanese kept him in Singapore until after the March 9 coup.⁸³ The suspicious French bemoaned Trần Văn Ân's "plan to make the Xuân Government a genuinely nationalist government."⁸⁴ After becoming Minister of Information in late 1947, according to the report, he sought to "bring in elements of his choice to form a solid nationalist core inside [the government] that will back [Nguyễn Văn Xuân's] demands."

One key appointment was Lâm Ngọc Đường who, through Trần Văn Ân's initiative,⁸⁵ became Chief of the National Intelligence Service in January 1948.⁸⁶ Though he was a regular fixture at non-communist political meetings, little biographical information is available. What we do know paints him as a well-connected, militant nationalist with a knack for clandestine organizing. In 1944, the Cochinchinese Sûreté reported that this Bạc Liêu landowner, who had returned from France, was to be recruited into the Vietnam Restoration Association, the same organization of which Trần Văn Ân was the general secretary.⁸⁷ His whereabouts are unclear until the March 9 coup, when he replaced Marcel Bazin as the head of the PSE, working under Huỳnh Văn Phương and Hồ Vĩnh Ký. It was in this role that he, through Maurice Thiên, first recruited Bảy Viễn and his men. After the return of the French, he led a peripatetic political life, facilitating Đại Việt activities in the south, joining Nguyễn Hoà Hiệp's Third Division, then Bảy Viễn's staff after the former's defection, and becoming a member of the Vietnamese Democratic-Socialist Party [Đảng Việt Nam Dân Chủ Xã Hội] Central Committee.⁸⁸

The emergence of nationalist figures like Trần Văn Ân and Lâm Ngọc Đường steered the French-backed Cochinchinese Republic toward incubating rather than neutralizing nationalist resistance. In discussions with Nguyễn Văn Xuân, Trần Văn Ân reasoned that if everyone simply left the resistance, the French would have no need for nationalists and their demand for independence would not be met.⁸⁹ Instead, he wanted Bảy Viễn to maintain a "neutral zone" [*vùng trung lập* or *khu trung lập*], a territory to which fighters who opposed both the DRV and the French could retreat.⁹⁰ Afterward, Nguyễn Văn Xuân sent a letter to Bảy Viễn, via Maurice Thiên, broaching the idea of a neutral zone. In reference to the "Bảo Đại Solution" that had been gaining steam since late 1947, Nguyễn Văn Xuân informed Bảy Viễn that Franco-Vietnamese negotiations "would achieve good results," that they would bring together elites from all three regions to form a government under the former emperor. In order to "consolidate a national force and to create a basis for the formation of a national army," he advocated the creation of a neutral

⁸³ Notice de renseignements: Concernant M. Tran Van An, attached to "Séjour en France de M. Tran Van An, Ministre de l'Information du Gouvernement Provisoire de Cochinchine," No.2883 Cab., March 30, 1948, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Série Asie-Océanie Indochine 349, Archives Diplomatiques de France [Diplomatic Archives of France], La Courneuve. Nguyễn Hoài Vân, "Tiểu Sử Cụ Trần Văn Ân," September 11, 2002 (email correspondence with author on November 7, 2015).

⁸⁴ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s Activité politique Vietnamiennne—Groupe de Tran Van An [Regarding Vietnamese political activity—Trần Văn Ân's Group], No.6494, November 19, 1948, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁸⁵ Nguyễn Hoài Vân, "Nói Chuyện với Cụ Trần Văn Ân, Mùa Xuân 1993," April 27, 1993.

⁸⁶ Arrêté: Lam Ngoc Duong est designé Chef du Service National de Renseignements, No.5-S/MD-Cab/S, January 16, 1948, Folder D 5-470, Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt [Office of the Governor of Southern Vietnam] (PTHNV), TTLTQGII.

⁸⁷ Rapport mensuel (Sûreté Intérieure, Cochinchine) 16 Mai au 15 Juin 1944, Conspol 161, CAOM.

⁸⁸ Fiche (SESAG): Sur Lam Ngoc Duong, in Bulletin de renseignements, No.13626, June 3, 1947, 10H 4201, SHD. See also Nguyễn Hoài Vân, "Nói Chuyện với Cụ Trần Văn Ân, Mùa Xuân 1993." Guillemot, 256-57.

⁸⁹ Trần Văn Ân, "Lại thêm vấn đề Lê Văn Viễn về Thành," in *Di Thăm Cựu Thủ Tướng Nguyễn Văn Xuân* (Private Papers). I want to offer my thanks to Mr. Nguyễn Văn Trần (Paris) and Dr. Nguyễn Hoài Vân (Vitré), two close confidants of the late Trần Văn Ân, as well as Mrs. Trần Văn Ân (Rennes) for their hospitality and willingness to share with me his unpublished multivolume autobiographical writings.

⁹⁰ Pierre Dabiezies, "Forces Politiques au Viet Nam" (Thèse pour le Doctorat, Université de Bordeaux, 1955), 165.

zone to concentrate nationalist fighters as they awaited the conclusion of the negotiations. The choice of zone chief was up to Bảy Viễn. Sensitive to Bảy Viễn's self-perception, Nguyễn Văn Xuân assured him: "The organization of this zone [under him] in no way signifies surrender."⁹¹

In early 1948, Nguyễn Văn Xuân sent Trần Văn Ân to discuss the plan with the French military then under General Boyer de Latour's command. Antoine Savani, a Second Bureau agent considered a "mastermind" behind the defection of the religious sects and credited with rallying Bảy Viễn, acted as his representative.⁹² As Trần Văn Ân recalled, he explained to Savani that there would be no better fighter against the DRV than an ex-Việt Minh. Moreover, Bảy Viễn's value was not just military but also political. For that reason, the Bình Xuyên "cannot be seen as defectors [*người đầu hàng*] to the French . . . If Lê Văn Viễn rallies [*về thành*, lit. return to the city] there will no longer be a Bình Xuyên Zone and Lê Văn Viễn himself will have become a creature of the French."⁹³ By this time, there was a marked shift in perception in the French military toward the Bình Xuyên. Whereas in 1946 and early 1947 it saw the rallying of the Bình Xuyên in largely military terms (i.e., to reduce the Việt Minh's armed force and, more importantly, to take their weapons off the battlefield), by late 1947 to early 1948, the Bình Xuyên's appeal encompassed its political capital as non-ideological and well-respected partisans, singularly committed to the protection of the Fatherland.⁹⁴ After consulting with de Latour, Savani agreed to a neutral zone, but pressed for regular French patrols. Trần Văn Ân recalls asking: "If the French frequent and patrol the area, then it is a French Zone. Why not let the Provisional Central Government patrol it instead?" Savani retorted: "[Because then] you can manufacture arms to fight us, who can stop you [then]?" Unwilling to accede to a genuinely neutral territory, the French command broke off talks.

The *Ralliement* that wasn't

The impasse between nationalists inside the Cochinchinese Republic and the French military doomed the neutral zone. In March, the three parties—Nguyễn Văn Xuân's government, the French military, and Bảy Viễn—had agreed to a temporary truce while the idea of the neutral zone was discussed. Under its terms, the French military would be given free movement on the Soài Rạp River in exchange for recognizing Bảy Viễn's authority in his territory and provisioning his troops.⁹⁵ But on March 20, just as talks between Trần Văn Ân and Savani broke down, a launch called "Thanh Vân" traveling from Long Xuyên to Chợ Lớn was hijacked by a band proclaiming to be part of the Bình Xuyên. The men forced their way onto the vessel as it passed through Gia Định, inflicting multiple fatalities, including two French soldiers and four French passengers. The rest of those onboard were robbed of their valuables and freed two days later in Biên Hoà. According to the Sûreté Fédérale report, a hostage recalled seeing Mười Trí and Bảy Viễn among the Việt Minh. The latter was even said to have lectured them on the Việt

⁹¹ Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): Lettre du Général Xuan, Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Viet Nam à Bay Vien (Traduction), No.1210, January 13, 1948, 10H 4201, SHD.

⁹² Christopher Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-1954)* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011), 419.

⁹³ Trần Văn Ân, 17.

⁹⁴ Amiral d'Argenlieu (Haut-Commissaire de France, commandant en Chef) to Général Valluy, Traitement des rebelles condamnés de droit commun, faisant leur soumission, No. 147/EMP, February 6, 1947, 10H 532, SHD.

⁹⁵ Project de convention pour une trêve [Draft agreement of a truce], Unnumbered, Undated, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

Minh's goals of liberty and independence in the resistance war.⁹⁶ The "Thanh Vân Affair" marked a decisive break in the plan to rally the Bình Xuyên. Based on the Sûreté Fédérale report, Bảy Viễn's complicity is apparent.

Did Bảy Viễn intentionally renege on the agreement? Did other Bình Xuyên leaders force his hand? Or was the attack something else entirely? In late 1947 similar dustups between Bình Xuyên troops not under Bảy Viễn's direct command and French forces had nearly compromised the fragile peace that Maurice Thiên tried to maintain.⁹⁷ The Thanh Vân incident, according to French military intelligence, was the result of a similar internal disagreement. "This attack had reportedly been considered between 13 and 17 March [during a meeting of Bình Xuyên commanders]. While [Mai Văn] Vĩnh, Mười Trí, [Năm] Hà wanted to act, Bảy Viễn opposed the undertaking, wanting at least for it to not take place in his zone."⁹⁸ Further complicating the issue, communist Vietnamese historians claim that Thanh Vân was in fact a supply vessel the French intended for Bảy Viễn's forces to capture, part of an effort to win over the Bình Xuyên. "Before the 'enemy ship' was even attacked, it had 'surrendered,'" the historians write, "[the Bình Xuyên's] sampans rushed out and seized Thanh Vân's entire cargo. Immediately after, [Bảy Viễn's] headquarters proclaimed a 'resounding victory,' [and] praised it as an achievement of Detachment No. 9."⁹⁹ A draft copy of the truce between Bảy Viễn and the French military suggests this is indeed a possibility,¹⁰⁰ though the Cochinchinese government reported the "annulment" of the truce and the resumption of armed conflict.

Whether the incident was a result of a broken truce, a product of the Bình Xuyên's internal discord, or a pre-arranged "attack," the Sûreté Fédérale's report raises questions. It appears that the security service zealously implicated Bảy Viễn in the attack in order to derail the ongoing negotiations between military intelligence and Bảy Viễn's faction of the Bình Xuyên, and foil a potential *ralliement*. The mistrust between the two intelligence services was well-known. It was a legacy of the conflict between General Philippe Leclerc, commander of the French Expeditionary Corps, and Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, High Commissioner to Indochina, in which the latter advocated a more aggressive policy toward the DRV.¹⁰¹ D'Argenlieu believed that Leclerc was a victim of "indoctrination" and thus saw military intelligence as similarly "tainted," so he developed an intelligence service that gathered what he deemed trustworthy information. By the end of 1945, according to historian Jean-Marc Le Page, there existed "two opposed services that practically did not speak to each other."¹⁰² Even after Leclerc left Indochina in 1946, the civilian intelligence service regarded military intelligence with suspicion.¹⁰³ Viewed in this context, the Sûreté Fédérale had motivation to put an end to negotiations involving suspect members of the Nguyễn Văn Xuân government and sections of French military intelligence—the Second Bureau (of forces in Cochinchina) and the Sài Gòn branch of the Historical Studies Section [Section d'Études Historiques, Saigon] (SESAG).¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Note (Sûreté Fédérale): Attaque de la chaloupe Thanh-Vân, No. 4399-S, 1 April 1948, Folder D 01-26, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁷ Maurice Thiên letter to Bertrand (2ème Bureau), September 12, 1947, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁹⁸ BR (SESAG): A/s préparatifs d'attaque sur le convoi fluvial de Long Xuyen à Saigon [Preparations of an attack on the riverine convoy from Long Xuyên to Saigon], No. 2451, 3 March 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁹⁹ BDBX, 150.

¹⁰⁰ TTLTQGII 1223

¹⁰¹ Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 242.

¹⁰² Jean-Marc Le Page, *Les Services Secrets en Indochine* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2012), 33.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰⁴ So far as I can tell, the reports and interrogation transcripts about the Thanh Vân hijacking, found at both SHD and CAOM, were all produced by the Sûreté Fédérale.

The fallout was swift. After de Latour and Savani rejected the idea of an independent zone, all of the principal actors either fled or were arrested. Trần Văn Ân briefly considered joining the Bình Xuyên in the *maquis*, but ultimately decided to go to France at the end of March.¹⁰⁵ On April 3, Maurice Thiên was arrested on the charge of clandestinely supplying Bảy Viễn's troops and organizing and harboring his agents in Saigon-Cholon.¹⁰⁶ On April 11, Lâm Ngọc Đường resigned from the National Intelligence Service and fled with twenty agents to the *maquis* to join the Bình Xuyên.¹⁰⁷ Before leaving, he penned a letter of resignation to Nguyễn Văn Xuân in which he lamented the Prime Minister's failure to protect nationalists who had stood by him.¹⁰⁸ Particularly galling was his failure to even register a protest when the Sûreté Fédérale ransacked the offices of the National Intelligence Service and arrested its agents en masse: "The French keep hounding us while you remain passive." Lâm Ngọc Đường cautioned: "You will lose all of your friends and support if you do not adopt a more forceful attitude. You risk being a puppet without being aware of it." Lâm Ngọc Đường also sent a parting letter to Captain Huc, head of SESAG, whom he fondly called a "sincere and loyal friend." In it, he shared his frustrations and explained his need to leave: "My intention, as you know well, was to break the Bình Xuyên from the communists. And we almost achieved our goal . . . had there not been service-to-service rivalry. . . I must go to the *maquis* [now] because General Xuân is too soft, he cannot protect me against the Sûreté Fédérale's [attacks]." He concluded by stressing that if the Sûreté Fédérale continued to direct policy in Cochinchina, it would cost France dearly.¹⁰⁹

With Bảy Viễn's primary intermediaries out of the picture, the Sûreté Fédérale proceeded to clamp down on his men's clandestine activities. On April 30, Sûreté Fédérale agents arrested Ngô Văn Nhơn (alias Clément Nhơn), the onetime bank clerk, publisher of *Tiếng Gọi* [The Call], and French military intelligence agent on charges of supplying the "rebel chief" with cash. Investigators uncovered an arrangement whereby Clément Nhơn helped Kim Chung (Cloche d'Or) casino operators make weekly payments to Maurice Thiên to secure Bảy Viễn's "protection" against terrorist attacks. According to the report, Maurice Thiên approached the casino operators soon after the establishment's opening to demand a substantial daily protection fee. Clément Nhơn was called upon to negotiate a compromise. It was agreed that Kim Chung would pay the Bình Xuyên (i.e., Bảy Viễn) fifty thousand piasters per day. Simultaneously, Clément Nhơn was an agent of SESAG. Fully aware of his agent's conflicting roles, Captain Huc continued to authorize his dual employment until Clément Nhơn was arrested. In the span of two months before the Sûreté Fédérale broke up the scheme, a sum of over two and a half million piasters had been paid out by the casino.¹¹⁰ This particular scheme exposed the ways in which both the Cochinchinese government and the French military progressively empowered Bảy Viễn to extend his control in Saigon-Cholon.

¹⁰⁵ Trần Văn Ân, 18.

¹⁰⁶ Notice de renseignements: Concernant Nguyen Van Thien dit Maurice Thiên dit Tu Thien (SDECE), March 1951, 10R 96, SHD.

¹⁰⁷ SDJ report to 2ème Bureau: La fuite de Mr. Lam Ngoc Duong, SDJ No.236, April 15, 1948, 10H 4090, SHD.

¹⁰⁸ Lâm Ngọc Đường letter to Nguyễn Văn Xuân, April 11, 1948, in Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG): A/s lettres écrites par Lam Ngoc Duong, Chef du Service National des Renseignements du Gouvernement du Sud Viet Nam avant son départ en dissidence, No. 2950, April 14, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹⁰⁹ Lâm Ngọc Đường letter to Captain Huc, April 11, 1948, in Bulletin de renseignements (SESAG), A/s lettres écrites par Lam Ngoc Duong, Chef du Service National des Renseignements du Gouvernement du Sud Viet Nam avant son départ en dissidence, No. 2950, April 14, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹¹⁰ Sûreté Fédérale: Affaire Clément Nhơn: Ravitaillement d'un chef rebelle en espèces sous l'assentiment d'un Officier des Services Secrets Français, No.6634/S, May 15, 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

While the Franco-Vietnamese schemes fell apart due to internal suspicion and competition, all indications pointed to the DRV (not just the southern leadership) intending to have Bảy Viễn replace Nguyễn Bình as Zone 7 Chief. While tension between Nguyễn Bình and the Bình Xuyên remained high, the DRV leadership—from the Southern Administrative Committee and Southern Territorial Committee on up to Hồ Chí Minh—stepped in to defuse the situation.¹¹¹ As a gesture reiterating their commitment to the resistance, the Southern Territorial Committee asked Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí to issue a declaration of their loyalty to the DRV on the occasion of the Lunar New Year.¹¹² Hồ Chí Minh responded via secret telegram No. 946/TRT: “Thank you for your new year’s wishes. I send you my affectionate greetings to praise the entire Bình Xuyên army for always trying to achieve ever more glorious victories. The government is pleased to commend the heroic fighters.” And in a subtle acknowledgment of the troubles that had beset the southern forces, he urged Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí to “contact the Government and the General Directorate [Bộ Tổng Chỉ huy] when a problem cannot be resolved.” The very next telegram—No. 947/TRT—was to Nguyễn Bình, stressing the need to carefully consult [*cẩn thận bàn bạc*] with the Resistance and Administrative Committee and other “military comrades” in order to uphold the principle of collective leadership [*tập thể lãnh đạo*]. Hồ Chí Minh reminded him to foster unity between soldiers and the people, and within the army, in the interest of the Fatherland.¹¹³ Nguyễn Bình responded with a “letter of submission.”¹¹⁴

A “Sinister Plot” Prevails

On 24 May 1948, Bảy Viễn reached the village of Nhơn Hoà Lập in Đồng Tháp Mười, the resistance stronghold also known as *Plaine des Joncs*.¹¹⁵ Bảy Viễn made the journey from his base on the edge of Rừng Sác. Lê Duẩn tasked Mười Trí and Nguyễn Văn Trấn—Bảy Viễn’s close friends—with inviting him to the gathering of southern resistance leaders, organized to coincide with Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday. The two men, along with two bodyguards, clandestinely traveled to Bảy Viễn’s headquarters in An Thới Đông by taking a boat down Rạch Đĩa, then crossing the Saigon River into Rừng Sác. Receiving the hand-delivered invitation from his confidants, Bảy Viễn “happily accepted.”¹¹⁶

There was reason for both caution and enthusiasm for Bảy Viễn. On the one hand, tension between the Bình Xuyên leader and Nguyễn Bình had been escalating in the preceding months, leading the former to negotiate with the Nguyễn Văn Xuân government and the French military for a way out of the maquis. On the other hand, his scheduled promotion to Zone chief would be a sign of official legitimacy and power, as well as a satisfying *dénouement* to his conflict with Nguyễn Bình. On 30 May, nearly one week into his visit, the Southern

¹¹¹ Lartéguy, 134.

¹¹² BX historique (10H 4186), 136. The SDECE report correctly states that Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí sent Hồ Chí Minh a Lunar New Year (Tết) greeting. A different report that General Blaizot sent to the Ministre de la France d’Outre-Mer mistakenly pegged the telegram as a birthday wish. See Ralliement des Bình Xuyên, June 24, 1948, Folder 344, HCI, CAOM.

¹¹³ Hai bức mật điện gửi Khu V [Two secret telegrams sent to Zone V], 946/TRT and 947/TRT, *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn Tập, Tập 5 (1947-1949)*, http://dangcongsan.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30008&cn_id=29596 (accessed November 18, 2014).

¹¹⁴ A/s de l’Affaire Bình Xuyên, No. 874/II/STR, 11 June 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹¹⁵ A/s de l’Affaire Bình Xuyên, No. 874/II/STR, 11 June 1948, 10H 4186, SHD; *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 167.

¹¹⁶ Nguyễn Văn Trấn, 139.

Administrative and Resistance Committee (with the backing of the Southern Territorial Committee) officially nominated Bảy Viễn to take over command of Zone 7. He would be flanked by Huỳnh Văn Nghệ as his deputy, and Nguyễn Văn Trấn as political commissar.¹¹⁷ This arrangement evinced a pragmatic approach long favored by the DRV leadership, which would maximize the Bình Xuyên's military function, maintain a stable relationship with the DRV, and ensure—if not increase—ideological conformity.

Nguyễn Bình, though, would not be acquiescent. Amidst the hoopla of Bảy Viễn's promotion—Huỳnh Văn Tiêng was reportedly in the middle of penning an official announcement to be sent to Saigon newspapers—a purge was underway in Rừng Sác.¹¹⁸ The operation had been in the works for nearly two months. On 27 March 1948, Nguyễn Bình had convened a meeting of Zone 7 officials to address the challenges posed by French military and espionage activities, namely the Bình Xuyên problem.¹¹⁹ They made two determinations. First, they needed consolidate the decentralized detachments across the zone into larger regiments to facilitate tighter control and isolate infiltrators. Second, convinced that Bảy Viễn was under French influence and had betrayed the resistance, they decided that the Bình Xuyên must be purged.¹²⁰

Nguyễn Bình placed his Zone 7 political commissar, Nguyễn Văn Trí, in charge of the operation.¹²¹ Under his direction, two organs were created—a steering and a command committee—each led by Nguyễn Bình loyalists from Regiments 300 and 308, as well as disgruntled Bình Xuyên commanders. According to communist historians, the plan called for three battalions from Regiment 300 to raid the Bình Xuyên Interzone Headquarters and Detachment 9 command, as well as four battalions from Detachments 9 and 21 to disarm the leadership of Detachments 21 and 25. Dương Văn Hà's Detachment 2-3 headquarters also in Rừng Sác would function as a communications hub for the steering committee. Several of his platoons were charged with setting up and guarding two jails to hold purported reactionaries and spies while also providing security for the steering committee.¹²² Preparations were to be completed by mid-May, before Bảy Viễn's departure for Đồng Tháp Mười.

It was necessary for Bình Xuyên leaders to take part in the purge for it to be successful. A unified Bình Xuyên would have posed a grave, perhaps insurmountable, military, logistical, and political challenge. As communist historians concede, “to fellow fighters of the seven [Bình Xuyên] detachments, Bảy Viễn was firstly a resistance fighter. Many people said that until now, despite his incorrect and perplexing behavior, the ‘essence of resistance’ in him had not diminished.”¹²³ Fortunately for Nguyễn Bình, a fissure had long existed within the Bình Xuyên. As Chapter 1 shows, the Bình Xuyên did not start as a homogeneous organization. Rather, it was a hodge-podge of outlaw groups that banded together in the name of national resistance. This inherent heterogeneity, combined with interpersonal rivalry and political manipulation,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 13.; Charles Bonfils à Haut-Commissaire de France pour l'Indochine: Ralliement des Binh Xuyen, 24 June 1948, HCI 344, CAOM; Savani, 110.

¹¹⁸ Nguyễn Văn Trấn, 139.

¹¹⁹ *Chợ Lớn: Lịch Sử Chín Năm Kháng Chiến* (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân), 139; Trần Hải Phụng & Phương Thanh Lưu, eds., *Lịch Sử Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến, 1947-1975* (TP HCM: nxb Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1994), 177

¹²⁰ Đảng Ủy, Bộ Chỉ Huy Quân Sự TP HCM, Quân Đội Nhân Dân, *Lịch Sử Lực Lượng Võ Trang Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1945-1995* (Hanoi: nxb Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1998), 116,

¹²¹ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 161.

¹²² *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 162-66.

¹²³ *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 159

compromised the Bình Xuyên's organizational integrity. In March 1948, French military intelligence had reported that the group was splitting into two rival factions. One comprised Detachments 2, 3, and 7, led by Dương Văn Hà and Mai Văn Vĩnh; the other included Detachments 4, 9, 21, 25, and led by Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí.¹²⁴ The French simplistically—and erroneously—referred to them as pro-Việt Minh and pro-Bảy Viễn camps.¹²⁵ Nguyễn Bình exploited this growing discord.

The rivalry between Năm Hà and Bảy Viễn partly caused the division. In their competition to succeed Ba Dương as leader of the Bình Xuyên, Bảy Viễn had come out on top. He was able to whip up support among the Bình Xuyên and the DRV leadership, not least Nguyễn Bình's. Năm Hà, on the other hand, was viewed as possessing “neither the energy, nor the valor” of his older brother.¹²⁶ His drinking likely contributed to this perception. So well-known was his alcoholism that DRV propaganda trumpeted his purported sobriety as an achievement.¹²⁷ As Bảy Viễn ascended the hierarchy of the Việt Minh, Năm Hà felt aggrieved. A second source of discord was political affiliation. Lined up alongside Năm Hà were the Bình Xuyên leaders most closely associated with the ICP—Nguyễn Văn Mạnh (Tám Mạnh) and his son-in-law, Mai Văn Vĩnh (Hai Vĩnh). Both men first collaborated with southern communists in the lead-up to the Southern Uprising of 1940. They maintained a steadfast and hardline loyalty to them throughout the early years of the war, in contrast to the opposing faction's liaisons with non-DRV and non-communist nationalists. Tám Mạnh had joined the party sometime in 1944.¹²⁸ Hai Vĩnh, in his words, “had followed [ICP activist] Bảy [Trần] on the revolutionary path [and] abandoned banditry.”¹²⁹ He was reportedly approved for induction into the party in early 1947.¹³⁰ The cracks in the Bình Xuyên may have appeared in 1946, even as it was consolidated under Bảy Viễn. According to Nguyễn Hùng, when Mười Trí spoke of his experience being hounded and nearly captured by DRV agents on his way to and from a meeting convened by Cao Đài leaders in Tây Ninh, Tám Mạnh and Hai Vĩnh were not sympathetic. Instead, they frowned upon their comrade's interactions with non-communists.¹³¹ Later, it was Hai Vĩnh who would inform Nguyễn Bình of Bảy Viễn's relationship with non-communist nationalists (like Maurice Thiên) and religious groups (like the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo).¹³² Outside Bình Xuyên proper, the DRV also cultivated Tám Mạnh's favorite son, Nguyễn Văn Hải (Bảy Hải), as a public security [*công an*] official. After six months of training, he was made head of Zone 3 Public Security in Saigon-Cholon.¹³³

The stage was set. On 17 April, Nguyễn Bình sent Bảy Viễn an invitation to the conference in Đồng Tháp Mười, likely before Mười Trí and Nguyễn Văn Trần trekked to Rừng Sác. While the DRV leadership under Lê Duẩn intended to promote Bảy Viễn to zone chief, Nguyễn Bình saw it as an opportunity to launch his carefully planned operation. On 2 May, as

¹²⁴ Forces Binh Xuyen (TFIS, 2ème Bureau), 11 June 1948, 10H 4188, SHD; BR: A/s Situation des Binh Xuyen, No. 496/2S, 30 March 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹²⁵ BR: A/s Situation des Binh Xuyen, No. 496/2S, 30 March 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹²⁶ Người Bình Xuyên, 159; Charles Bonfils à Haut-Commissaire de France pour l'Indochine: Ralliement des Binh Xuyen, 24 June 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

¹²⁷ *Nay...Mai*, Ba ngày ở Bình Xuyên, 47-11-16

¹²⁸ Lương Văn Nho, *Chiến Khu Rừng Sác* (TP HCM: nxb Đồng Nai, 1983), 48.

¹²⁹ Lê Phú Khải, *Lời Ai Điều: Hồi Ký* (Charleston, SC: nxb Người Việt Books, 2016), 448.

¹³⁰ *Người Bình Xuyên*, 163

¹³¹ *Người Bình Xuyên*, 164.

¹³² *Người Bình Xuyên*, 170.

¹³³ Bộ Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Biên Niên Lịch Sử, 1945-1954* (Hanoi: nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia), 107

the opening of the conference drew near, he sent word to units loyal to him —Regiments 300, 307, 308, 310, and 302—to prepare for reciprocal assistance when called upon. He advised them to “stay alert.”¹³⁴

The operation would not go according to plan, suffering several false starts. According to French intelligence, Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí set off on 12 May, at which point Nguyễn Bình ordered Regiments 300 and 307 to execute the plan while “avoiding as much as possible the spilling of blood.”¹³⁵ For some reason, the purge was not launched. Then, on 24 May, once it was reported that Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí had arrived in Đồng Tháp Mười, Regiments 300 and 307 were ordered to initiate the purge. But, again, the operation hit a snag. On the 27th, Nguyễn Bình, under the Territorial Committee’s orders, had to call off the purge, explaining that the Bình Xuyên question had been resolved “amicably.”¹³⁶ The counter order was confirmed two days later.¹³⁷ On 28 May though, Nguyễn Bình’s secretary Ngô Thanh—“disdainful of the Committee’s decision” and with his boss’s connivance—instructed regiments on standby to ignore the Territorial Committee’s injunction and carry on with the purge.¹³⁸ If questioned, they were told to claim that the order did not arrive in time.¹³⁹

Regiments loyal to Nguyễn Bình and a number of Bình Xuyên units led by disgruntled commanders swept in and swiftly disarmed the unsuspecting Bình Xuyên fighters. They captured key commanders, including Tư Ty (Detachment 25 commander), Tư Hoạch (Detachment 21 commander), Bùi Hữu Phiệt (Đại Việt-affiliated commander in Detachment 25), Tư Văn Lang (head of Military Intelligence Committee), among others.¹⁴⁰ Both Tư Ty and Tư Hoạch were killed.¹⁴¹ Lâm Ngọc Đường, who had escaped the Sûreté Fédérale and come to the maquis in April, managed to escape. But he, too, would be captured and executed. Trần Văn Đối, one of the first outlaws to join Ba Dương but considered one of Bảy Viễn’s henchmen, was shot two months later.¹⁴²

Bảy Viễn learned of the ambush from one of Mười Trí’s men, around the time of his promotion at the end of May. By then, the purge was complete. Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí immediately left the conference without a word. A Zone 7 battalion pursued Bảy Viễn and his accompanying platoon led by his son, Lê Paul, to Tân Nhựt. There, Mười Trí along with two DRV officials, Cao Đăng Chiếm and Đặng Minh Trứ, implored Bảy Viễn not to leave.¹⁴³ But Bảy Viễn would not hear of it.¹⁴⁴ Even after he established communication with the French military, the Southern Administrative and Resistance Committee tried in vain to convince him to take up his new post as Zone 7 Chief.¹⁴⁵ Nguyễn Bình had succeeded. In Nguyễn Văn Trăn’s

¹³⁴ Savani, 109.

¹³⁵ Savani, 110.

¹³⁶ Général Blaizot (HCI) to Ministre de la France d’Outre-Mer, Ralliement de Bay Vien et des Bình Xuyên, No.5589/Cab, July 10, 1948, HCI 344, CAOM; *Lịch sử lực lượng vũ trang Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (1945-1995)*, 118.

¹³⁷ A/s de l’Affaire Binh Xuyen, No. 874/II/STR, 11 June 1948, 10H 4186, SHD, pp. 5-6.

¹³⁸ Savani, 111.

¹³⁹ A/s de l’Affaire Binh Xuyen, No. 874/II/STR, 11 June 1948, 10H 4186, SHD, p. 7. That is precisely the argument advanced by communist historians. By the time the order arrived, they stress, the purge was already underway, having been initiated by Nguyễn Văn Trí on 24 May. See *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 167.

¹⁴⁰ Savani, 111.

¹⁴¹ BR, 10 June 1948, 10H 4188, SHD; Nguyễn Văn Trăn, 139; *Người Bình Xuyên*, 267.

¹⁴² *Bộ Đội Bình Xuyên*, 168-69.

¹⁴³ *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*, 108.

¹⁴⁴ Nguyễn Văn Trăn, 139.

¹⁴⁵ Captured Document: Phạm Ngọc Thuần (Chairman, Southern Administrative and Resistance Committee) to Lê

view, this “sinister plot” [*kế quy*] had enabled Nguyễn Bình to defeat Lê Duẩn in the broader power struggle within the Việt Minh.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Dương Văn Hà was elevated to replace Bảy Viễn. This was, after all, what he had always wanted. The Bình Xuyên, though, was no more.

The battle for the southern resistance would not reach a resolution until Nguyễn Bình was killed on his way to the north in 1951. Only then was the southern leadership able to “consolidate the party’s control over intelligence operations and clandestine networks in Saigon-Cholon.”¹⁴⁷ In the meantime, one year after the purge, a DRV Inspection Delegation [Phái đoàn Kiểm tra Trung ương Đảng và Chính phủ], which evaluated the shortcomings of the southern resistance, offered a stinging assessment: “With respect to the policy of unity [in reference to the Territorial Committee’s December 1947 resolution], the ‘purge of the Bình Xuyên’ . . . was a mistake in both conception and implementation. The result was not just Bảy Viễn taking a number of troops to the French, but also bringing about disastrous consequences to the [resistance] movement inside the city.”¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

Bảy Viễn’s *ralliement* marked a turning point in the history of the Bình Xuyên. Those invested in the political optics of the event—the Cochinchinese Republic, the French, the DRV, or even Bảy Viễn himself—reduced the split between the Bình Xuyên and the DRV to binary terms of loyalty versus betrayal, nationalism versus communism. In reality, the turn of events from 1945 to 1948 were driven by contradictory motivations and contingencies. A key factor in the formation and deformation of the southern resistance were the personal relationships forged between violence entrepreneurs and anticolonial activists in the years before decolonization. Bảy Viễn’s friendship with ICP cadre Nguyễn Văn Trấn and anticommunist operative Maurice Thiên—two men who marshaled indispensable networks of political and material support—were crucial to the Bình Xuyên’s empowerment. Moreover, interstate conflict and intrastate competition played a key role. The “divided state apparatuses”—riven by jurisdictional struggles and internal fragmentation—made it possible for Bình Xuyên partisans to stake their claims on concrete local power as they pursued a grander vision of national independence.

Văn Viễn and Nguyễn Văn Trấn, No.11/TV/DB, June 11, 1948, in Note (Sûreté Fédérale): Ralliement de Bảy Viễn, No. 2851/SG-I, June 24, 1948, Folder 344, HCI, CAOM.

¹⁴⁶ Nguyễn Văn Trấn, 139.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Goscha, “Intelligence in a Time of Decolonization: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at War (1945-50),” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.22, No.1 (2007): 113.

¹⁴⁸ See Lê Hồng Lĩnh, “Đến Đồng Tháp Mười” [Coming to Đồng Tháp Mười], in *Xứ ủy Nam Bộ với căn cứ Đồng Tháp Mười*.

Chapter 3: Treacherous New Beginnings

This chapter looks at the aftermath of the “purge of Rừng Sác.” The months immediately following the purge represented a low point for Bảy Viễn, as he fielded a ragtag force of only some two hundred and was a target of Việt Minh attacks and ravaging propaganda. Given the Bình Xuyên’s contentious relationship with factions of the Việt Minh, what kind of relationship did it maintain with the even more factionalized Franco-Vietnamese authorities? Underlying the story of the Bình Xuyên’s reconstitution, consolidation, and expansion is the complex dynamics between the armed group and a divided state apparatus in the midst of civil war. How did the Bình Xuyên, which some French authorities and the Việt Minh saw as weak and servile after its purge, manage to emerge as a formidable force that shifted the balance of power among constituents of the Franco-Vietnamese state?

On the evening of 16 June 1948, a beleaguered Bảy Viễn emerged from his hideout just outside Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn. Accompanied by his advisor and two French military intelligence officers, he entered the city to formally sever ties with the Việt Minh. The following week, the Franco-Vietnamese authorities held a ceremony where Prime Minister of the Provisional Central Government Nguyễn Văn Xuân and Governor of Cochinchina Trần Văn Hữu welcomed Bảy Viễn. He gave an interview on the airwaves in which he characterized his joining the French and the Nguyễn Văn Xuân government as neither submission nor surrender, but collaboration. He was happy to see the signing of the Hạ Long Bay Agreement and wanted to quickly put an end to the “fratricidal struggle between the French and the Vietnamese.”¹

Bảy Viễn’s break with the DRV was unexpected. From the outbreak of violence in southern Vietnam, Việt Minh propaganda and pro-Việt Minh publications had hailed the Bình Xuyên troops as heroic resistance fighters and cemented their patriotic reputation. And just weeks prior, Bảy Viễn had sat among the southern DRV leadership, having been elevated to the position of War Zone 7 commander. Caught off guard by Nguyễn Bình’s purge of his stronghold in Rừng Sác, he now found himself on the run, cut off from his once formidable army, and derided as a traitor. Hounded by Nguyễn Bình loyalists, and with key interlocutors exiled, jailed, or dead, Bảy Viễn was left with virtually no other viable option than to seek rapprochement with his erstwhile adversaries.

After escaping Đồng Tháp Mười with a small retinue of fighters and finding his base irrecoverable, Bảy Viễn dispatched his personal secretary and political advisor, Lai Hữu Tài, to make contact with the French military.² The latter promptly sent two high-ranking intelligence officers, including the chief of Deuxième Bureau, Antoine Marie Savani. After some hesitation, Bảy Viễn agreed to a meeting, during which they reached a provisional agreement whereby Bảy Viễn would rally to the Nguyễn Văn Xuân government and Bảo Đại, and recognize the French Union. In return, the French promised to clear Rừng Sác and provide funds for rallying the remaining Bình Xuyên troops. Yet, even after the completion of the operations, it took further prodding by Savani for Bảy Viễn to rally.³ After tracking down Bảy Viễn on the evening of June 16, Savani convinced him to meet with General de Latour at the Commissariat de la République. The next day he signed a proclamation that condemned the communist dictatorship, declared his

¹ “Bay Vien rencontre les Presidents Xuan et Tran Van Huu” [Bảy Viễn meets Presidents Xuân and Trần Văn Hữu], *Union Française* 25 June 1948, attached to Note: Ralliement de Bay Vien, No. 9999 SG-I, Folder 344, HCI, CAOM.

² Jean Lartéguy, *Soldats perdus et fous de Dieu: Indochine: 1945-1955* (Paris: Presse de la Cité, 1986), 135.

³ A.M. Savani, “Note sur le ralliement des Binh Xuyen,” No. 2665/2S, June 22, 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

will to fight it, and recognized the Provisional Government and the French Union.⁴

But, the ceremony notwithstanding, Bảy Viễn faced an uncertain future. It was not lost on him that he was no longer operating from a position of strength. He had no army, no money, or control of any territory. And even his reputation as a *résistant* was being tarnished by a concerted Việt Minh propaganda campaign. The Sûreté Fédérale in South Vietnam summed up the predicament Bảy Viễn faced in mid-1948: He is a “gang leader in desperate straits, deprived of all means to act and fearing for his life ... the conditions of its execution should allow the Cochinchinese authorities and the [French] military command to easily impose discipline on Bảy Viễn and his men.”⁵

From Insurgent to Pacifier

The Bình Xuyên's immediate utility was in counter-insurgency. When Bảy Viễn rallied in June 1948, French forces were in the midst of a bloody pacification campaign led by Brigadier General Boyer de Latour, commander of the Troupes Françaises en Indochine du Sud (TFIS) and the Commissaire de la République in the region. De Latour reached southern Vietnam in mid-1947, just as a “wave of terrorism swept Saigon and provincial cities.” The Việt Minh “concentrated its attacks on communications [infrastructures] as well as commercial and industrial installations, while terrorist commandos launched bombs into public spaces in Saigon and Cholon.”⁶ Insurgents had overrun “virtually the whole of Cochinchina, except the islets formed by our stations and garrisons which were poorly connected by precarious communications,” de Latour later recounted.⁷ His mission in Indochina had three priorities: clear Saigon-Cholon's periphery to extend the security perimeter around the city, reestablish control of major highways critical to commerce, and begin pacification in the provinces. But when he took command, TFIS units were widely dispersed among static positions, leaving him few options to defend vulnerable targets or initiate offensives against insurgents. The availability of reserve units was crucial. Yet creating them required abandoning existing posts, which would incur significant political costs and represent an “admission of weakness and a loss of face.” The only solution was to “make a broad appeal to the populations that have rallied to our cause to constitute auxiliary units... which allowed me to proportionally free up the regular forces.”⁸ It was in this critical role that the Bình Xuyên would earn its keep.

Upon returning to the city, Bảy Viễn and his ragtag band of roughly two hundred first took aim at insurgents in Saigon-Cholon. Despite apprehension from various corners of the Franco-Vietnamese state, particularly the Sûreté Fédérale, the Bình Xuyên's presence in the city was necessary if not entirely desirable. Robert Francès, head of Sûreté Fédérale in southern Vietnam, arranged to have Bảy Viễn's agents join the urban pacification effort. In early July, Francès reported, Bảy Viễn agreed to send sixty elite intelligence agents to aid the Sûreté in rooting out Việt Minh action committees and other organs inside Saigon-Cholon. Francès no doubt felt compelled to capitalize on the Bình Xuyên's unique knowledge, but still tried to limit its agents'

⁴ Bulletin de renseignements-Activités politique et Informations diverses, Document 360/MI/AP, 19 June 1948, Folder D 01-36, PTHNV, TTLTQG2.

⁵ Robert Francès (Sûreté Fédérale de Cochinchine): Ralliement de Lê Văn Viễn dit Bảy Viễn, Note No. 8890/S, 4 July 1948, HCI 344, ANOM, 6.

⁶ Yves Gras, *Histoire de la Guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1979), 221.

⁷ Pierre Boyer de Latour, *De l'Indochine à l'Algérie: Le martyre de l'Armée française* (Paris: Presses de Mail, 1962), 105.

⁸ De Latour, 106.

field of action. He insisted that Binh Xuyên agents were not to make arrests, and if circumstances demanded, the suspects had to be handed over to the Sûreté or the Police Municipale. Moreover, Francès drew a clear distinction between military and (civilian) security services: "Interior security" inside the city came under the purview of the Sûreté, while "military action" outside the city was under the jurisdiction of the Deuxième Bureau. But as we shall see shortly, this arbitrary division of labor was impractical. And Francès knew it. He was hardly optimistic about the prospects of harmonious cooperation: "Although Bảy Viễn has promised to see to the strict observance of these conditions, we have serious worries about their implementation, both because of the rebel elements' past and their impoverished state. Already, we know that several armed robberies committed on the periphery have been attributed to them."⁹ Yet, in spite of Francès's negative outlook, Binh Xuyên agents were mobilized for offensive action.

Pacification allowed the Binh Xuyên to simultaneously eliminate its primary competitor and solidify its status vis-à-vis the French military. Bảy Viễn and his men wasted little time. The small but tight-knit group of fighters set about neutralizing their onetime allies. These Việt Minh agents—from public security personnel to urban terrorists populating so-called "action committees" [*ban công tác*—were responsible for what military historian Yves Gras described as an atmosphere of "endemic terrorism" striking at the city's "*esprit populaire*."¹⁰ Despite the success of French military and security services in periodically dismantling these insurgent units, the threat of Việt Minh attacks large and small remained a constant worry. The Binh Xuyên's onslaught, however, proved devastatingly effective. French journalist Lucien Bodard even mythologized the swiftness with which Bảy Viễn defanged the Việt Minh in the city: "In a single night, [the Binh Xuyên] liquidated all rival 'bang cong tac' [*sic*] in the city under Nguyễn Bình."¹¹ From strategically sited bases along Saigon-Cholon's primary waterways, Bảy Viễn dispatched his men to track down Việt Minh agents across the city and its suburbs.

Intimately familiar with the Việt Minh's clandestine network and, now unconstrained by demands of cooperation, battle-hardened Binh Xuyên fighters took to their mission with an "*énergie farouche*."¹² Insurgents in and around the city were extremely vulnerable. For despite power struggles among the leadership in the maquis, low-level fighters routinely partnered with the Binh Xuyên to carry out sabotage activities and assassinations. The latter's supply network, provision of travel certificates, and occasional extrication from police custody all proved crucial to resistance activities. This dependence left the urban insurgents exposed. As Lai Hữu Tài noted decades later, "Since we had spent time in the *maquis* and fought there, we also knew how to organize the counter maquis."¹³ Intercepted Việt Minh communications and informant accounts provide a glimpse of what insurgents faced. In late June, a scouting unit [*trinh sát*] warned the Public Security Service that "the reactionary Binh Xuyên ... has already begun identifying members of our organizations during raids ... on rue de Nancy."¹⁴ By July, a Việt Minh agent conceded that Bảy Viễn dominated Cholon while also sending his agents into Khánh Hội and Saigon proper, raiding insurgent hideouts and capturing Việt Minh agents. Areas south of the

⁹ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine, Ralliement de Le Van Vien dit Bay Vien, No. 8890, 3 July 1948, Folder 21471, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰ Gras, 259-260.

¹¹ Lucien Bodard, *La Guerre d'Indochine: L'Enlèvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 110-111.

¹² A.M. Savani, *Notes sur les Binh Xuyen*, (Saigon: [s.n.] 1954), 141.

¹³ Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 152.

¹⁴ Bulletin de Renseignements (SESAG), "A/s Agissements des Binh Xuyen Ralliés vus par les Viet Minh," No. 4266, 5 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

city like Xóm Củi and Cần Giuộc were subjected to the same relentless assault.¹⁵ This same source lamented: “It is unfortunate that [the Bình Xuyên] had worked with our agents on joint sabotage activities [before they left the maquis].”¹⁶

The Bình Xuyên's assault on the Việt Minh was equal parts pacification and internecine warfare. In one of Bảy Viễn's first monthly reports in October 1948, he noted the killing of Nguyễn Văn Hải (alias Bảy Hải), head of Zone 3 Public Security Service in Saigon-Cholon.¹⁷ Bảy Hải was no ordinary insurgent. His father, Nguyễn Văn Mạnh, was an outlaw-turned-revolutionary and chief of staff of the Bình Xuyên Interzone in Rừng Sác. Bảy Hải's brother-in-law, Mai Văn Vĩnh, was commander of Bình Xuyên Detachment 7 and reportedly spearheaded the anti-Bảy Viễn faction within the Bình Xuyên Unified Forces. When the Việt Minh Public Security Service [Ty Công An] became increasingly concerned about Bảy Viễn's non-communist political connections, it recruited Bảy Hải and his siblings as agents. At 24 years old, he was made chief of public security in southern Saigon-Cholon, commanding the service's "shock brigades" [*công an xung phong*] and intelligence arm, while entrusted with collecting taxes from nearby merchants, motorists, and boat operators.¹⁸ Not coincidentally, his primary zone of action along the Arroyo Chinois and the Canal de Doublement—the city's major commercial corridor—overlapped with that of Bảy Viễn's agents.¹⁹ On patrol in Phước Lộc Thôn in September, along the Cây Khô canal, Bảy Viễn's troops encountered a Việt Minh ambush unit. It was led by Bảy Hải.²⁰ We find out much later that the encounter was not by happenstance. Two of Bảy Hải's own men—a subordinate and a nephew who followed Bảy Viễn out of the maquis—acted as guides for the Bình Xuyên contingent.²¹

The Việt Minh fought back. Nguyễn Bình issued an order giving “power to all action committees to arrest and execute any [Bảy Viễn] henchman” operating in Saigon-Cholon.²² These terror cells managed to briefly throttle Bình Xuyên plans to create its own urban armed units, succeeded in assassinating one of its agents outside his home, and launched grenades at the residence of Lai Hữu Tài. But these turned out to be mere nuisances. The tide had turned. By mid-July, the Saigon-Cholon Public Security Service ordered all urban units to “overhaul” their plan of action in light of the Bình Xuyên's attempt “to paralyze our activity in the city.”²³ The Saigon-Cholon Administrative and Resistance Committee, at a late July meeting, acknowledged that Bảy Viễn's ralliement had left the city in disarray and had caused members of security

¹⁵ Captured Document: Comité de Résistance et Executive du Nam Bo, Communiqué Adressé aux 10 B.C.T.—Objet: espions de Bay Vien (translation), No. 6253/2S, 15 December 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

¹⁶ SDJ, Rapport V.M. No. 92 au 2^e Bureau des TFIS, Objet: Rendez-Vous avec Mr. Hoi (Agent de N.B.) établi par No. 0.1.Z., No. 4V8/Z, 7 July 1948, 10H 4090, SHD.

¹⁷ Bảy Viễn, Rapport sur l'activité des Forces Armées Binh Xuyen du 1^{er} Octobre au 26/10/1948, No. 24/A.M., 26 October 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁸ Julien (Sous-Secteur de Cholon 2^e Bureau), Rapport d'Information sur le Cong An de la Région Saigon-Cholon (Sûreté VM), No. 1333/SSC/S, 5 June 1948, 10H 4984, SHD.

¹⁹ Bộ Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Biên Niên Lịch Sử, 1945-1954* (Hanoi: nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia), 107.

²⁰ Bulletin de Renseignements (S/Secteur de Cholon 2^e Bureau), Activité Binh Xuyen, No. 1933/SSC/S, 1 October 1948, 10H 4984, SHD.

²¹ Bulletin de Renseignements (Forces Armées Vietnamiennes, 1^{ère} Région Militaire, 2^e Bureau), No. 1245/TM/DNQK/2, 5 August 1952, 10H 4186, SHD.

²² Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình, Ordre Secret (translation), Unnumbered, 11 July 1948, attached to Bulletin de Renseignements Particulier No. 245/P, No. 16.121/B.2., 2 August 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

²³ Captured Document: Ty Cong An de la ville Saigon/Cholon, A/s Révision du Programme d'Action par suite de l'Action d'Un Traître (translation), No. 798/VPK2, 18 July 1948, attached to Bulletin de Renseignements (SESAG), No. 4457, 20 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

services to retreat.²⁴ Sweeping changes were made to Việt Minh operations. Military activities were moved from Saigon-Cholon proper and its southern periphery, to locales like Phú Nhuận, Gia Định, Bà Chiểu (all on the city's northern outskirts), and Thị Nghè (to its east). According to one informant, a Việt Minh agent said that his action committee had suspended activities to retreat to the maquis, and wondered if the southern DRV government had abandoned Cholon to Bảy Viễn.²⁵ By September, French military intelligence reported that the Việt Minh was forced to initiate the wholesale replacement of personnel "too well-known" to the Bình Xuyên.²⁶ Attempts to infiltrate the group were likewise unsuccessful.²⁷

Political Reorientation

The purge transformed an internal battle of leverage into a war of ideologies. Before the *coup de force* provoked this shift, southern DRV leaders had tapped Bảy Viễn as their counterweight to Nguyễn Bình, commander of insurgent armed forces in southern Vietnam. For all intents and purposes, Bảy Viễn's actions and proclamations had exhibited a deference toward the Việt Minh, despite maintaining a foothold in non-communist nationalist circles via intermediaries. But within mere weeks of being elevated to commander of War Zone 7 (encompassing Saigon-Cholon), he had become an anti-Việt Minh crusader and was roundly denounced as a traitor. Bảy Viễn's faction of the Bình Xuyên had delicately straddled the chasm between communist and non-communist nationalists. The rupture was sudden, but the fallout was not unexpected. Nguyễn Bình's power play pushed the group decisively away from the Việt Minh and into the hands of militant nationalists already populating the Bình Xuyên ranks.

Both sides of the conflict—the Việt Minh faction that cultivated Bảy Viễn and their non-communist adversaries allied with the French—continued to pursue Bảy Viễn as he pondered the choice before him. Local and regional Việt Minh authorities tried in vain to undo the damage. The latter even sent a letter urging Bảy Viễn to put aside the “misunderstanding” and take up his post as Zone 7 commander some two weeks after the purge.²⁸ On the opposing side, Maurice Thiên, who had been sitting in military prison since his arrest by the French Sûreté, was recruited to provide his comrade some words of inducement. “Today the fate of the nation [*vận mạng nước nhà*] is in your hands,” he wrote, “the time has come for you to save the country.” Referring no doubt to Bảy Viễn's negotiation with Savani, Thiên implored him to be “clearsighted” and “not waiver like before.” He expressed his eagerness to join the fight against the communists, for they had “spilt blood.” He adds: “History records [the communists'] thirst for blood, and will hold them accountable.”²⁹

Days later when Bảy Viễn declared his commitment to the Franco-Vietnamese authorities, anti-communist nationalism had become the Bình Xuyên “splinter” group's battle cry. After his

²⁴ Captured Document: Procès-verbal de la Réunion du Comité Central du 24.7.48 (translation), attached to Note (SurFed) No. 14.939/S, 22 October 1948, 10H 4984, SHD.

²⁵ SDJ Rapport V.M. No. 107, Objet: La Trace de Nguyen Van Huong, No. 562/Z, 8 August 1948, 10H 4090, SHD.

²⁶ Bulletin de Renseignements (SESAG), A/s Activités terroristes V.M., No. 5215, 10H 4187, SHD.

²⁷ Captured Document: Cong An du quartier III à Mr. le chef du Ty Cong An de S/C (translation), 28 August 1948, attached to No. 2771/2S, 15 December 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

²⁸ Captured Document: Comité de Résistance au Nam Bo à M. Le Van Vien (Commandant de la Zone 7) et M. Nguyen Van Tran (Commissaire Politique de la Zone 7) (translation), No. II/TV/DB, 11 June 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

²⁹ Captured Document: Maurice Thiên to Bảy Viễn, Unnumbered (hand-written personal letter), 14 June 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

initial proclamation at the Commissariat de la République, a litany of locally distributed leaflets denounced Nguyễn Bình as a “bloodthirsty autocrat” [*độc tài khát máu*], the “Third International” (Stalinists) for trying to “divide and assassinate nationalists in the resistance,” and both for “selling out” the nation [*dùng tổ quốc...cho ngoại quốc*].³⁰ The language was resonant with the rhetoric of anticommunist militants. For Bảy Viễn and his confidants, the deployment of this language was also highly instrumental. On the one hand, it was necessary to align with their new patrons while also insulating themselves from political backlash. On the other, it offered an opportunity to stake out a political identity distinct from that of the Việt Minh. For while the “Third International Communists” [Cộng Sản Đệ Tam] exploited the spirit of struggle in the service of “Soviet ideals” [*lý tưởng Nga Sô*], according to one leaflet, “Nationalist Fighters” [*Chiến sĩ Quốc gia*] like the Bình Xuyên fought “valiantly [and] faithfully” for the fatherland.³¹ “[We] can no longer follow the Communists in search of independence,” another leaflet concluded.³² The implication, of course, is that the Bình Xuyên would take its leadership role.

The Việt Minh had other ideas. Despite multiple attempts to assuage Bảy Viễn, once the prospect of rapprochement dimmed, they quickly pivoted to a concerted propaganda campaign. It aimed to not only destroy Bảy Viễn’s reputation as a *résistant*, but also deny him and his followers any pretense of higher ideals. Bảy Viễn and his followers were casted as venal pawns swayed by material enticements. “The whole time in the maquis, they needed English cigarettes, wine, good food, and gambling,” ran one circular.³³ Another accused Bảy Viễn of “exploiting the flesh and blood” of Bình Xuyên fighters for his own glory, which explains why he was easily “corrupted” and “bought off.”³⁴ These defectors, the propaganda insisted, must be set apart from the loyal Bình Xuyên: “All propaganda services should explain to the people Bảy Viễn’s attitude. Never touch on the Bình Xuyên combatants ... only talk about Bảy Viễn’s treason.”³⁵ Nguyễn Bình disseminated a narrative in which Bình Xuyên fighters themselves discovered Bảy Viễn’s anti-DRV schemes and staged an “internal revolution.” Factions in the Việt Minh opposed to Nguyễn Bình strained to project an image of internal cohesion in the resistance as well as to assert their agency in the rupture. The communist party’s Southern Territorial Committee [Xứ uỷ Nam bộ], for instance, claimed that, suspicious of Bảy Viễn’s “spirit of resistance,” it had advocated for the disarmament operation despite having promoted Bảy Viễn to Zone 7 commander.³⁶ Even Mười Trí, perhaps Bảy Viễn’s closest confidant since the 1930’s and considered the leading nationalist inside the Bình Xuyên, issued a denunciation: “By submitting to the French invaders, he is a traitor [*phản quốc*]...[he] has betrayed his friend, abandoned the just cause [*chánh nghĩa*], and fallen into the enemy’s trap.”³⁷

³⁰ “Vì sao Nguyễn Bình không bỏ Bình Xuyên?”, No. 48-12/Tr., 10H 4188

³¹ “Đồng Bào nên Nhận Định” (leaflet), 10H 4188, SHD.

³² “Quốc Dân!” (leaflet), 10H 4188, SHD.

³³ Captured Document: Circulaire (Compagnie d’Instruction de Propagande), No. 6/TH, 13 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

³⁴ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình (Vệ Quốc Đoàn Khu VII), Thông Cáo, Unnumbered, 24 June 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

³⁵ Bulletin de Renseignements No. 208 (Secteur de Hocmon 2è Bureau), No. 14.025/B.2., 2 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

³⁶ Bulletin de Renseignements (FTEO 2è Bureau), No. 4579/2S, 27 September 1948, 10H 4187, SHD. The communiqué strains to make the case that the Territorial Committee was fully aware and approved of the operation.

³⁷ “Đề trả lời cho giặc Pháp về vụ Bảy Viễn,” Thông Tin—Ban Tuyên truyền Khu 1, 11 July 1948. Central File: Decimal File 851G.20200, U.S. National Archives. Archives Unbound. Web, <http://go.galegroup.com/gdsc/i.do?&id=GALE%7CSC5104757500&v=2.1&u=29002&it=r&p=GDSC&sw=w&vievtype=fullcitation>. (Accessed 1 October 2017)

Bảy Viễn and his lieutenants, however, saw the Bình Xuyên—once reconstituted—as the fulcrum of nationalist struggle. Despite entering into collaboration with the French military, Bảy Viễn never wavered in his self-perception as a patriotic *résistant*. This conviction stemmed from both a belief in the purity of his mission and the historical conjuncture in which he found himself. A nationalist pathway to independence was taking shape in 1947, as a coalition of non-communist political groups, rallying around former emperor Bảo Đại, entered into negotiations with the French. After a bloody civil war that had raged in the south since 1945, the non-communists' decision to ally with the French signaled a willingness to “risk continued civil war with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, using French military power to do so, instead of remaining within a [communist-led] national front.”³⁸ According to Christopher Goscha, this shift marked a turning point in twentieth-century Vietnamese political history. But because Bảy Viễn was able to leverage his political cachet and the DRV's internal fractionalization to ascend the Việt Minh ranks, he had squarely committed the Bình Xuyên to the communist-led resistance. That was until the purge resuscitated the idea of the Bình Xuyên as a foundational force backing the so-called Third Force and a state built around Bảo Đại.

A manifesto, called the “Political and Propaganda Program of the Bình Xuyên Combatants,” articulated the vision of the group as a cornerstone of independent Vietnam. Likely written by Lai Hữu Tài (Bảy Viễn's onetime personal secretary and political advisor), the document bore the unmistakable imprint of anticommunist nationalism. “We understand perfectly,” the program went, “that to win national independence, not only must we fight more vigorously, but we must also fight Communism, eliminate [it] from the fighters' ranks, and retake, that is to say for the nationalists, control” of the resistance.³⁹ In contrast to propaganda leaflets released in the wake of Bảy Viễn's ralliement, the program frames the group's rebirth not as an angry reaction to betrayal, but a necessary response to the shifting landscape of decolonization. Even though the Bình Xuyên fighters had devoted themselves to armed struggle, it explained, a communist-led resistance has only led to failure. Diplomatically, neither Vietnam's neighbors nor the United States would tolerate a communist state. Domestically, the communists' systematic extermination of political opponents and attempts to communize their territory only managed to “discourage the people” and “divide the resistance.” Whether out of naïveté or rhetorical calculation, the program accepted as a given that Bảo Đại's anticipated partnership with the French was the only viable alternative path.

Yet, the power asymmetry between the French and Vietnamese nationalists was obvious. The latter had neither an armed force nor institutional infrastructure. Bảy Viễn and his lieutenants were well aware of the nationalists' vulnerability—demonized by communists and bullied by the French. They knew that the line between patriot and puppet was a fine one. For the so-called Bảo Đại Solution to succeed, the program stressed, the ex-emperor must be and be seen as a patriot. And the precondition for this was to have a strong “support force” made up of resistance (insurgent), religious, and non-communist political elements. Yet, the program pointed out, non-communist efforts up to that point had been marred by the political elite's tendency toward factionalism and the nationalist government's crippling weakness. With no military or police forces of its own, the government could not hope to face off against the communists or resist dictates coming down from the French. “Concrete force” was a prerequisite for effective politics.

³⁸ Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin history of modern Vietnam* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 241.

³⁹ “Programme Politique et de Propagande du Bloc des Combattants Binh Xuyen,” attached to No. 1408 S/CAB/AP, 10 December 1948, HCI 344, CAOM, p.4.

In place of armed struggle, then, the Bình Xuyên called for something akin to “armed politics.”⁴⁰ Though armed force would not be used to fight the French, “it is because of their very existence that France must reckon with...the nationalist political movement promoted by the Bình Xuyên.”⁴¹ Within the parameters of the Bảo Đại Solution, then, the inherently liminal position of non-communists demanded a militarily capable Third Force. Not only would an armed force afford non-communists leverage, it would also allow them to eliminate communist competitors and establish territorial control.

A document accompanying the political program entitled “Role Assigned to the Nationalist Army” outlines the steps the group would take to advance the nationalist cause. Broadly, the plan calls for the formation of a Bình Xuyên army and the simultaneous creation of a “nationalist zone.” A two-thousand-man force would be recruited through clandestine propaganda and recruitment centers in the “occupied city” and from among non-communist resistance groups. The group’s territory—a region immediately south of Saigon-Cholon—would become the training ground for fighters and cadres, housing supply depots and concealed arms workshops. Within three months, the ambitious plan estimated the army would triple in size. Once the group formed an army and established a nationalist zone, it would expand its territory, creating “politico-economic zones.” The group would continue to rally nationalist elements and Việt Minh defectors, while allying with other nationalist armed groups to isolate and eliminate communists. Outside its territory, Bình Xuyên agents would enter Saigon-Cholon to organize political “sub-committees,” establish local authority, and carry out anticommunist propaganda. Ultimately, military and territorial power would support future negotiations with the French. The autarkic overtones reflect the program’s principle of self-reliance—as a way to “prevent the French from dominating the group.”

Rebuilding the Bình Xuyên on the Edge of Saigon-Cholon

In the maelstrom of decolonization and civil war, Bảy Viễn knew his value to any side—and indeed his ultimate fate—in the conflict was directly tied to his ability to field an army. Fortunately, in this regard, Bảy Viễn’s priorities aligned with the French military’s. Of the approximately two thousand Bình Xuyên Unified Forces troops, only some two hundred had trekked out of the maquis with their suddenly diminished leader. But the initially bleak situation did not remain for long. The Bình Xuyên quickly reconstituted itself despite chronic financial difficulties. Its military ranks grew steadily—from 200 in June 1948, to 648 six months later, 791 after another six months, and up to 921 in February 1951.

The Bình Xuyên comprised distinct civilian and military wings. The civilian wing was populated by urban intelligence agents and assassins, drawn from surviving elements of Bình Xuyên “military espionage” [*ban do thám*] and “traitor suppression” [*ban trừ gian*] committees that circulated in Saigon-Cholon. The lack of manpower and search for financial resources in the early months after *ralliement* led the leadership to focus on strengthening its urban operation. Bảy Viễn and his lieutenants first had to replace commanders held or killed by the Việt Minh and consolidate the surviving fragments of their urban committees.⁴² Additionally, the Bình Xuyên was charged with creating six “sabotage sections”—essentially action committees—reportedly at

⁴⁰ See Paul Staniland, “Armed politics and the study of intrastate conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 54(4), 2017.

⁴¹ “Programme Politique et de Propagande,” p.1.

⁴² Captured Document: Circulaire à tous les Lien To et à tous les Comités Spéciaux du B.C.T. No. 3 de Saigon-Cholon, Document No. 3 in BR Particulier No. 245/P, No. 16.121/B.2., 11 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

the behest of Governor Trần Văn Hữu. “But for his own prestige vis-à-vis the French Authorities as well as the Vietnamese people, Bảy Viễn did not intend to receive help in money or arms,” an informant noted. So Maurice Thiên, the architect of the Bình Xuyên’s urban network, set out to build them as self-funded units intended to be stationed in Saigon, Cholon, and Phú Nhuận.⁴³ A shortage of funds briefly interrupted the effort.⁴⁴ But Bình Xuyên leaders would recreate, and expand, the urban network. By the latter half of 1949, captured Việt Minh documents suggest, between sixteen and eighteen such committees existed. They maintained a presence in Saigon-Cholon’s economically vital areas and transportation bottlenecks.⁴⁵

The military wing was also growing. In contrast to the diffuse and clandestine nature of the civilian wing, the military was made up of conventional army units that manned French military guard posts and engaged in rural security operations. Bảy Viễn’s initial reticence about taking money and arms from the regional government and the French military quickly gave way. From September 1948, he began receiving a monthly government subvention and periodic shipments of arms from the French. The army started with a single regiment [*trung đoàn*], divided into three companies [*đại đội*], under the command of Thái Hoàng Minh (aka Tư Minh). Added to these units were organs for internal control, including military police aimed at deserters and a special committee to stamp out blackmailing.⁴⁶ In mid-1950, the Bình Xuyên also added “intervention companies” at the behest of the Nguyễn Phan Long and Trần Văn Hữu governments, and the French military in preparation for insurgent attacks on Saigon-Cholon.⁴⁷ By the end of 1950, the official headcount of the Bình Xuyên military and civilian wings stood at 850 regulars divided among five companies, plus approximately 1000 members in various action committees often working in the city.⁴⁸ The year 1951 saw the further elaboration of the Bình Xuyên armed force. It established workhouses [*trại tế bần*] to train mendicants and prostitutes in the work of intelligence collection.⁴⁹ Run by an “indigent committee” [*ban tế bần*], this virtually invisible network focused on collecting “all intelligence concerning the activities of the Việt Minh, other politico-religious parties, as well as both Vietnamese and French authorities.”⁵⁰ The Việt Minh Public Security Service in Saigon-Cholon, having caught wind of these developments, cautioned its agents against these clandestine operatives.⁵¹ According to an accounting made at the end of November 1951, the army alone—not including a perhaps even larger civilian wing—

⁴³ SDJ report to 2ème Bureau: Activités des Binh Xuyen, No. 519/Z, 21 July 1948, 10H 4090, SHD.

⁴⁴ SDJ report to 2ème Bureau: Activités actuelle de Bay Vien, unnumbered, 23 July 1948, 10H 4186, SHD; SDJ report to 2ème Bureau: Etat actuel de Bay Vien et Tu Thien, No. 546/Z, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁴⁵ Captured Document: Le Commandement du Comité des Actions en Ville à tous Comités d’Actions (translation), 8 September 1949, 10H 4186, SHD; Captured Document: Formation de l’Armée Nationale au Q.G. de Bay Vien, No. 37/T.S., translation attached to No. 4304/2S (FFVS), 19 July 1949, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁴⁶ Captured Document: Le Commandement du Comité des Actions en Ville à tous Comités d’Actions (translation), 8 September 1949, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁴⁷ Bảy Viễn to Lt.-Colonel Rousson, Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon: A/s création d’une Compagnie d’Intervention, No. 696, 31 May 1950, Folder D 7-555, Phủ Thủ Hiến Nam Việt (PTHNV), TTLTQGII.

⁴⁸ Fiche sur les F.A.N.B.X. (Secteur de Saigon-Cholon), Unnumbered, 27 November 1950, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁴⁹ Captured Document: Công Điện (UBKCHC Tỉnh Long Châu Hà), Unnumbered 8 February 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁵⁰ Bulletin Quotidien Dirsuma No. 133, No.133, 29 September 1951, Folder Phủ Thủ Tướng Quốc Gia Việt Nam (PThTQGVN), TTLTQGII; Sommaire des activités Binh Xuyen (SSHC), Unnumbered, Undated (sent to 2ème Bureau on 17 November 1951), 10H 4187, SHD.

⁵¹ Captured Document: BR No. 1.109/CT (Comité Politique du Service du Cong An de Saigon-Cholon, 9 February 1951, attached to Traduction d’un Document rebelle récupéré au cours de l’Opération “Jasmin,” No. 1346/2.S., 14 August 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

had six companies staffed by 42 officers, 181 non-commissioned officers, and 1,440 troops.⁵²

The foundation of the new Bình Xuyên was in the beginning the old Bình Xuyên. After Nguyễn Bình loyalists forced Bảy Viễn to flee the Plaine des Joncs and unceremoniously dispatched some of his most trusted commanders, word quickly spread in the resistance. One company [*đại đội*] commander, Nguyễn Tấn Nhị (aka Tư Cốc), recalled the confusion in the immediate aftermath, having taken flight in the belief that the entire Bình Xuyên force had been disarmed. He would become Bảy Viễn's economic affairs chief.⁵³ Alarmed contingents from Detachments 21 and 25, considered solidly "pro-Bảy Viễn," successively made their way out of Rừng Sác to seek protection from the French military and rejoin their leader—eighty from Detachment 21 and twenty from Detachment 25, just in June.⁵⁴ Another 400 reportedly sought refuge as well, but it is unclear what came of the plan.⁵⁵ According to Savani's estimate, a total of about 900 fighters from Detachments 4, 9, 21, and 25 had rallied to Bảy Viễn by the end of 1948.⁵⁶ Not that the Việt Minh made it easy. In December 1948, a Detachment 21 fighter named Trần Văn Điền wrote from Maison Centrale [Khám Lớn] pleading for Bảy Viễn's help. He recounted that Nguyễn Bình's dragnet prevented him from following Bảy Viễn to Saigon. When he finally managed to escape in October, he was arrested by guards at a French post and deposited in the city's notorious colonial-era prison.⁵⁷ Nguyễn Văn Bảo, a fighter in Bình Xuyên Detachment 9 under Lai Văn Sang, had an even tougher time getting out. He was held for six months in a Việt Minh prison due to his affiliation, and upon being released, was sent to work in Regiment 397's "Autarkic Production Camp" as a cultivator.⁵⁸ Or, take Trần Văn Tâm who had followed his uncle and cousin into Bảy Viễn's intelligence service. He was arrested by the Nhà Bè Public Security Service after the purge and, when freed, was demoted to an oarsman for the Việt Minh economic service.⁵⁹ There were high-profile defections, too, thanks to Nguyễn Bình's policy of dismantling the remaining "loyal" Bình Xuyên units. In August 1948, he offered explicit guidance on the matter: "After purging the Public Security of Bà Rịa and the Bình Xuyên's Rừng Sác Zone, we must reorganize the army... we must change the commanders, because you are not unaware that the commanders of the Bình Xuyên detachments are inadequate, lacking ability in military affairs as in politics... like Mười Lực [aka Ngô Văn Lực] and Năm Chăng [Lê Văn Chăng] in Regiment 302."⁶⁰ In April of 1949, longtime Bình Xuyên commanders, initially considered firmly in the anti-Bảy Viễn camp, including Ngô Văn Lực (Regiment 307 commander) and Võ Văn Môn (Regiment 309, Company 1 commander),

⁵² Stationnement Détaillé des FANBX à la date du 20 Novembre 1951, Territoire des FTSV, Zone Centre, 10H 2215, SHD.

⁵³ SDJ report to 2ème Bureau: Vérification sur l'arrestation de Bay Vien, No. 402/Z, 10 June 1948, 10H 4090, SHD.

⁵⁴ Commandant le Secteur de Cap-Baria à Commandant les TFIS, No. 1056/SEC/2, 5 June 1948, 10H 4188; Rapport: Ralliement de quelques éléments du Chi Doi 25 (S/Secteur de Cholon), No. 1429/SSC/S, 17 June 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁵⁵ Projet de Télégramme (2ème Bureau, TFIS), unnumbered, undated, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁵⁶ Savani, 140.

⁵⁷ Trần Văn Điền to Bảy Viễn (hand-written letter), 15 December 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁵⁸ Déclaration de Nguyen Van Bao rallié au poste de My Hoi le 14-12-49, No. 0152/2, 5 January 1950, 10H 4013, SHD.

⁵⁹ Interrogatoire du Rallié Tran Van Tam, No. 3658/SR, 1 December 1949, 10H 2214, SHD.

⁶⁰ Captured Document: Nguyễn Bình letter on Bình Xuyên reorganization, No. 144, 10 August 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

rallied.⁶¹ Then in September 1951, Lê Văn Chưởng followed suit.⁶² Each of them would assume a prominent position in the new Bình Xuyên.

The reconstituted Bình Xuyên would play a key role in General de Latour's "guerre des postes" in Saigon-Cholon's southern hinterland. Its marshy topography and profusion of canals were almost tailored to the needs of insurgents. It bordered the city's major trade hub, heightening the need for security. And so the French military assigned a progressively expanding territory to the Bình Xuyên—viewed as its home turf of sorts. What came to be called the “Bình Xuyên Zone” was to be the city's buffer against Việt Minh infiltration and outright attacks. In October 1948, this zone comprised a narrow strip of land (roughly one square mile) bounded on the north by the Canal de Doublement, the east by Rạch Ông Lớn, the west by Rạch Xóm Củi, and the south by Rạch Đĩa.⁶³ Using this zone as a springboard for operations deep into the city's periphery, Bình Xuyên troops engaged in the steady decimation of the Việt Minh. In monthly reports to French commanders and the South Vietnamese regional government, Bảy Viễn tallied the results. Between September 1948 and June 1950, the Bình Xuyên officially killed 115, arrested 242, and rallied 170 insurgents of varying importance, ranging from administrators to public security [*công an*] agents. The Saigon-Cholon Sector, under whose command the Bình Xuyên operated, was so encouraged by the results that it advocated enlarging the semi-autonomous zone. Its boundaries were extended several times between 1949 and 1951.⁶⁴ By mid-1951, the Bình Xuyên Zone's northern boundary ran the length of the Canal de Doublement and Canal de Dérivation, from Rạch Cần Giuộc on the west to just short of the Saigon River on the east, and its southernmost boundary reached Phú Lễ Village in Dương Hoà Hạ Canton. The expanded area totaled more than thirty square miles.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Colonel Lê Văn Viễn to Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Viet Nam, No. 53/AM, 23 April 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶² BR (Sous-Secteur de Cholon), No. 1959/2, 19 September 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁶³ Note de Service (EM 3ème Bureau, Secteur de Saigon-Cholon), No. 1724/3, 9 October 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁶⁴ Fiche (EM 3ème Bureau, Secteur de Saigon-Cholon) relative à l'extension des FANBX, No. 3056/3, 19 October 1950, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶⁵ Savani, 141. [Insert map of the BX Zone 1948-1951 from “Zone d’Implantation BX” 10H 4186]



Binh Xuyen Zone from 1948 to 1951 (10H 4186)

Saigon-Cholon as Contested Terrain

The Binh Xuyen's close proximity to the city worried segments of the Franco-Vietnamese state early on. In July 1948, South Vietnamese government officials reported that the Binh Xuyen as well as other "auxiliary groups" had "given themselves over to acts that constitute the veritable encroachment on the powers of police and judicial services."⁶⁶ Governor Trần Văn Hữu had even asked General de Latour to keep the Binh Xuyen outside of Saigon-Cholon to avert potential problems.⁶⁷ The Binh Xuyen was officially headquartered at the Hiệp An Bridge (and later the Y Bridge) and permanently assigned a liaison officer reporting to the Saigon-Cholon Sector command. Despite these precautions, run-ins with the police became frequent. One

⁶⁶ Sous-Secrétaire d'État à l'Intérieur du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam/Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 669/?/DAP, 14 July 1948, PTHNV B 04-22, TTLTQGII.

⁶⁷ Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam/Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam à Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine, Unnumbered, July 1948 (no precise date), PTHNV B 04-19, TTLTQGII.

incident barely one month into the Bình Xuyên's new role nearly devolved into a violent clash.⁶⁸

The incident unfolded over two days in late July 1948, merely a month into the Bình Xuyên's new partnership with Franco-Vietnamese authorities. On the afternoon of the 27th, Roger Pagès, an agent of the District 5 Police, arrested four Bình Xuyên soldiers near his post at the Tay Nam Rice Mill. The men had been charged with security in a zone stretching from the city's southern boundary (Canal de Doublement) to the Bình Đăng area one mile away. Pagès contended that the men, though carrying travel passes certified by the French military, had left their designated zone of action and encroached on 5ème Arrondissement jurisdiction. Informed of what transpired, the men's commander arrived at the post with twenty armed soldiers in tow. A second Bình Xuyên commander who came to the scene demanded the release of his men, else the police agent would have to deal with the armed contingent surrounding his post. To "avoid a regrettable incident," Pagès acquiesced.⁶⁹

The matter was far from resolved, however. The following day, another police agent, Jacques Vandelet, arrested two other Bình Xuyên members loitering near the same post. Ten minutes later, he spotted Pagès on his return from patrol. He was being pursued by some twenty Bình Xuyên soldiers. Astonished, Vandelet ordered his men to confront the soldiers as he went off to alert his superiors. It began to look like an outright attack. When told to retreat, the Bình Xuyên commander flatly refused. In a replay of the day before, part of the contingent surrounded the police post while the majority remained on the Cần Giuộc Bridge, their *mitraillettes* drawn. Reinforcement quickly arrived with District 5 Police Chief, Passagne, which disarmed and arrested the now overmatched Bình Xuyên troops. The anticlimactic end saw Bảy Viễn appear on the bridge, likely at the urging of Commandant Julien, the French military liaison. The Bình Xuyên chief acknowledged that his soldiers had failed to follow instructions and vowed to punish them. In a conciliatory gesture, Passagne released the men and returned the seized weapons to Bảy Viễn.⁷⁰

Bloodshed was avoided, yet the dustup was no doubt unnerving for both civil and military authorities. On the instructions of General de Latour, Robert Francès met with the Bình Xuyên leadership and its military minders the next morning.⁷¹ Measures had to be taken to avoid a repeat of what transpired, they were told. In effect, Bảy Viễn had to move his entire force out of Saigon-Cholon, save for his general staff and a cadre of twenty bodyguards. According to a police count, some 145 men were barracked at No. 31 rue de Canton, despite being ostensibly relegated to the Bình Xuyên zone. Bảy Viễn grudgingly acquiesced. Out of spite, he also "volunteered" to recall his sixty action committee members, originally assigned to support urban pacification, adding that he would no longer accept the slightest responsibility for public order in the city. Francès assured him that "regular" services would be capable of maintaining security. Local authorities were elated that the Bình Xuyên was sanctioned. A letter from the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon heartily thanked Governor Trần Văn Hữu for safeguarding the city from the

⁶⁸ Note (Sûreté Fédérale): Incidents entre éléments des troupes de Binh Xuyen et agents de la Police Municipale, No. 11849/SG1, 31 July 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

⁶⁹ Pagès (Poste de Rizeries No. 3 "Tay Nam" à Commissaire de Police du 5ème Arrondissement, Unnumbered, 27 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁷⁰ Commissaire du Police du 5ème Arrondissement à Chef de la Police Munipale, no. 1394, 29 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁷¹ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine à Mr. le General Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine, Incidents entre éléments des troupes Binh Xuyen et agents de la Police Municipale, No. 101797/S, 29 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

armed Bình Xuyên contingent.⁷² The military's liaison, Commandant Julien, blamed the incident on each side's "rigid attitude" and warned that "this habit of struggle [between them] will not disappear anytime soon."⁷³

The Sûreté Fédérale's success in dislodging the Bình Xuyên was short lived. For the French military quickly enlisted the group to set up a checkpoint in Vĩnh Hội in late August 1948. Halting Việt Minh infiltration seemingly outweighed the obvious potential for conflict. The islet sat at the confluence of the city's two primary commercial waterways—the Arroyo Chinois and the Canal de Doublement.⁷⁴ A third, Rạch Ông Lớn, linking the city to its southern hinterland, also terminates nearby. This junction, between a bustling commercial center and the city's primary commercial port on the Saigon River, figured prominently in security and economic considerations. Việt Minh supplies, foodstuff, medicine, and munitions, had once flowed along the waterways to the maquis. Before Bảy Viễn rallied, Maurice Thiên had been responsible for operating one such a supply line for the Bình Xuyên. And so it was only fitting that he led a contingent of 37 men to staff two guard posts on the islet. Each faced one waterway as they forked around Khánh Hội before emptying into the Saigon River.⁷⁵ The strategic position of the posts and the broadness of their assigned mission—to monitor the fluvial junction and its surrounding area—afforded the Bình Xuyên significant latitude. Far from a surreptitious encroachment, the group publicly announced its presence: a black boat with "Sûreté Nationale, Poste de Binh Xuyen" painted in white was prominently docked by one post.

Wittingly or not, the military had made the Bình Xuyên the city's gatekeeper. This arrangement alarmed the police and Sûreté. For the police, it was all the more troubling since Maurice Thiên had been accused of kidnapping multiple police informants and committing a host of "crimes" since his release. Robert Francès, worried about a resurgence of Bình Xuyên transgressions, vehemently challenged the legitimacy and utility of the military's security measure.⁷⁶ "The presence of irregular elements in this sensitive area constitutes a certain danger," he cautioned, adding that it could "generate incidents with security organs." Commissioner Jegou of the Port Police added to the chorus of opposition. He reported an incident where five rice junks belonging to the Comité des Céréales on their way to the Saigon port were stopped and searched by the Bình Xuyên. This despite being escorted by the Port Police.⁷⁷ Though the incident did not escalate, Jegou criticized the ill-defined jurisdictional boundaries and conflicting orders for causing confusion. According to him, Lai Hữu Tài had intimated that even he did not know the group's precise "territorial limits." In the latter's telling, Governor Trần Văn Hữu had additionally tasked the Bình Xuyên with securing the Canal de Dérivation (the eastern extension of the Canal de Doublement)—beyond the junction it was initially asked to monitor—further complicating an already ambiguous jurisdictional mishmash. Whether the Bình Xuyên controlled the bottleneck around Vĩnh Hội or an additional two miles

⁷² Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, No. 331-S, 4 August 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁷³ Rapport (S/Secteur de Cholon): Sur les incidents entre la Police Municipale et les Troupes Binh Xuyen ralliés, No. 1744/SSC/S, 29 July 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁷⁴ Commissaire de la Police, 6ème Arrondissement, à Chef de la Police Municipale, No. 241/C, 22 August 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷⁵ Bulletin de Renseignements (S/Secteur de Cholon), Organisation des B.C.T. Binh Xuyen, No. 4/B.X., 23 August 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷⁶ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine, Activités Binh Xuyen, No. 11543/S, 25 August 1948, 10H 4188, SHD.

⁷⁷ Commissariat de la Police des Ports de Saigon-Cholon à Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine, Activités Binh Xuyen, No. 551/C, 17 September 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

of waterway seems trivial, but it had serious implications for how competing claims of authority would be adjudicated.

Pushback from the police and Sûreté was firm. Robert Francès, as the ranking Sûreté official in southern Vietnam, issued a rebuke of the Binh Xuyên.⁷⁸ He flatly stated: "The participation of the Binh Xuyên in the monitoring of river navigation is unacceptable." Beyond repeated run-ins with the city's police, "in case of crisis, it could pose serious risks to our rice and rubber stocks." He ends by urging the Saigon-Cholon Sector to "inform Bảy Viễn...of his actual role and the territorial limits to his action." Francès's warning, which no doubt made its way to General de Latour, appears to have been heeded. Almost as soon as he issued his report, the Binh Xuyên was "evicted" from Vĩnh Hội to "put an end to the inconveniences."⁷⁹

State of Fragmentation

The French military paved the Binh Xuyên's path out of the maquis. Though the Sûreté Fédérale registered its concerns about the group's unruly nature, it had no power to derail the *ralliement*. The Sûreté Fédérale's street-level offshoot, the Police Municipale, also had little recourse once the Binh Xuyên was garrisoned close to its district stations and guard posts. And as tension between the police and the Binh Xuyên threatened to spill into open warfare, there appeared to be little interest from either the Vietnamese authorities or the French military in checking the Binh Xuyên's growing presence. On the contrary, both General de Latour and Governor Trần Văn Hữu appeared to stand firmly behind the group. In September, they had officially conferred on the Binh Xuyên a territory abutting the city's southern boundary, granting it policing powers as well as a monthly government subvention.⁸⁰ Soon after, heartened by the group's ability to bring "calm" to its zone, they proposed extending its territory further southward and even enlisting it for counterinsurgency operations in Gò Cong Province.⁸¹ Still, Francès pressed the issue of Binh Xuyên encroachments. Its "abuses," he insisted, compromised his ability to ensure security on the Canal de Doublement and Canal de Dérivation.⁸² Tax collection on the waterways was a case in point. But Trần Văn Hữu came to the group's defense. It was necessary to confront both the Binh Xuyên and the "agents réguliers," he equivocated. For "Bảy Viễn complains ... that certain port agents are [actually] Việt Minh agents and claims that if the Binh Xuyên collect taxes in their place, it is to prevent the Việt Minh from receiving them" from its moles. Francès flatly dismissed the claim as mere "pretext." Characterizing the group as "very unreliable," he expressed fear that in case of a "grave incident," it would be impossible to tell the Binh Xuyên apart from the Việt Minh. Yet the governor was indefatigable. He reminded Francès that Bảy Viễn was a *nationalist* leader who rallied to the *Vietnamese* government. The implication was clear: Handling of the Binh Xuyên was foremost the Vietnamese government's prerogative.

The Sûreté Fédérale was undeterred. In early November 1948, Robert Francès continued to lodge complaints with Trần Văn Hữu about the Binh Xuyên ignoring his warnings and carrying

⁷⁸ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine, Activités Binh Xuyen, No. 12706/S, 17 September 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁷⁹ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, Secteur assigné aux Binh Xuyen, No. 456-S, 20 September 1948, Folder B 04-23, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁰ Générale Boyer de Latour & Président/Gouverneur Tran Van Huu, Note de Service: Stationnement et entretien des Troupes Binh Xuyen, No. 745/Cab.Mil., 10 September 1948, D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸¹ Procès-verbal, Comité de Ralliement, Séance du Vendredi 15 Octobre 1948, 10H 4323, SHD.

⁸² Procès-verbal, Comité de Ralliement, Séance du Vendredi 22 Octobre 1948, 10H 4323, SHD.

on with illegal activities in Saigon-Cholon.⁸³ After getting dislodged from Vĩnh Hội, Bình Xuyên men tried to move into Chánh Hưng Island, north of the “Bình Xuyên Zone.”⁸⁴ There, they reportedly set up an action committee post on rue de Phong Phú and constructed a post near Pont en Y.⁸⁵ Francès stressed that he had “tried hard to resolve the incidents [directly] with the Bình Xuyên commander in order to build the necessary confidence between legal authorities and recently rallied nationalists.” By the same token, he tried to “demonstrate a good many times” to Bảy Viễn that police action could only be legally carried out by those “bodies authorized by the law,” that actions by “irregular elements could stir up grave complications.” But these efforts came to naught. “I cannot but place full legal responsibility of future criminal acts [these men] may commit on the Bình Xuyên,” Francès wrote. No longer content to let its agents run amok, he took matter into his own hands and instructed the Chef de la Police Municipale to bring the group into line. Per Francès’s instructions, Bình Xuyên personnel who “disrupt public order” would no longer receive special treatment. Those belonging to a military unit would be taken to the local police station and handed over to French military police; those not able to prove military affiliation would be charged with a common law crime and referred to the public prosecutor’s office.⁸⁶

From the perspective of Saigon-Cholon officials, the military and the regional government had left unchecked clear violations of state authority—arbitrary arrests, illegal taxation, and a general usurpation of official functions. Despite frequent reports to Governor Trần Văn Hữu and General de Latour about the group’s transgressions, the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon complained that he “never received any responses” from them.⁸⁷ He added that the military’s “Saigon-Cholon Sector does not seem to have much weight with the Bình Xuyên, tends to minimize their encroachments, and seems to be not very strict with the *ralliés*.” The Prefect strongly believed, as the Police Municipale and Sûreté Fédérale did, that the Bình Xuyên posed a danger to the government’s local control. “The systematic decimation of our investigative agents,” he wrote to the governor, “is intended to terrorize their replacements so as to cut off all the Police’s means of information [gathering] on what is happening in the Bình Xuyên Zone.”⁸⁸ Francès even impugned the group’s true agenda, noting that its “ill-defined intentions and anarchic spirit” hampered the work of pursuing insurgents and clearing the zone south of the canal [de Doublement and de Dérivation]. “Consequently,” he wrote, “I am duty-bound to insist, once again, that the sector assigned to the Bình Xuyên troops be as far away from Saigon as possible.”⁸⁹

Francès’s persistence merely nudged the military and the regional government to issue

⁸³ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine/Directeur de la Sûreté Nationale à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Viet Nam, A/s Forces Binh Xuyen, No. 15.855/S, 6 November 1948, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁸⁴ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, Secteur assigné aux Binh Xuyen, No. 456-S, 20 September 1948, Folder B 04-23, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁵ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Commissaire de la République en Cochinchine, Activités Binh Xuyen, No. 582/Cab, 23 October 1948, 10H 3770; Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Commissaire de la République en Cochinchine, Installation d’un poste par les forces Binh Xuyen à proximité du Pont tripode, 8 November 1948, No. 533-S, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁸⁶ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine/Directeur de la Sûreté Nationale à Chef de la Police Municipale, A/s Forces Binh Xuyen, No. 15.856/S, 6 November 1948, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁸⁷ Affaires Binh Xuyen, Réunion de sécurité le 13 Novembre 1948, Chez le Préfet, Unnumbered, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁸⁸ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, Attitude des ralliés Binh Xuyen, No. 578-C/Cab, 14 December 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁹ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale, Troupes Binh Xuyen: Sécurité du Canal de Dérivation, No. 17.932/S, 8 December 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

another perfunctory warning. In early December 1948, General de Latour's office sent the governor a letter echoing complaints about the Bình Xuyên's jurisdictional encroachments and other questionable activities in Saigon-Cholon. It emphasized that "police operations inside the urban perimeter and on the Canal de Dérivation and Canal de Doublement belong to the exclusive jurisdiction of the regular police services."⁹⁰ The governor's office, in turn, communicated de Latour's directives to Bảy Viễn. Captain Flocard, the regional government's Chief of the Military Cabinet, sent Bảy Viễn a delicately worded letter. "I know that these schemes are contrary to your directives and that you yourself criticize them," it read, "But it will be necessary to give strict instructions [to your men] in order to avoid [future] incidents, which can only damage the good existing relations. The simplest way ... is to restrict these incursions by Bình Xuyên elements north of the [canals], and to punish the guilty."⁹¹

However, the Sûreté Fédérale's more aggressive posture emboldened the police. On 9 April 1949, Bảy Viễn alerted General de Latour to a disconcerting incident. Nguyễn Văn Thân (alias Nguyễn Minh Chân), a Bình Xuyên company commander who had been on patrol in the Cholon section of town, was arrested by the Police Municipale. It is unclear why he was apprehended in the first place, but once investigated by the *laboratoire d'identité*, it was discovered that he was an escaped convict and technically still on the run. As it turned out, in 1940, the Cour Criminelle de Saigon sentenced the native of Bình Xuyên village to twenty years of forced labor for "piraterie."⁹² He was shipped off to Poulo Condore, a notorious prison island off the coast of Cochinchina, but later escaped amidst the chaos brought on by the end of World War II. Upon returning to the mainland, he joined Bảy Viễn's unit under the Bình Xuyên moniker and began life as a guerrilla fighter. Once his identity was exposed, the police deposited him at the Maison Centrale de Saigon to await his return to prison.⁹³

Bảy Viễn was understandably dismayed. When he rallied in June the previous year, General de Latour had promised what amounted to amnesty for Bình Xuyên fighters who followed suit. "I consider null and void all that has happened [in the past]," the general was quoted as saying. And Bảy Viễn made sure to remind him again that *most* Bình Xuyên soldiers had a criminal record, and that dredging up these "old stories" hurt the group's efforts to recruit fighters still in the maquis, not to mention retaining those who had already rallied.⁹⁴ Bảy Viễn was not exaggerating when he claimed that his fighters could be tempted to leave. In August of that year, a contingent of rallied fighters did desert for fear that they, too, could be arrested and imprisoned like Nguyễn Văn Thân.⁹⁵ And in December, Bảy Viễn alerted the military to yet another desertion, tying it directly to the sense of anxiety this saga had provoked.⁹⁶ Amnesty from prior criminal infractions was no small matter, especially as Bình Xuyên leaders sought to rebuild its

⁹⁰ Commissaire de la République en Cochinchine à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam, No. 246/SC/CAB/AP, 9 December 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹¹ Chef du Cabinet Militaire du Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam à Colonel Le Van Vien, No. 1085/Cab.Mil, 16 December 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹² Bùi Văn Toàn, *Tù Nhân Côn Đảo 1940-1945*, Tập 1, 206. According to this compilation, Nguyễn Văn Thân was born in 1907 in Thạnh Hưng, Chợ Lớn Province. He was arrested on 26 May 1939, tried for aggravated burglary on 23 January 1940, and sent to Poulo Condore on 3 July 1940.

⁹³ Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam à Commissaire de la République Française au Sud Viet Nam, No. 1452/Cab/BG, 10 November 1949, Folder D 5-102, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁴ Colonel Le Van Vien à Général de Latour, No. 45/A.M., 9 April 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁵ Colonel Le Van Vien à S.M. Bao Dai, Chef de l'Etat, No. 84/A.M., 2 August 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁶ Colonel Le Van Vien à Colonel Faulconier, Adjoint au General Commandant les Forces Franco-Vietnamiennes du Sud, No. 408, 29 December 1949, 10H 5001, SHD.

army and maintain legitimacy among their own fighters.

Nearly a month would pass with no sign of progress. “Despite your kind and generous order to free our company commander ... he remains incarcerated at the Maison Centrale,” Bảy Viễn wrote in a follow-up letter. He expressed hope that the general could “put an end to the tiresome trouble between the police and the nationalist Bình Xuyên soldiers.”⁹⁷ The *procureur général*, Mr. Sammarcelli, was not swayed by lobbying from the French Political Affairs Section that de Latour deployed.⁹⁸ The general appeared hamstrung, as were Bảy Viễn’s Vietnamese patrons.⁹⁹ It was argued that the power to grant “right of reprieve” [*droit de grace*]¹⁰⁰—the only legal means to effect Nguyễn Văn Thân’s release—was reserved for the President of the Republic of France.¹⁰⁰ The Vietnamese government itself had no such power.¹⁰¹ As the case lingered into 1950, de Latour’s replacement as Commissioner of the Republic in South Vietnam, General Chanson, did try to fulfill his predecessor’s promise. It is unclear what ultimately became of Nguyễn Văn Thân. Except for a February 1950 request to grant him “provisional release” to spend the Lunar New Year with his family, the archival trail goes cold.¹⁰²

French authorities had weighed the benefits and costs of rallying the Bình Xuyên for some time. In early 1947, as military intelligence ratcheted up its efforts to splinter the Việt Minh, General Jean Valluy, then commander of Force Française d’Extrême-Orient (FFEO), proposed using a broad amnesty policy to win over the group. The question of rallying insurgents was a complicated one, made more so when they were also ex-convicts. At the time, Léon Pignon, Commissioner of Political Affairs, opposed the military’s plan. He noted that because the Bình Xuyên was made up of “pirates who did not recognize any authority, political or military,” it had limited credibility. While the plan could yield “provisional success” by, for example, taking arms out of insurgent hands, civil authorities responsible for the future of Cochinchina “cannot be associated with such a proposal”—that is, one compromising with criminal elements. Pignon concluded: “Rallying the intransigent, such as common law criminals, is a pipe dream.”¹⁰³ Such skepticism among French civilian officials did not discourage, though did disrupt, attempts by French military intelligence and the nascent nationalist government to bring the Bình Xuyên into the anti-Việt Minh fold. The French Sûreté and Police, however, harbored lingering suspicion and resentment. Successive heads of the Sûreté Fédérale in South Vietnam, Robert Francès then Marcel Bazin, were preoccupied with restraining what they considered a characteristically unruly group. Francès after all warned that without proper discipline, “[the Bình Xuyên’s] contribution to pacification could turn out to be more harmful than helpful.”¹⁰⁴ When General de Latour and Governor Trần Văn Hữu initiated the release of captured Bình Xuyên fighters,¹⁰⁵ Bazin cited

⁹⁷ Colonel Le Van Vien à Général de Latour, No. 47/A.M., 5 May 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁹⁸ Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Saigon à Direction des Affaires Politiques, No. 491/S/CAB/AP, 5 May 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁹⁹ Général de Latour à Colonel Le Van Vien, No. 1132/Cab., 28 May 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁰⁰ Commissaire de Police du 4ème Arrondissement à Chef de la Police Municipale, Irrégularité des agents de Binh Xuyen, No. 5671/A, 21 October 1948, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁰¹ Chef de Cabinet à Directeur de Cabinet, Unnumbered, 5 September 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁰² Colonel Le Van Vien à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 551, 15 February 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁰³ Amiral d’Argenlieu, Haut-Commissaire de France pour l’Indochine à Général de Division, Commandant en Chef des TFEO (2è Bureau), Objet: Traitement des rebelles condamnés de droit commun, faisant leur soumission, No. 147/EMP, 6 February 1947, 10H 532, SHD.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Francès (SurFed), “Ralliement de Lê Văn Viễn dit Bảy Viễn,” Note No.8890/S, 4 July 1948, HCI 344, CAOM.

¹⁰⁵ Beginning in late 1948, Franco-Vietnamese authorities began releasing large numbers of former Bình Xuyên fighters held in various prisoner of war camps to aid in the rebuilding of Bảy Viễn’s force. D 7-555, p.124

“their past behavior” as reason for his opposition.¹⁰⁶ The *procureur général*, in response to appeals for Nguyễn Văn Thân’s release, even proposed using the threat of legal action as a “weapon against the possible reversion of these characters” to their old ways.¹⁰⁷

The Nguyễn Văn Thân saga illustrates how French and Vietnamese officials negotiated the boundary between legality and criminality. In truth, a particular understanding of “the criminal” permeated both the civilian and military establishments. Even those in favor of integrating the Bình Xuyên shared Pignon’s lowly views of the group. Governor Trần Văn Hữu’s office described the Bình Xuyên as manned by “outlaw” adventurers who despised discipline and who found politics to be “a ridiculous thing.”¹⁰⁸ General de Latour, too, conceded that “certainly, a number of [them] are pirates and readily extort the people.”¹⁰⁹ Cognizant of the group’s reputation, he cautioned against giving “publicity” to prisoner releases.¹¹⁰ But the trade-off seemed worthwhile. When the Nguyễn Văn Thân case became bogged down with no end in sight, Trần Văn Hữu reached out to de Latour’s successor, General Charles Chanson, for a way to avoid the same problem in the future. Writing in November 1949, the governor explained to the French general that to facilitate the rallying of the Bình Xuyên, whose members “were not always recruited from a wholesome part of the population,” the group was given a “broad and general pardon” that covered certain members who had past convictions. Recent developments had had a deleterious effect on the minds of these men, whose “sometimes simple mentality” could not grasp why they were being pursued for acts that had nominally been pardoned. “That is why I come to you,” the governor wrote, “to ask if it would be possible, by the most legal of ways, to ensure that members of the Bình Xuyên would be safe from difficulties of this kind, the type of difficulties that make them doubt the promise [we] made to them.”¹¹¹ The following month, the military transferred the group from civil to military jurisdiction, citing a 1928 law that subjected all “forces supplétives” to military law in time of war.¹¹²

Unresolved Complications

Jurisdictional disputes exacerbated tensions between the Police Municipale and the Saigon-Cholon Sector, a manifestation of a more muted friction between the Sûreté Fédérale and the Deuxième Bureau. At 12:30 p.m. on 31 March 1949, a five-member Bình Xuyên squad arrested two men—a mechanic at the military transmission factory and a guest at his home—at No. 776 rue des Vignes and took them to Bình Xuyên headquarters. By 9:30 p.m. the same day, District 4 Police had apprehended the five Bình Xuyên agents, charging them with “illegal arrest and detention.” These men, the report added, had also surreptitiously established a post in the nearby Ngã Sáu area.¹¹³ Not until three days later were they released on General de Latour’s order to Captain Savani, head of the Deuxième Bureau. The military’s liaison officer to the Bình Xuyên,

¹⁰⁶ Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine à Général Commandant les Troupes Françaises en Indochine du Sud, No. 19062/S, 27 December 1948, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁰⁷ Chef de Cabinet à Directeur de Cabinet, Unnumbered, 5 September 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁰⁸ Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam, Rapproch Mensuel Juillet 1948, No. 3-Cab, Folder 1, PThTQGVN, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰⁹ De Latour, 76.

¹¹⁰ De Latour to Trần Văn Hữu, 25 November 1948, No. 1577/Cab.Mil., Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹¹¹ Trần Văn Hữu to Chanson, No. 1452 Cab/BG, 10 November 1949, Folder D 5-102, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹¹² Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, Objet: F.A.N.B.X., No. 2720/3, 22 December 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹³ Commissaire Le Cuir (PM 4ème Arrondissement), “Arrestation de cinq agents de renseignements de Binh Xuyen,” 1 April 1949, No. 1830-A, 10H 4188, SHD.

Lieutenant Perron, was incensed by the clumsy police intervention. In his telling, the Bình Xuyên agents, upon receiving reliable information, told Perron of their intent to make an arrest. Perron had a “European deputy” accompany the agents to meet the supervising officer at the suspect’s workplace. The latter confirmed that the suspect’s behavior was odd, having quit his job suddenly and seemingly without reason after working there for two years. Interrogation of the two suspects confirmed the initial intelligence: they confessed to being members of a “Saigon-Cholon Assassination Committee.” Additional information provided by the two men led directly to the arrest of a Việt Minh Public Security agent in the Phú Thọ area. Perron stressed: “[T]he good faith of the Bình Xuyên agents in this matter is without doubt.”¹¹⁴

Little more than three months later, the chief of the Police Municipale drew de Latour’s attention to another complaint. This time it was the District 2 Police that accused Perron himself of violating police jurisdiction.¹¹⁵ According to District Commissioner Bouchacourt’s report, Perron accompanied a group of Bình Xuyên men to search a house on the north bank of Arroyo Chinois. Bouchacourt demanded to know by “what right can Lieutenant Perron ... carry out operations of this kind.”¹¹⁶ The military’s response was dismissive. Perron challenged the accuracy of the report, pointing out that he was not actually present for the operation, that two military police officers accompanied the group, and that the search was performed outside the house, not inside.¹¹⁷ In reality, Lieutenant-Colonel Rousson of the Secteur de Saigon-Cholon contended, the Bình Xuyên had discovered a printshop run by the Việt Minh’s Service Économique on Boulevard Gallieni. In the process, the suspect claimed to know where a cache of grenades was held. The Bình Xuyên acted on what turned out to be false information. This “affair,” the French military concluded, was “greatly exaggerated and recounted in an erroneous fashion” by the the District 2 Commissioner.¹¹⁸

Not until the brewing conflict erupted in gunfire on 28 November 1949 did civil and military authorities in Saigon-Cholon jointly call a meeting to demarcate jurisdictional lines. According to Lieutenant Perron’s investigation, at 3:45 p.m. a Vietnamese woman complained to the District 6 Police Station that her husband had been apprehended by men dressed in black. A police patrol was dispatched to the Canal de Dérivation where they encountered a man clad in black wearing a Bình Xuyên insignia. Police agents, familiar with the Bình Xuyên’s habit of unauthorized arrests, demanded to see his papers. He refused and turned to leave the scene. One police agent fired a shot in the air as a warning.¹¹⁹ At this point, Perron noted, accounts diverge. According to the Police Municipale’s daily bulletin, the Bình Xuyên soldier fired the first shot as he fled the scene, triggering the firefight.¹²⁰ Bảy Viễn, on the contrary, claimed that a hail of bullets descended on his soldier and the Bình Xuyên guard post across the canal, and maintained

¹¹⁴ Perron (Officier auprès des Troupes Binh Xuyen) to Rousson (Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon), 4 April 1949, No. 43/BX, 10H 4188, SHD.

¹¹⁵ Chef de la Police Municipale à Cabinet Militaire du Commissaire de la République en Cochinchine, No. 9140, 15 July 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹⁶ Commissaire de Police, 2^e Arrondissement, à Chef de la Police Municipale, No. 3582/CC, 13 July 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹⁷ Lieutenant Perron, Officier de liaison auprès des Troupes Binh-Xuyen, à Commandant de la Secteur Saigon-Cholon, No. 91 B.X., 20 July 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹⁸ Commandant du Secteur de Saigon-Cholon à Cabinet Militaire, Commandant les FFVS, No. 1284/2S, 23 July 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹⁹ Perron, Officier de Liaison auprès des Troupes Binh-Xuyen à Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, No. 191/B.X., 28 november 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹²⁰ Commissariat Central (Police Municipale), Rapport Quotidien du 27 au 28 Novembre 1949, No. 1779, 28 November 1949, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

that the Bình Xuyên were ordered not to retaliate.¹²¹ Neither side was willing to admit fault. What Perron was able to confirm was that police gunfire intensified as the Bình Xuyên soldier ran toward a small boat to cross the canal. It was then that a French military officer at the nearby poste de la Cotonnière was hit, suggesting that the Bình Xuyên post likely participated in the mêlée. Seeing that police agents were firing at a figure dressed in black (not dissimilar from an insurgent) and angered by the injury to their officer, the soldiers joined in. To “put a stop to the gunfire,” soldiers on a “pontoon bridge” fired shots in the air and those on a small boat launched grenades toward the Bình Xuyên guard post. The clash lasted ten minutes.¹²² Though the casualty count was modest—injuries to the French officer, the Bình Xuyên soldier, and a Chinese civilian—the very fact that a gunfight took place on the busy waterway was alarming.

In retrospect, this incident seems virtually inevitable given the mounting tension between the Bình Xuyên and the police, and the military’s unresponsiveness to the latter’s grievances. Lieutenant-Colonel Rousson, commander of the Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, concluded that unless the authorities took “radical measures,” the situation would deteriorate.¹²³ On 1 December, civil and military authorities in Saigon-Cholon convened a meeting with Lai Văn Sang, Bảy Viễn’s top lieutenant for military affairs, to “stabilize” the relationship between the Bình Xuyên and the Police Municipale. The agreement emerging from this “exchange of views” was similar to what Francès had advocated more than a year earlier. Jurisdictionally, the Bình Xuyên was not allowed to engage in activities within the boundaries of Saigon-Cholon; the police, likewise, would have no control over the Bình Xuyên zone. And while Bình Xuyên members were free to move about the city, they were prohibited from carrying arms. The only exception was if a mission required it, in which case they had to carry the proper arms authorization.

Because arrests carried out by and against the Bình Xuyên had been at the center of multiple disputes, the agreement sought to codify the procedures involved. If Bình Xuyên agents were charged with tracking down insurgents in the city, they had to follow one of two courses of action. If there was urgency to make an arrest, the suspect would have to be taken directly to the group’s liaison officer or the Secteur office. If it was not urgent, the arrest had to be made in the presence of an inspector from the Brigade de Surveillance du Territoire de Cholon.¹²⁴ In both cases, the suspect would be handed over to the Deuxième Bureau (of the Saigon-Cholon Sector) for joint interrogation by military intelligence and Bình Xuyên personnel. Under no circumstances, however, should the suspect be taken to the Bình Xuyên zone. If a Bình Xuyên member were arrested, he would be presented to the military authority (in this case the Sector command) as soon as the police commissioner had collected preliminary statements, and would be detained at a military disciplinary facility if necessary. The police would alert the liaison officer, who would then inform Bảy Viễn. Finally, in a clear reference to the violent clash days prior, a plainclothes Bình Xuyên was now required to present his identity papers if asked by the police.¹²⁵ It is doubtful, though, that anyone at the December meeting believed this compromise

¹²¹ Colonel Le Van Vien à Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, No. 361, 28 November 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹²² Perron, Officier de Liaison auprès des Troupes Binh-Xuyen à Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, No. 191/B.X., 28 November 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹²³ Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, à Commandant Forces Franco-Vietnamiennes du Sud, No. 2487/3, 28 November 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹²⁴ The unamended agreement required the presence of two military police officers.

¹²⁵ Cabinet du Préfet de la Région Saigon-Cholon, Procès-verbal de la réunion, Unnumbered, 1 December 1949, 10H 4186, SHD.

would hold.

Entrenchment and Impunity

Over the coming two years, the Bình Xuyên would assume even greater security responsibilities at the behest of Franco-Vietnamese authorities while also extending its reach inside the city, often contrary to the wishes of those same authorities. A number of developments made this possible. In January 1950, Nguyễn Phan Long assumed the Prime Ministership. He oversaw the transfer of the civilian security services—the Police and Sûreté—from the French to the Vietnamese government. The handover, which his newspaper *L'Echo du Viet Nam* had been pushing for since mid-1949,¹²⁶ was successively completed on 10 March 1950 in the South, 15 June in the North, and 18 July in the Center.¹²⁷ Nguyễn Phan Long's tenure saw the security situation deteriorate, however. Though hardly a DRV sympathizer, he nonetheless “pursued a policy of outreach” vis-à-vis the Việt Minh, with the hope of courting non-communist nationalists among its ranks, not unlike the strategy of his predecessor Nguyễn Văn Xuân.¹²⁸ This approach was most consequential in regard to the security services. As Daniel Varga notes, the Sûreté and its chief, Marcel Bazin, had become “symbols of French oppression.”¹²⁹ So Nguyễn Phan Long strained to project a contrasting image. Take his gesture at the end of the handover ceremony in Saigon. The Prime Minister visited the “disciplinary premises” of the Sûreté headquarters where he told inmates in Vietnamese that henceforth their justice system and police were at the disposal of Vietnam.¹³⁰ Nguyễn Phan Long's symbolic efforts to shake up the status quo, however, looked increasingly problematic in practice. Lucien Bodard disparaged the nationalized institution thusly: He named as head of the Sûreté “a humanist lawyer who called for gentleness. The first gesture of this man was to release all the accused, all the suspects, to empty the prison. He prohibited ‘interrogations’ and all the techniques to make [someone] talk. The zeal consists, for the police, of knowing nothing, of stopping no one, and all the more so as they fear for their skin—they no longer have to carry weapons, [with] persuasion replacing the revolvers and machine guns.”¹³¹

But Nguyễn Phan Long's tenure boded well for the Bình Xuyên. Control of the security services was always an organizational goal of the group. In 1949, Bảy Viễn and Trần Văn Ân had reportedly approached Bảo Đại about having Lai Hữu Tài take command of both the Police Municipale and the Sûreté.¹³² In March 1950, Nguyễn Phan Long even unsuccessfully tried to install Lai Văn Sang as head of the Sûreté Nationale in South Vietnam.¹³³ The consolation prize,

¹²⁶ Note (Dir. de la Police et de la Sûreté): L'application des accords Franco-Vietnamiens en ce qui concerne la Police et la Sûreté, 29 July 1949, HCI 470, CAOM.

¹²⁷ Le Directeur des SSHCI à Délégué du HC auprès du Gouvernement du Vietnam: Procès-verbaux concernant les passations du Service de la Police au Gouvernement du Vietnam, No. 11543SG/3P, 25 August 1950, HCI 470, CAOM.

¹²⁸ Varga (2004), 578

¹²⁹ Varga (2004), 580

¹³⁰ Directeur des Services Français de Sécurité en Indochine à Haut-Commissaire de France, Transfer des premiers éléments de la Sûreté Fédérale du Sud Viêt Nam à l'autorité vietnamienne, No. 39/SG/SD, 10 March 1950, HCI 470, CAOM.

¹³¹ Bodard, 444

¹³² Note (Directeur de la Police et de la Sûreté Fédérale): Intentions vietnamiennes au sujet de la Police Municipale et de la Sûreté Fédérale, No. 10598/SG/1, 27 May 1949, HCI 470, CAOM.

¹³³ Direction des Services Français de Sécurité en Indochina, “M. Lai Huu Sang dit Lai Van Sang,” attached to Note no. 1965/C/SG/1, 28 April 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM.

though, was the appointment of Nguyễn Văn Đây, a Parisian-trained jurist, as Director General of the Service de la Police et Sûreté. A naturalized French citizen and longtime judge in Phnom Penh and Bạc Liêu, he joined the resistance in 1945. He presided over a Việt Minh tribunal in Rạch Giá Province until a change of heart in late 1946 when he returned to Saigon. From there, he resumed his work chairing civilian tribunals in Trà Vinh and Mỹ Tho.¹³⁴ It is unclear how he became acquainted with the Bình Xuyên leaders, but Bảy Viễn and Lai Hữu Tài were his ardent champions when he faced dismissal in June 1950. Lai Hữu Tài, while in France for the Pau Conference, personally pled his case before Bảo Đại and Nguyễn Văn Xuân.¹³⁵ And Nguyễn Văn Đây's successors in the Sûreté Nationale disparaged him as a Bình Xuyên "henchman."¹³⁶ The second figure, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, took the helm of the Police Municipale (also called the Police Régionale or Police Préfectorale) at the behest of Governor Trần Văn Hữu on 25 March 1950.¹³⁷ Unlike Nguyễn Văn Đây, this former Minister of Youth and Sports and leader of the "autonomist" Cochinchinese Popular Front (later renamed the Popular Front) cut an unassailably pro-French figure. Yet he, too, gravitated toward Bảy Viễn. In early 1948, Nguyễn Tấn Cường reportedly took part in the Cochinchinese Republic's attempt to rally the Bình Xuyên.¹³⁸ Once Bảy Viễn crossed over, according to the Sûreté Fédérale, Nguyễn Tấn Cường struck up a relationship with the Bình Xuyên chief and thought to have even provided him with arms.¹³⁹

Neither the presence of amiable leaders in the security services, nor the convention signed in December 1949 subdued the festering tension between the Bình Xuyên and the Police Municipale. Indeed, run-ins with the police resumed with added intensity and frequency. According to the French Service de Sécurité du Haut Commissariat (SSHC, formerly the Sûreté Fédérale), "since the beginning of 1950, the situation has not improved and, moreover ... the animosity Bình Xuyên elements have shown toward the agents of the Police Municipale has grown, and ... frequently manifests in unprovoked aggression."¹⁴⁰ In a span of one week in February, for instance, Bình Xuyên agents were not only caught engaged in illegal searches, assaults, and robbery, but also the beating and kidnapping of police agents. One officer in the Brigade de Recherche who had fired his weapon to fight off an attempted kidnapping, Đặng Văn Ba, was relieved that he had missed his targets. Otherwise, he intimated, his entire family would have been massacred within a week. Asked why such defeatism, he responded: "M. Commissaire, you are not unaware that the Bình Xuyên right now can kill, pillage, assault, arrest anyone and return to their sector [the Bình Xuyên Zone], where they remain safe from any punishment and pursuit." The Commissaire concluded that this state of things inevitably discouraged the police from holding the group to account and forced the population to suffer abuse in silence.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Direction des Services Français de Sécurité en Indochina, "M. Nguyen Van Day," attached to "Gouvernement de S.E. Tran Van Huu" folder, May 1950, SPCE 19, CAOM.

¹³⁵ Bulletin Quotidien Spécial No. 5 (Sûreté Nationale), No. 1667/AS, 27 June 1950, PThTQGVN 1319, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁶ Bulletin des Mois de Juin et Juillet 1950 (Sûreté Nationale), No. 1091/IB/S, 15 August 1950, PThTQGVN 1315, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁷ "Prise de pouvoir: M. Nguyễn Tấn Cường, Chef de la police Municipale," *L'Echo du Viet Nam*, 27 March 1950, HCI 772, CAOM.

¹³⁸ Captured Document (translated): Rapport sur le Front Cochinchinois (Comité de Résistance de Saigon-Cholon), No. 302/TB, 27 February 1948, PTHNV D 61-88, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁹ Activités Nationalistes, Forces Binh Xuyen (Sûreté Fédérale), No. 18284/S, 14 December 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

¹⁴⁰ Note (SSHC): Activités illégales des Forces Armées Nationales Binh Xuyen, No. 3241/C/SG/1, 29 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁴¹ Commissaire du 4ème Arrondissement: Agissements délictueux des Binh Xuyen, No. 273-C, 2 April 1950, PTHNV D 6-14, TTLTQGII.

This brazenness was on full display on the night of 29 March 1950. What began for J. Le Rouzic, the 4ème Arrondissement commissaire-adjoint, as a routine traffic stop ended with a “savage” beating by a group of Binh Xuyên soldiers. According to Commissaire Henri Le Cuir, at 9:20 that night, he saw a “bloodied figure coming toward me,” only to realize that it was his colleague. In Le Rouzic’s telling, that night he noticed a jeep had seemingly broken down on rue des Marins. He told the driver to move the vehicle to the side of the road, but sensing resistance, asked to see his papers. The jeep then pulled up next to a truck, whose occupants—Binh Xuyên soldiers it turned out—told the driver to not present his papers, but that he should beat M. Le Rouzic instead. At that moment, “several individuals armed with iron bars and wheel cranks” descended on the policeman. He escaped only thanks to the “intervention of a four or five Europeans—legionnaires—and a Malay guard... The latter fired a shot in the direction of the jeep, which took off toward Saigon.” Only the driver of the truck was apprehended by the soldiers and handed over to the police.¹⁴² Remarkably, the following day, Bảy Viễn sent the Saigon-Cholon Sector a complaint against the same policeman for initiating the violence, injuring one of his men and damaging his vehicle.¹⁴³ Lieutenant-Colonel Rousson replied that an investigation was underway. He added: “Without wanting to dramatize the affair, I take this opportunity to ask you to please insist that your subordinates avoid all friction with the authorities.”¹⁴⁴

Response from the authorities was mixed. To Rousson, for instance, both sides were responsible. He remarked that the “animosity that exists between the Police and the Binh Xuyên is, in general, due to close-minded subordinates.” Adding to this, Lai Văn Sang “almost always has a tendency to dramatize the smallest of incidents and M. Baly of the 4ème Arrondissement harbors ... an automatic prejudice toward the Binh Xuyên.” The remedy, in his view, was to punish personnel on both sides who ignore orders for moderation.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Trần Văn Đôn, the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon, pleaded with Governor Trần Văn Hữu to ask General Chanson to intervene, “that a stern call to order be addressed to the Binh Xuyên Units.”¹⁴⁶ Trần Văn Hữu, no doubt, conferred with General Chanson. But when the governor’s office followed up, the tone was decidedly equivocal: “The Governor has ... decided to intervene in order to avoid a repeat of similar incidents, but he would not want, in his action, to go against the arrangements that could have been adopted, in terms of military control, by the F.F.V.S. [Forces Franco-Vietnamiens du Sud] Command.”¹⁴⁷ The French security service took the opposite approach and offered a full-throated condemnation. Pierre Perrier, head of the service, pointed to the “marked tendency of the Binh Xuyên elements to create incidents in territory under the jurisdiction of the Police Municipale.” Taking a broader view of law and order, Perrier echoed the report by the Commissaire du 4ème Arrondissement, warning that the group’s transgressions “create a

¹⁴² Commissaire du 4ème Arrondissement: Agression commise contre un commissaire-adjoint de police par les membres de FANBX, No. 263-C, 29 March 1950, PTHNV D 6-14, TTLTQGII.

¹⁴³ Colonel Le Van Vien à Lt.-Colonel Rousson, Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, No. 615, 31 March 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁴⁴ Lt.-Colonel Rousson, Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon à Colonel Le Van Vien, No. 501/2S, 1 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁴⁵ Lt.-Colonel Rousson, Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon, à FFVS/Cabinet, No. 599/2S, 18 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁴⁶ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam: Agression commise contre un commissaire-adjoint de police par les membres de F.A.N.B.X., No. 23 C/Cab, 4 April 1950, PTHNV D 6-14, TTLTQGII.

¹⁴⁷ Directeur du Cabinet (SVN) à Directeur du Cabinet (CRF SVN), No. 257-C/CA.L, 26 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

dangerous state of mind, as much in the population as among the force of the [police].” It was transparent to Perrier that the Binh Xuyên elements were determined to “establish themselves and act as they please in a zone that normally came under the authority of the Police Municipale.”¹⁴⁸

Despite the widespread concerns about endemic disorder and illegality, punctuated by the Le Rouzic incident, the Binh Xuyên would be enlisted to defend the city. On 24 April 1950, Nguyễn Phan Long submitted a proposal to Bảo Đại to enlist the group as defenders against an imminent Việt Minh attack on Saigon-Cholon. To face the impending threat, Nguyễn Phan Long wrote, “I am currently examining with Colonel Lê Văn Viễn the possibility of organizing, with elements of the Binh Xuyên, shock troops capable of usefully aiding the regular police forces and, possibly, intervening effectively against the troublemakers.”¹⁴⁹ The timing of this proposal, in light of Long’s earlier effort to name Lai Văn Sang head of the Sûreté Nationale in the South, seems to suggest an attempt to curry favor with the politically connected Binh Xuyên. But it is his replacement, Trần Văn Hữu, who ultimately approved the measure.¹⁵⁰ Terror was foremost on the new prime minister’s mind when he conferred with Nguyễn Tấn Cường and Nguyễn Văn Đây about establishing a secretive “anti-terrorist committee.” During his first cabinet meeting, Trần Văn Hữu officially established the committee and expanded the powers of the Police and Sûreté.¹⁵¹ The makeup of the committee remained under wraps. But there were rumors, picked up by French intelligence, that Bảy Viễn was to be put in charge of the counter-insurgent campaign in the city.¹⁵² The newspaper *Tiếng Dội* [Echo] speculated whether the Binh Xuyên chief might take command of the entire Saigon-Cholon Region.¹⁵³ The Binh Xuyên unit did extend its operations into the Đa Kao and Ngã Sáu areas, outside of its designated zone.¹⁵⁴ Largely, though, it remained on the outskirts of the city and tasked with a “particularly difficult aquatic region south of Cholon and west of Nhà Bè.”¹⁵⁵ The group’s Compagnie d’Intervention joined a massively strengthened security apparatus to wreak havoc on the insurgency.¹⁵⁶ The Binh Xuyên was praised for its “participation in numerous Saigon-Cholon Sector-organized operations.”¹⁵⁷ The overall result of the counter-insurgent campaign was devastating for the Việt Minh. In just one year, the number of Việt Minh public security [*công an*] agents in the metropolitan region was virtually cut in half from 1000 to 502 agents.¹⁵⁸ The same downward

¹⁴⁸ Note (Directeur des SSHC): Activités illégales des Forces Armées Nationales Binh Xuyen, No. 3241C/SG/1, 29 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹⁴⁹ Nguyễn Phan Long (Président du Gouvernement) à Bao Dai (Chef de l’Etat), unnumbered, 24 April 1950, PThTQGVN 1352, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁰ Le Van Vien à Lt-Colonel Rousson, Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon, No. 696, 31 May 1950, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵¹ Note (SSHC): Mesures d’exception contre le terrorisme, No. 3753/C/SG/1, 17 May 1950, SPCE 19, CAOM.

¹⁵² BR (Sûreté Fédérale): Commission d’action anti-terroriste, unnumbered, 15 May 1950, SPCE 19, CAOM.

¹⁵³ “Đại tá Lê-v- Viễn sẽ được thăng chức Đại tướng Tư Lệnh Saigon-Cholon?” *Tiếng Dội*, 8 May 1950

¹⁵⁴ Le Van Vien: Nos activités militaires pendant le mois de Juin 1950, No. 791, 7 July 1950, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁵⁵ Fiche concernant la conduite et l’activité sur le plan militaire du Colonel Le Van Vien, No. 1803/Cab/Mil, 12 July 1951, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹⁵⁶ Trần Hải Phụng & Phương Thanh Lưu, eds., *Lịch Sử Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn-Gia Định Kháng Chiến, 1947-1975* (TP HCM: nxb Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1994), 256. Nguyễn Văn Tâm was charged with building the National Sûreté in the same year. According to Devillers, it was able to capture much of the Bao Dai zone and did not hesitate to employ harsh methods. Devillers 457.

¹⁵⁷ Rousson (Commandant, Secteur de Saigon-Cholon), “Rapport sur l’activité actuelle des Binh Xuyen,” No. 1521/2S, 16 October 1950, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹⁵⁸ Nguyễn Tấn Tài, ed., *Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: Biên Niên Sự Kiện Lịch Sử (1945-1954)* (Hà Nội: nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2004), 168.

trend likely held for other organs as well. In mid-November, a triumphant General Chanson commended Bảy Viễn for his tireless effort in maintaining order. The Bình Xuyên, he wrote, had “reestablished security in a particularly delicate zone of the city. Moreover, [Bảy Viễn] established an Intervention Unit that, through ceaseless patrols day and night ... has subjected the rebels to important losses of personnel, armament, and various materiel.”¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

Serious questions had attended Bảy Viễn’s ralliement in June 1948. Who was he without the two thousand-strong Bình Xuyên Unified Forces, without his impregnable base in Rừng Sác, and without the prestige that official recognition from the DRV afforded him? Even though he and his lieutenants had survived the purge and had found powerful patrons, they looked thoroughly weakened and their reputations tarnished. Yet the Bình Xuyên underwent a remarkable resurrection, as it assumed vital pacification duties in and around Saigon-Cholon while becoming a paragon of anti-communist nationalism. That Bảy Viễn, not only a high-ranking commander but also a vaunted hero of the resistance, had turned against the DRV made for a powerful narrative to bolster the legitimacy of the Bảo Đại Solution. Moreover, military effectiveness earned the group cachet with the French military while anti-communism and support for Bảo Đại won goodwill from powerful Vietnamese officials. They also adroitly exploited divisions within the Franco-Vietnamese hybrid state—civil versus military, French versus Vietnamese, and central versus local—to extend economic and territorial influence. Strategic maneuvers, paired with theatrical, expressive violence against the police and the Sûreté, allowed the group to walk a fine line between “resistance” and “collaboration.”

¹⁵⁹ Ordre de la Division 1329: Citation pour Colonel Le Van Vien (Général Chanson), 13 November 1950, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

Chapter 4: Confronting the State

The Bình Xuyên underwent a remarkable resurrection after its purge in 1948. As the previous chapter has chronicled, the group assumed vital pacification duties in and around Saigon-Cholon while becoming a paragon of anti-communist nationalism. That Bảy Viễn, not only a high-ranking commander but also a vaunted hero of the resistance, had turned against the DRV made for a powerful narrative to bolster the legitimacy of the Bảo Đại Solution. Since the latter half of 1947, when the French pivoted away from negotiating with Hồ Chí Minh and turned to building a non-communist state to compete against the DRV, recruiting nationalists from the Việt Minh had been a top priority. So the Franco-Vietnamese state amply exploited the *ralliement*'s propaganda value. Bảy Viễn and his lieutenants, in turn, used their new lease on life to rebuild their army, accumulate political capital, and extend its reach throughout the Saigon-Cholon region. The Bình Xuyên's successful reinvention as an anti-DRV nationalist force was therefore a signal victory for the Franco-Vietnamese political project.

Yet, bringing the Bình Xuyên into the fold created a combustible situation. On the one hand, not all segments of the Franco-Vietnamese state favored the arrangement. The Sûreté Fédérale vigorously pushed against plans to rally the Bình Xuyên drawn up between nationalists in the Cochinchinese government and French military intelligence. Bảy Viễn joined the anti-DRV camp in spite of deep ambivalence among its stakeholders. On the other hand, the Bình Xuyên's self-identification as a resistance force was hardly blunted by its *ralliement*. Bảy Viễn and his men did not equate their shift in allegiance with either submission or abandonment of their resistance cause. An ethos of defiance, however ambiguous, permeated their ranks. The Bình Xuyên and its detractors were therefore on a collision course from the start. Their fierce contest over power, legitimacy, and authority played out on the streets of Saigon-Cholon—a muted war within a war that occasionally erupted in gunfire. Toward the end of 1950, the Bình Xuyên was in an enviable position. With enthusiastic supporters among the French military command and allies in positions of the government, it could assert its will over the capital and bend the will of local administrators with virtual impunity.

Changing of the Guards

All that had come to pass would suggest a kind of Bình Xuyên exceptionalism. Immediate, prosaic security concerns outweighed long-term, abstract ones over governmental legitimacy and strict jurisdictional distinctions. With its vital role in pacification and security and the backing of the French military, the Bình Xuyên's transgressions were denied, underplayed, or simply ignored. With Nguyễn Văn Đây and Nguyễn Tấn Cường respectively helming the Sûreté and the Police Municipale, the Bình Xuyên's position seemed secure. But beginning in 1951, as the group stepped up efforts to entrench itself in Saigon-Cholon, it would run up against a renewed vigor in checking its ambitions. This was a product of the government reshuffle that saw Nguyễn Phan Long resign and Trần Văn Hữu replace him. One important consequence of this transfer of power was a change to the leadership of the security services, which reversed the Bình Xuyên's gains under the previous government. There was no longer a place for Nguyễn Văn Đây, whose ineffectiveness and suspect politics came under increasing scrutiny. Trần Văn Hữu promptly replaced him with Nguyễn Văn Tâm, a veteran of the colonial bureaucracy. Known as the "Tiger of Cai Lậy," he had distinguished himself by putting down a communist uprising in 1940. After World War II, he was in charge of internal security then defense in various iterations of the

Republic of Cochinchina.

He chose Mai Hữu Xuân to head the South Vietnamese branch of the Sûreté. Born in 1916, the Saigon native cut his teeth at the Police Municipale, serving as an agent in 1944. After the Japanese coup de force on 9 March 1945, he refused to serve the Japanese and instead joined Marcel Bazin's "resistance" group in the Plaine des Jongs. After the war, Mai Hữu Xuân went to work for the Sûreté Fédérale under Bazin. In 1949, the latter became chief in the South.¹ Mentor and protégé shared a deep suspicion and distaste for the Bình Xuyên, likely stemming from their run-ins with its criminal elements in years past and the bloody war against them as insurgents. Or perhaps, it was due to the group's close association with pro-Japanese nationalists like Trần Văn Ân and Lâm Ngọc Đường, the latter of whom had replaced Bazin at the head of the Police Spéciale de l'Est under the Japanese.² That Mai Hữu Xuân essentially took on Bazin's position spelled trouble for the Bình Xuyên. The Sûreté's work was bolstered by its ally in the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon, Lê Tấn Nẫm. He was another veteran of the colonial bureaucracy, with stints as an administrative delegate in Mỹ Tho and Long Xuyên, who then served in Nguyễn Văn Xuân's Cochinchinese government as Under Secretary of the Interior. In June 1950, he served as interim governor of South Vietnam (briefly replacing Trần Văn Hữu) until becoming Prefect.³ Bảy Viễn saw him as "particularly hostile" toward the Bình Xuyên.⁴ Nguyễn Tấn Cường remained in his post until 1953, but the *commissariats d'arrondissements* frequently circumvented him and directly reported to Lê Tấn Nẫm and Mai Hữu Xuân. Together with Lê Tấn Nẫm, the Police Municipale, as well as the SSHC, the strengthened Sûreté Nationale would act as a watchdog for the auxiliary group.

The Bình Xuyên's brazen and surreptitious attempt to extend its reach into Saigon-Cholon with armed agents was a sore point. Despite Nguyễn Phan Long's initial proposal to deploy the group's "shock troops" inside the city, the jurisdictional boundaries established by the December 1949 "convention" remained in force. But emboldened by the success of pacification, Bảy Viễn redoubled his efforts to strengthen his presence in the city. In February 1951, he informed General Chanson that the Bình Xuyên had installed a military police unit at No. 156 Boulevard Trần Hưng Đạo, the main thoroughfare in Cholon. Ostensibly, it was to enforce discipline among Bình Xuyên fighters and liaise with civil and military authorities of Saigon-Cholon.⁵ According to the Sûreté Nationale, these military police units—also referred to as Brigades Spéciales de Recherches—comprised three to four members of both sexes, and tasked with gathering intelligence and recruiting new adherents to the force. It also pursued Bình Xuyên deserters, as was the case when six agents tracked down two of them in the Bàn Cờ area.⁶ Chanson, clearly exasperated by this act of insubordination, curtly admonished Bảy Viễn: "I'm astonished and seriously discontented to note that you believe you have the power to create and install this unit [in Saigon-Cholon] without any authorization... I do not authorize the functioning of [this unit]

¹ "M. Mai Huu Xuan," October 1952, HCI 730, CAOM.

² Fiche (SESAG): Sur Lam Ngoc Duong [On Lâm Ngọc Đường], in Bulletin de renseignements, No. 13626, June 3, 1947, 10H 4201, SHD.

³ "M. Le Tan Nam," November 1954, 10R 133, SHD.

⁴ Lt.-Colonel Blanche, Commandant le Secteur Saigon-Cholon, à Commandant la Zone Centre Cochinchine, 2ème Bureau, Questions Binh Xuyen, No. 606/2/S, 30 April 1952, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁵ Directeur, Services de Police et de Surete Nationales au SVN: Création de Brigades speciales de Recherches Binh Xuyen, No. 653/IB-S, 14 February 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

⁶ Directeur Adjoint, Services de Police et de Surete Nationales au SVN: Creation de Brigades speciales de Recherches Binh Xuyen, No. 777/IB-S, 21 February 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

and ask that you give immediate orders accordingly.”⁷ Nguyễn Văn Tâm, at the urging of Mai Hữu Xuân, asked Trần Văn Hữu to “use your influence on Colonel Lê Văn Viễn to ask him to withdraw the said brigades.”⁸ Thái Lập Thành, Governor of South Vietnam, tried to rein in the Bình Xuyên’s encroachments as well, telling Bảy Viễn that “you should be prudent in ordering your men to not engage in policing activities outside [their] zone.”⁹

Lieutenant General Paul-Louis Bondis and Hồ Quang Hoà, Chanson and Thái Lập Thành’s successors after their assassination in July 1951, were no more accommodating. In November, Hoà alerted Bondis to the proliferation of so-called “Bureau de Liaison” in Saigon-Cholon. The governor noted that since the Bình Xuyên’s effort to install its military police had met resistance, it was simply changing tactics.¹⁰ One such unit, operating out of No. 3-B rue des Eparges, was implicated in the arrest of two Police Municipale informants who had provided information that led to the arrest of a Bình Xuyên agent for extortion.¹¹ These units were not a recent phenomenon, though. The SSHC had in fact reported in 1950 that these “liaison cells” began appearing in Cholon as early as November 1949.¹² Bondis promptly reproached the Bình Xuyên chief and reiterated that the “presence of armed Bình Xuyên soldiers in the middle of Saigon-Cholon is not acceptable.”¹³ But by November, the same rue des Eparges cell had resumed its “illegal activities.” It tasked four of its informants—rather than regular agents, perhaps for the sake of deniability—to kidnap a 3ème Arrondissement policeman outside his home, only to be thwarted by a police security detail. The informants were arrested and declared that they helped the Bình Xuyên track down Việt Minh infiltrators. Jacques Long, commander of the Bình Xuyên military police (*brigade spéciale de recherche*), eventually arrived to take custody of them.¹⁴

To Bình Xuyên leaders, the Sûreté Nationale, SSHC, Police Municipale, and local administrators in Saigon-Cholon represented a single hostile bloc. This bloc’s aggressive surveillance and enforcement efforts led to clashes and even bloodshed. The death Tran Van Truong, a Bình Xuyên 3ème Compagnie soldier, on 18 March 1951 further escalated tensions. According to Bảy Viễn’s official complaint to Chanson, his soldier was arrested by the Adjoint-Chef Alavoine of the Poste de Thủ Thiêm, then handed over to Inspecteur Frachet of the Brigade Nautique de la Sûreté. Several hours later, Frachet brought the soldier back to the post “in a near death state.” Alavoine refused to take him back. The following day, Truong’s body turned up two hundred meters from the military post. In the aftermath, Inspecteur Frachet and his Sûreté agents continued to search for Bình Xuyên men and informants to arrest. Bảy Viễn urged

⁷ Général Chanson à Colonel Le Van Vien, Création de Brigades spéciales de Recherches Binh Xuyen, No. 443/Cab/Mil, 15 February 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

⁸ Nguyen Van Tam, Ministre de la Sécurité Publique, à Président du Gouvernement, Installation de "Brigades spéciales de recherches" à Cholon, No. 478-S/Dir, 22 February 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

⁹ Thái Lập Thành to Đại Tá Lê Văn Viễn, No. 1120/V/P/Q/S, 6 July 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰ Ho Quang Hoai, Directeur des Finances charge de l'expédition des affaires courantes, à Général de Division Bondis, Commissaire de la République Française, Commandant les FTSV, Bureau de liaison Binh Xuyen, No. 2560/Cab.Mil, 2 November 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

¹¹ Commissaire du 3ème Arrondissement à Directeur de Police Municipale, Bureau de liaison Binh Xuyen, No. 30/S, 29 October 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

¹² Note (Directeur des SSHC): Activités illégales des Forces Armées Nationales Binh Xuyen, No. 3241C/SG/1, 29 April 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

¹³ Général de Division Bondis à Colonel Le Van Vien, Bureau de liaison Binh Xuyen, No. 2860/Cab/Mil, 10 November 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

¹⁴ Commissaire du 3ème Arrondissement à Directeur de Police Municipale, No. 150-C, 20 November 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

Chanson to “put an end to the state of things that create an atmosphere of dangerous hostility.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Bình Xuyên struck back. According to the SSHC, three Bình Xuyên agents, led by Second Lieutenant Jacques Long, arrested and killed Tran Van Thao (5ème Brigade Mobile de Sûreté in Thủ Thiêm) on 26 March to avenge Tran Van Truong’s death.¹⁶ The hostilities did not end there. According to the Sûreté, Bầy Viễn had ordered his men to target both French and Vietnamese security service agents.¹⁷ One bulletin in early May 1951 reported that Bình Xuyên organs—including the “brigade spéciale de recherches” officially banned from the city—“sought quarrels with agents of the French and Vietnamese police forces, [as a pretext] to take their weapons, to beat them senseless, to kidnap them, or to shoot them down [so as to] undermine the prestige of these security forces.”¹⁸

This pattern of provocation continued into the latter half of the year. Two incidents stand out. In October, Bình Xuyên and Police Municipale agents turned the Rạch Cát Market into the scene of another firefight. The target appeared to be a M. Bisson, Chef du Poste de Rachcat de la Police. On 27 October, Bisson recounted, he and his wife were at the market when they were attacked by ten Bình Xuyên men. Shots were fired, gravely injuring two bystanders. Jacques Long was dispatched to the scene, but concluded that the assailants were Việt Minh, not Bình Xuyên, agents.¹⁹ Deputy Prefect Paul Reny lamented that the “bad faith [Jacques Long] showed in this circumstance denotes the systematic state of mind that animates the leaders of this group in their behavior vis-à-vis the authorities and legal forces.”²⁰ While Mai Hữu Xuân called the incident a “gunfire attack” by the Bình Xuyên against Bisson,²¹ the Bình Xuyên liaison officer would conclude that the shots originated from Bisson’s camp.²² A mere two weeks later, yet another public incident transpired. This time, the volatile mix of chauvinism and a habitual resort to violence produced an absurd display. On the night of 13 November, five clearly inebriated Bình Xuyên men marched into the Commissariat du 3ème Arrondissement. They wanted to file a complaint against a policeman for assaulting Nguyễn Tấn Nhì, a *chef de brigade*. The accused officer, Sous-Brigadier Chindeko, denied the charge and added that he was threatened by about 50 Bình Xuyên men while making a routine traffic stop. As the situation got heated, Commissaire Hoa Văn Mùi called the Bình Xuyên headquarters. Once again, Jacques Long went to the scene, with three machine-gun-toting men.²³ The Bình Xuyên’s bullying tactics prompted Lê Tấn Nẫm to complain that this latest incident aimed at discrediting the police in the eyes of

¹⁵ Colonel Le Van Vien à Général Chanson, Commandant les FFVS/CFR dans le Sud Vietnam, No. 1339, 28 March 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

¹⁶ Sommaire des activités Bình Xuyên, “Principaux incidents depuis le ralliement de Le Van Vien dit Bay Vien le 16 Juin 1948,” pp. 6-9, No. 2919-S/Cab, 17 November 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

¹⁷ Bulletin Quotidien Special No.100 du 10 Avril 1951, No. 1702/IB-S, 9 April 1951, PTHNV D 5-299; Bulletin Quotidien Special No. 94 du 1 Avril 1951, No. 1596/IB-S, 31 March 1951, PTHNV D 5-299, TTLTQGII.

¹⁸ Bulletin Quotidien Special No.129 du 9 Mai 1951, No. 2372/IB-S, 9 May 1951, PTHNV D 5-299, TTLTQGII.

¹⁹ Commissaire du 5ème Arrondissement à Directeur des Services de Police et de Sûreté Nationales au Sud Vietnam, Incident entre membres des FANBX et le Chef du Poste de Rachcat de la Police, No. 903/IB-S, 26 October 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

²⁰ Préfet Adjoint pour Cholon à Préfet de Saigon-Cholon, Incident entre membres des FANBX et le Chef du Poste de Rachcat de la Police, No. 53-C/PAC, 28 October 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

²¹ Note (Directeur de Police et de Sûreté Nationales au Sud Vietnam): Incident entre membres des FANBX et le Chef du Poste de Rachcat de la Police, No. 6752/IB-S, 31 October 1951, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

²² Officier de liaison auprès des FANBX à Commandant le Secteur de Saigon-Cholon, No. 004, 28 October 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

²³ Incident grave survenu entre agents des FANBX et agents de la Police Prefectural, Document 147-C, 14 November 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

the public hurt the police's prestige and authority.²⁴ Hồ Quang Hoài's head of the Military Cabinet, Dương Văn Minh, passed the report up to General Bondis.²⁵

State Power Asserted?

By late 1951, intrastate conflict had reached a tipping point. Officials in both the French and Vietnamese security services were disturbed by the brazenness of Bình Xuyên aggression. Both were also hamstrung in their ability to respond. The French SSHC had no easy justification for intervening in a Vietnamese law enforcement matter since it had transferred the Police and Sûreté services to Vietnamese control in 1950. The Sûreté Nationale, though endowed with the proper powers, faced a political constraint. Bảy Viễn was an ally of Trần Văn Hữu and, more importantly, of Bảo Đại. But with evidence of the group's transgressions mounting, the French would take the lead. The SSHC and Commissaire de la République, General Bondis, took a hardline position vis-à-vis the Bình Xuyên. Vietnamese authorities in South Vietnam, assured of Bondis's commitment, followed suit. For perhaps the first time since its *ralliement*, the Bình Xuyên faced a more or less united Franco-Vietnamese, civil-military front.

In late October, André Moret, head of the SSHC in South Vietnam, advocated a disarmament operation, in response to the Rach Cát incident. In a letter to General Bondis, he proposed organizing "mixed search groups," made up of Sûreté Nationale, Police Préfectorale, and Prévôté (military police), to take illegal arms (e.g., not covered by "regular permits") off city streets. He noted that "since I took over the service, the number of incidents caused by the auxiliaries carrying their arms under irregular circumstances is worrisome." Far from an aberration, then, the attempt on Inspector Bisson's life was only the Bình Xuyên's latest salvo.²⁶ Moret would send additional reports to Bondis in the coming days about the Bình Xuyên's skirting judicial sanction and the damage this apparent impunity had done to the SSHC. Even "the service's own personnel," Moret pointed out, "have made unfavorable comments about the SSHC's powerlessness."²⁷

Bondis, irked by the group's willful disregard for his orders, agreed. He recommended the measure to the Conseiller Politique de Haut Commissariat. Bondis explained that armed groups, namely the Cao Đài and the Bình Xuyên, had been able to use their military role to build up their cadre and spread their operations into Saigon-Cholon. Because of this situation, "we find in our midst several hundred armed men whose action proved to be diametrically opposed to ours and could suddenly become an acute [source of] danger for the French population and the wholesome part of the native population." He was critical of the "passive" Vietnamese authorities, in particular those with vested interests in shielding the Bình Xuyên. "It should be recognized," he continued, "that the ties of Prime Minister Hữu and the Imperial Cabinet to Lê Văn Viễn ... do not facilitate the task of the Prefect who [also] has under his command a police chief [Nguyễn Tấn Cường] who is hand in glove [*a partie liée*] with Bảy Viễn." In Bondis's view, the Vietnamese government must assert its authority vis-à-vis the armed groups. If necessary, the

²⁴ Incident grave survenu entre agents des FANBX et agents de la Police Préfectorale, Document 152-S/Cab., 19 November 1951, D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

²⁵ Incident grave survenu entre agents des FANBX et agents de la Police Préfectorale, Document 2753/Cab.Mil., 23 November 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

²⁶ Note (SSHC): Mesures préconisées pour commencer la chasse aux éléments armés circulant sur le territoire de Saigon Cholon, No. 18519/S/RG, 29 October 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

²⁷ Note (SSHC): Incident causé par les Binh Xuyen au Rach CAT (suite), No. 18766/S/RG, 3 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

French army would offer assistance.²⁸

Despite Trần Văn Hữu's reluctance to confront the Bình Xuyên, Vietnamese officials who felt its wrath most acutely—namely Nguyễn Văn Tâm, Mai Hữu Xuân, and Lê Tấn Nẫm—were determined to halt its unchecked infiltration of Saigon-Cholon. Official support from the Prime Minister, however, was still essential. On 15 November, two days after the “Chindeko incident,” Nguyễn Văn Tâm sent Trần Văn Hữu a frank assessment of the situation. He reiterated what the Prime Minister already knew well from his time as governor—that Bình Xuyên agents routinely operated outside their designated zone and tried to usurp the functions of the security services. The resulting conflicts between the two, particularly frequent in 1951, “compromise the prestige of these public [Police and Sûreté] services and diminish the population's confidence in their mission to maintain order and security.” Even more troubling, the Sûreté chief noted, Bảy Viễn seemed to believe that “the authority he unduly appropriated from the police and Sûreté ... would be on par with those of the national security services.” While urging Trần Văn Hữu to counsel Bảy Viễn, Nguyễn Văn Tâm proposed a more immediate measure to prevent future incidents—“mixed patrols [comprising French military, SSHC, Police, and Sûreté Nationale elements] to circulate at night in the Saigon-Cholon agglomeration.”²⁹ This proposal, given its resemblance to Moret's, was no doubt made at the behest of the SSHC and General Bondis. Meanwhile, French and Vietnamese officials in South Vietnam pushed ahead. On 21 November, Governor Hồ Quang Hoài hosted a meeting to iron out the details of the impending operation. In attendance were General Bondis, Prefect Lê Tấn Nẫm, Lieutenant-Colonel Blanche (Saigon-Cholon Sector), André Moret (SSHC), and Mai Hữu Xuân (Sûreté Nationale), among others. In a reversal of General Chanson's decision to bring the Bình Xuyên under military jurisdiction, Bondis insisted that Vietnamese civil authorities were responsible for the arrest and prosecution of “common law” crimes perpetrated by the group's agents. It was incumbent upon Vietnamese authorities to “ensure ... respect for laws and regulations,” Bondis lectured.³⁰ Mai Hữu Xuân would lead the effort, with Lê Tấn Nẫm providing logistical support as well as personnel.³¹ With the plans fully in motion, Trần Văn Hữu approved Nguyễn Văn Tâm's proposal.³² Mai Hữu Xuân finalized the logistics with Lê Tấn Nẫm on 24 November. Four squads—comprising one police officer (as chief), seven police agents, five sûreté agents, a military police officer, one to two SSHC agents, and an armored vehicle—would patrol sensitive areas in the city during four-hour rounds. They would search, verify, and, if necessary, arrest “irregularly armed elements.” In effect, anyone not carrying an arms authorization certificate signed by the governor and countersigned by the SSHC belonged in that category. Significantly, even Bình Xuyên agents authorized to bear arms only held certificates signed by Bảy Viễn and countersigned by Deuxième Bureau chief, A.M. Savani. The military, as a precaution, placed four tank platoons at

²⁸ Général Bondis: Fiche au sujet de activités illégales des setes ou groupements armés dans la Région Saigon-Cholon, 13 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

²⁹ Ministre de la Sécurité Publique à Président du Gouvernement, Agissements des FAN Binh Xuyen, No. 697-Min.SP/Cab.S, 15 November 1951, 10H 4186, SHD.

³⁰ Général Bondis à Gouverneur Ho Quang Hoai, 22 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³¹ Gouverneur Ho Quang Hoai à Préfet de Saigon-Cholon et Directeur des Services de Police et de Sûreté Nationales au Sud Vietnam, Recherches d'armes prohibées à l'intérieur de la Préfecture de Saigon-Cholon-Organisation patrouilles, No. 1375/S/CAB, 21 November 1951, PTHNV B 04-41, TTLTQGII.

³² Président du Gouvernement à Ministre de la Sécurité Publique, No. 290-Cab/BG, 22 November 1951, 10H 4186; Ministre de la Sécurité Publique à Directeur des Services de Police et de Sûreté Nationales au Sud Vietnam, Organisation de patrouilles mixtes de sécurité, No. 3194-S/IB, 23 November 1951, 10H 4186, SHD.

the operation's disposal.³³ The scale of the operation may have been small, but if Moret's original "points of enforcement" were adopted, it was concentrated in a small area of Cholon near the Arroyo Chinois.³⁴

The two-week operation commenced on 26 November. A cable intended for the Paris bureau of *Reuters* reported that "armed vehicles patrolled the streets of Saigon and ... Cholon. This large operation ... was directed against racketeers who are accused of extorting money from the Chinese population and smuggling weapons."³⁵ The tension was palpable. Though Bondis had informed Bảy Viễn three days earlier and Nguyễn Tấn Cường warned him an hour before, it seemed to have caught the rank-and-file by surprise. At 11:30 a.m., a Bình Xuyên officer approached a patrol chief on the corner of Avenue de la Résistance and Boulevard Trần Hưng Đạo to question the grounds for the seizures and threatened to return with two companies to retrieve the confiscated arms. This kind of intimidation was commonplace. But this time seemed different. As a French tank platoon, at the behest of the police officer, followed the men toward the Bình Xuyên headquarters at Pont en Y, a sizable unit armed with rifles and machine guns was waiting on the southern ramp of the bridge.³⁶ In spite of the aggressive posture, the days that followed were, for the most part, a bloodless affair. Frequently, when Bình Xuyên agents were apprehended, they had their arms seized and held for a few hours at the local *commissariat* before being released.³⁷ In fact, Bondis was peeved by what amounted to a catch and release tactic. "They should have been placed in detention and handed to the relevant criminal jurisdiction," he wrote, adding that this "unfortunate habit of treating armed groups, in giving them concrete proof of the deficiency of the law, only encourages their criminal activities and increases their pretentiousness."³⁸

On 30 November, however, the death of a Bình Xuyên soldier threatened to explode the uneasy calm. That day, as the police stopped a vehicle entering the city, every passenger submitted to the search except for Lê Văn Hiếu, a member of the 5ème Compagnie. He violently resisted the police officers and a Sûreté agent, leading to a foot chase and a shootout. He was hit and fell off the Nhị Thiên Đường Bridge. Lê Văn Hiếu was left in a coma and died the same day at a hospital.³⁹ In response to this incident, Bình Xuyên commanders ordered their men to resist the disarmament.⁴⁰ Within a few days, the leaders gathered the men at the headquarters to proclaim the government action a minor setback and vowed to protect their territory.⁴¹ Two companies were ordered to hold "ambush positions" at night along the Canal de Doublement,

³³ Directeur des Services de Police et de Sûreté Nationales au Sud Vietnam à Préfet de Saigon-Cholon, Organisation de patrouilles pour la recherche des arme prohibées à l'intérieur de la Préfecture de Saigon-Cholon, No. 7464/IB/S, 24 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³⁴ Note (SSHC): Mesures préconisées pour commencer la chasse aux éléments armés circulant sur le territoire de Saigon Cholon, No. 18519/S/RG, 29 October 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³⁵ Télégramme (Reuter Bureau), Saisi par ordre de Autorités Militaires, 27 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³⁶ Rapport quotidien: 26-27 Novembre 1951, Document 1658, Folder D 6-64, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

³⁷ Rapport quotidien: 27-28 Novembre 1951, No. 1666, PTHNV D 6-64, TTLTQGII; Note: Organisation de patrouilles pour la recherche des arme prohibées à l'intérieur de la Préfecture de Saigon-Cholon, No. 7349/C/SG/1, 29 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³⁸ Ministre de la Sécurité Publique à Général de Division Bondis, No. 723-Min.SP/Cab-S, 24 November 1951, HCI 772, CAOM.

³⁹ Incident survenu entre un agent des FABX et un group d'agents d'une patrouille mixte de Sécurité, Document 7677/IB-S, 30 November 1951, Folder B 04-41, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁴⁰ Rapport quotidien: 30 Novembre 1951, Document 1678, 30 November 1951, Folder D 6-64, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁴¹ Bulletin Quotidien Dirsuma No. 193 du 12-12-51, Document 193, 12 December 1951, Folder 1524, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

while mines were placed at Pont en Y to obstruct government penetration.⁴² Bunkers and pillboxes quickly went up along the southern border of the city.⁴³ The incident threatened to throw the city into turmoil.

Ultimately, though, a battle for Saigon did not ensue. Bảy Viễn knew well that he was in no position to openly challenge a united Franco-Vietnamese front. The defensive mobilization appears to have been aimed more at appeasing his men than preparing for open warfare. The rest of the operation wrapped up with no further incident. The disarmament operation was in the end no more than a warning shot at the Bình Xuyên. Some may have seen it as a belated assertion of state power. The Sûreté Nationale did outmaneuver the Bình Xuyên and momentarily emerged triumphant. The Trần Văn Hữu government, too, seemed to have gained a modicum of popularity, if anonymous letters from areas targeted by the operation are to be believed.⁴⁴ And Bondis seemed committed to backing the anti-Bình Xuyên bloc—Nguyễn Văn Tâm, Mai Hữu Xuân, Lê Tấn Nấm, and Hồ Quang Hoàì—“for a retreat would cause [them] to lose face, from which it would be hard to recover.”⁴⁵ Yet, the biggest winner was doubtless the French military command, without whose consent such a crackdown would have been a non-starter. The campaign was aimed at resetting what Bondis had come to see as a relationship gone awry. In a report to Haut Commissaire de Lattre, Bondis blamed the messy situation on his overly trustful predecessor and short-sighted local military command. Of the latter, he wrote: “Absorbed by their immediate tasks, they only saw the services the auxiliaries rendered at the operational level. Once they obtained satisfaction in this domain, they voluntarily closed their eyes to the encroachments that were carried out to the detriment of legal power.”⁴⁶ More than shoring up the power of the Vietnamese state, the “purge” [*cuộc trừng thanh*], as a Vietnamese newspaper called the operation,⁴⁷ would push the Bình Xuyên further into the French military’s fold and strengthen Bondis’s hand in dealing with the group. Bảy Viễn’s own words seemed to suggest as much: “I want to repeat that I am exclusively at the General’s disposal and it is not possible, under current conditions, to have confidence in the government. I know exactly what they [Vietnamese functionaries] are up to and, as I do not meddle in politics, I want to limit the F.A.N.B.X. to the fight against the Việt Minh.”⁴⁸

Continued Expansion

While the French military moved to check the group’s urban infiltration, it had few qualms about extending the Bình Xuyên’s territorial reach outside Saigon-Cholon. Since 1948, then, successive French commanders in southern Vietnam pushed to expand the semi-autonomous Bình Xuyên Zone as well as assign the group other locales vulnerable to Việt Minh attack or

⁴² Bulletin Quotidien Dirsuma No. 198 du 18-12-51, 18 December 1951, Document 198, 12 December 1951, Folder 1524, PThTQGVN, TTLTQGII.

⁴³ Bulletin Quotidien No. 203 du 26-12-51, Document 3614/SCR, 26 December 1951, Folder 1400, PThTQGVN, TTLTQGII.

⁴⁴ Ba lá đơn nặc danh tỏ lòng vui mừng của dân chúng vùng Chợ Đũi, vùng Nancy, và vùng Xóm Cũi, Document 2108-PTT/TTK/CP, 14 December 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁴⁵ Général de Division Bondis à Général d’Armée HCI et Commandant en Chef, No. 3029-S/Cab, 1 December 1951, HCI 719, CAOM, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Général de Division Bondis à Général d’Armée HCI et Commandant en Chef, No. 3029-S/Cab, 1 December 1951, HCI 719, CAOM, p. 4.

⁴⁷ “Các Sở An Ninh đã mở cuộc trừng-thanh các phần-tử khả-nghi,” *Phục Hưng*, 29 November 1951.

⁴⁸ Commandant la Zone Centre Cochinchine à Général de Division Bondis, No. 2863/3S, 5 December 1951, 10H 4187, SHD.

control. Such support for the continued spread of Bình Xuyên presence allowed the group to not only survive the 1951 confrontation but thrive in its aftermath. Talk of extending the Bình Xuyên's territorial reach started within months of Bảy Viễn's ralliement, so effective were his men in subduing the Việt Minh and so desperate was the military for manpower. As General Raoul Salan, commander-in-chief of French forces in 1953-53, conceded years later: "Certainly [...] they abuse their power a little over the distressed population, but they keep out the Việt Minh, and this makes up for that. Our means were so weak that we needed their support."⁴⁹

In October 1948, General de Latour proposed this southward expansion in a Comité de Ralliement meeting with a mix of French and Vietnamese officials.⁵⁰ His successor likewise advocated for further expansion of the zone. General Chanson pointed to the group's effective pacification efforts, evidenced by a rise in population, uptick in agricultural and commercial activity, and absolute calm in an area once dominated by insurgents. "If the extension is decided [...] it is doubtless that Colonel Lê Văn Viễn will succeed," Chanson noted, "for he is served by qualities of dynamism, clear-sightedness, and organization."⁵¹ Over the years, the Bình Xuyên also made numerous pitches to the French military, citing frequent Việt Minh attacks and promising to cut links between insurgent units.⁵² In late 1950, the group was conferred strategic points in Bình Đăng and Phong Đức to the south of the city, the latter being Bảy Viễn's natal home.⁵³ In 1951, the Saigon-Cholon Sector's plans called for the integration of two additional cantons—An Phú and Đa Phước—sitting between the Bình Xuyên Zone and the Cần Giuộc River.

The Bình Xuyên's growing reach met resistance at the provincial level. Vũ Tiến Huân, the Cholon province chief, warned of the group's "triumphal march south."⁵⁴ By mid-1951, the only impediment to the full "invasion" of the province that remained was the An Phú Post situated on Route No.5 connecting Saigon-Cholon to Gò Công province.⁵⁵ Although Vũ Tiến Huân acknowledged the Bình Xuyên's military value, he warned that its takeover would produce a "state within a state" and result in serious loss of morale. The Governor at the time, Thái Lập Thành, relayed these concerns to General Chanson.⁵⁶ The General offered this rationale for the progressive expansion of Bình Xuyên territory: Allowing the group to clear the area south of its zone would create a buffer zone for the capital and was, moreover, preferable to the Bình Xuyên's infiltration of Saigon-Cholon.⁵⁷ Tacit French acquiescence handicapped provincial authorities as the Bình Xuyên repeatedly mounted challenges to state authority. Route No.5 proved key to controlling traffic into Saigon-Cholon from the south. The Bình Xuyên, on multiple occasions, openly challenged the government's right to police the highway, ironically

⁴⁹ Raoul Salan, *Mémoires: Fin d'un Empire* (Paris: Presse de la Cité, 1970), 132.

⁵⁰ Procès-verbal, Comité de Ralliement, Séance du Vendredi 15 Octobre 1948, 10H 4323, SHD.

⁵¹ Fiche (CFTSV): La conduite et l'activité sur le plan militaire du Colonel Le Van Vien, 12 July 1951, No. 1803/Cab/Mil., 10H 4186, SHD.

⁵² Transfert 3 Postes, Document 39/AM, 4 April 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII; Arraînement l'embarcations par les FANBX, Document 66/AM, 23 September 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵³ Extension vers la Sud de la zone BX, Document 34-C, 5 April 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵⁴ Extension vers la Sud de la zone BX, Document 34-C, 5 April 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵⁵ Rapport d'ensemble: Mois d'Octobre 1951, Document 121/C, 5 November 1951, Folder E 03-171, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵⁶ Extension vers la Sud de la zone BX, Document 570/Cab/Mil., 10 April 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵⁷ Extension vers la Sud de la zone BX, Document 1027/Cab/Mil., 19 April 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

even demanding police to present proper paperwork.⁵⁸ In another encounter, Bình Xuyên troops threatened to shoot an officer if he did not cease patrolling the area.⁵⁹ Incursions into the An Phú Post zone increased over the next several months, escalating into outright attempts to overtake the post in August and October.⁶⁰ With the death of Chanson, his replacement by General Bondis, and later the disarmament operation in the works, Bình Xuyên territorial expansion was briefly shelved.

But the French military's support remained firm. They had brushed off provincial reports of the group's transgressions as misunderstandings or exaggerations. The commander of Zone Centre, Lieutenant-Colonel Rousson, even chided the province chief—and Vietnamese administrators in general—for being petty and unpatriotic. "It seems at first view logical that troops of the same race, working for the same goal, should help each other rather than create incidents," he wrote, "This is unfortunately not the case and this situation extends to the whole of the south."⁶¹ Indeed, in June 1952, Rousson resubmitted his plans to expand the Bình Xuyên's zone for General Bondis's approval. Notable benefits included the ability to reassign more than seventy troops to other operations while simultaneously ensuring security. Not only would the Việt Minh "bolt" when the Bình Xuyên move into an area, but required no supplementary funding.⁶² Bondis sent the plan to Governor Hồ Quang Hoàn, noting not only the military benefit but also the precise demarcation of the group's territorial boundaries. From a military perspective, Bondis saw only positives.⁶³ The governor was skeptical. In his recommendation to Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm, he argued that this proposal would appear legitimate if not for the fact that Bảy Viễn presided over a fief—beyond the reach of the state. Hoàn thus reasoned that this proposal was not appropriate until the Bình Xuyên was fully integrated into the national army.⁶⁴ Nguyễn Văn Tâm agreed.⁶⁵

The military had more success elsewhere. In the latter half of 1952, it began devising plans to secure two troublesome regions—the Phú Mỹ region along a stretch of Route Nationale No. 15 and an area along the Long Tảo River in the heart of Rừng Sác (mangrove forest). Ideas about using Bình Xuyên troops to occupy static installations—thereby freeing up regular troops to shift to the north—had long been discussed by the military brass. In late 1948, for instance, General de Latour spoke of the need to secure the vital highway connecting Bà Rịa and Vũng Tàu on the coast to Saigon-Cholon. A certain "density" of guard towers was necessary to safely open the highway, he pointed out, which could be assigned to the Bình Xuyên.⁶⁶ According to Savani, due to opposition from various corners of the government worried about the group's growing importance, the plan remained dead letter until the late that year.⁶⁷ At that point, General Salan approved the construction of four posts along Long Tảo River and the reopening

⁵⁸ Incident entre Gendarmerie Nationale et FANBX sur Route No.5 (SG-Gocong), Document 52-C, 21 May 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁵⁹ Rapport du Gendarme Berthet relatif au contrôle de la circulation sur la route No.5 dans sa traverse de la zone FANBX, Document 79-C, 8 August 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁶⁰ Sur des incidents survenus avec les Binh Xuyen (poste d'An Phu sur la Route No.5 Saigon-Gocong), Document 328/Q, 27 August 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁶¹ Zone Centre (Rousson) à CFTSV: Binh Xuyen, No. 8682/2-S, 1 November 1951, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶² Zone Centre (Rousson) à CFTSV: Extension zone Binh Xuyen, No. 1212/3-SC, 7 June 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶³ CFTSV à Gouverneur du Sud-Vietnam: Extension B.X. dans Cholon, 25 June 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶⁴ Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam à Président du Conseil: Extension B.X. dans Cholon, No. 1960/Cab/Mil, 7 July 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶⁵ Président du Conseil à CFTSV, No. 2209-C/Cab, 5 August 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶⁶ Procès-verbal, Comité de Ralliement, Séance du Lundi 29 Novembre 1948, 10H 4323, SHD.

⁶⁷ Savani, 143.

of Route Nationale No. 15, though the former took priority.⁶⁸ Four Bình Xuyên companies would be deployed.⁶⁹ Despite pushback from Governor Hồ Quang Hoài, General Bondis insisted that the operational plan was to be implemented by the first trimester of 1953.⁷⁰ By April 1953, the four companies were up and running.⁷¹

[Insert map of route Long Thanh-Ba Ria and Quartier de Kervella]

Economic Activities

The disarmament operation failed to either check the Bình Xuyên's economic ambitions or curb its activities—an important source of its strife with the police. Given the limited scope of the operation—the removal of its armed agents from Saigon-Cholon—that was unsurprising. General Bondis had few illusions about the Bình Xuyên, noting that Saigon-Cholon remained an “object of constant temptation” for the group and that a “bandit spirit” animated many of its elements.⁷² Despite a clear-eyed understanding of the group's predatory nature, the post-disarmament years saw the Bình Xuyên's economic fortunes soar. Indeed, the group's territorial expansion directly facilitated the growth of its business enterprises. The calculation behind extending the group's territorial reach was analogous to the calculation behind ignoring its economic exploits—one had to do with a dearth of troops, the other financial resources.

The Bình Xuyên's frequent run-ins with police agents were not merely manifestations of expressive violence or chauvinism. There was an underlying, material logic as well. In 1948, as soon as Bảy Viễn and a core group of fighters returned to Saigon-Cholon, the group focused on generating much needed revenue.⁷³ Funding was a constant problem for the Bình Xuyên. Its leadership's ambitions chronically outstripped its finances. The fanfare surrounding the *ralliement* belied the mundane challenges the group faced. Informants reported on its precarious financial state to French military intelligence. One revealed that the Bình Xuyên lacked funds to reconstitute its action committees and had trouble providing its men with lodging.⁷⁴ Another flatly stated that Bảy Viễn was “broke.”⁷⁵ Observers like Ellen Hammer have claimed that the Bình Xuyên was paid handsomely to support the nascent Provisional Central Government headed by Nguyễn Văn Xuân.⁷⁶ But the reality was more complicated. Neither Governor Trần Văn Hữu, then head of the South Vietnamese regional government, nor General de Latour, the top French official in southern Vietnam, wanted to commit their limited resources—namely money and arms—to the group.⁷⁷ Both wanted to harness the Bình Xuyên's valuable skillset and political profile with minimal financial outlay.

⁶⁸ Général de Corps d'Armée Salan à CFTSV: Surveillance de la Rivière de Saigon, No. 578/EMIFT/3/O/S, 28 November 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁶⁹ Zone Centre (Rousson) à CFTSV: Programme Opérationnel 1953, No. 3381/3-SC, 1 December 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁷⁰ CFTSV (Bondis) à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 3069/Cab/Mil, 7 December 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁷¹ CFTSV à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 3069 Cab/Mil, 7 December 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁷² CFTSV à Gouverneur Général de la France d'Outre-Mer & Secrétaire Général du HCI: Politique vis-à-vis des féodalités paramilitaires du Sud-Vietnam, No. 1924/Cab/Mil, 8 July 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁷³ SDJ, Rapport V.M./B.X. No. 1, Objet: Activités actuelle de Bay Vien, Unnumbered, 28 July 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁷⁴ SDJ: Activités actuelle de Bay Vien, 28 July 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁷⁵ SDJ: Etat actuel de Bay Vien et Tu Thien, No. 546/Z, 1 August 1948, 10H 4187, SHD.

⁷⁶ Hammer, 230.

⁷⁷ Procès-verbal, Comité de Ralliement, Séance du Vendredi 15 Octobre 1948, 10H 4323.

Inadequate material support would become a regular source of complaint from Bình Xuyên leaders. The group did not receive its first monthly subvention until September 1948, nearly three months after it officially broke with the Việt Minh. And the initial sum of 56,000 piasters proved inadequate. In November, Bảy Viễn reported an “urgent need” to increase the subvention to 300,000 piasters (in addition to arms, munitions, and other materiel) in order to support what was at the time a force of six hundred.⁷⁸ No such infusion of funds was made. The government did increase the subvention to 100,000 piasters in December, but only after Bảy Viễn reported the growth of his budding army to 648.⁷⁹ Although government allocations increased over time, Savani later noted that they failed to keep pace with the Bình Xuyên’s growing cadre of officers, soldiers, and agents, not to mention a sprawling network of informants.⁸⁰ Between 1948 and 1951, the regional government more than tripled its regular financial commitment to the group, from 56,000 to 170,000 piasters per month, excluding bonuses and incidental expenditures.⁸¹ Yet even the latter figure, earmarked to support roughly one thousand men, fell well short of what Bảy Viễn had deemed necessary for six hundred. And each modest increase was made begrudgingly.

To make up the difference—and no doubt also to enrich themselves—Bình Xuyên leaders relied on a certain entrepreneurial instinct to generate revenue. On Bảy Viễn’s return to the city, he and his followers were headquartered near the Hiệp Ân Bridge on the south bank of the Canal de Doublement, but unofficially operated out of Maurice Thiên’s house at No. 31 rue de Canton in Cholon. The first order of business—right next to the elimination of their Việt Minh adversaries—was to reestablish the Bình Xuyên’s protection arrangement with local businesses. Maurice Thiên, the group’s de facto financier who had built a reputation as an unscrupulous racketeer among Cholon businesses, spearheaded the effort.⁸²

The initial approaches were transparently extortive. Days after Bảy Viễn officially joined the Franco-Vietnamese government, his agents issued an ultimatum to Cholon rice mills. These businesses, which had been paying all sides of the conflict, were now made to choose a single protector from among the Việt Minh, the Bình Xuyên, and the Municipal Police.⁸³ The latter intercepted one ominous summons: “Owners of the Tran Dong A and Tay Nam rice mills are asked to present themselves at the office of our action committee to discuss important questions. I hope that you would not refuse.”⁸⁴ Bảy Viễn also exploited his past dealings with these businesses. To gain leverage, he compiled a dossier based on records of each rice mill’s “contributions” to the resistance.⁸⁵ Using the threat of exposing a business owner’s “collusion”

⁷⁸ Colonel Le Van Vien: Etat des besoins urgents demandés pour l’entretien des Troupes et le maintien de la zone, 11 November 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁷⁹ Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam à Directeur des Finances, No. 1047/Cab/Mil, 10 December 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁰ Savani, 145

⁸¹ Arrêté: La subvention forfaitaire, No. 1750-Cab/MF/B3, 17 December 1948, Folder T 43-294, PTHNV, TTLTQGII; Le Van Vien au Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam, No. 55/AM, 9 June 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII; Arrêté: Augmentation de subvention forfaitaire, No. 770-DF/B3, 26 February 1951, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸² SDJ au 2ème Bureau des T.F.I.S., Activité de Maurice Thien (Source: Un ami Chinois de No. 15Z qui a été arrêté une fois par Thien), No. 216, 6 April 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁸³ Bulletin de Renseignements (S/Secteur de Cholon), Impôts forcés sur les rizeries, No. 1539/SSC/S, 1 July 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

⁸⁴ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud-Vietnam, No. 394-C, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁵ SDJ: Activités actuelles de Bay Vien, V.M. (B.X.) No. 1, 28 July 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

with the Việt Minh, a Bình Xuyên agent once demanded 100,000 piasters.⁸⁶ When threats failed, Bình Xuyên agents were not above using brute force. On more than one occasion, they abducted merchants off city streets and held them until they agreed to make concessions.⁸⁷ In one case that was scrutinized by the Police Spéciale de Saigon, three Chinese merchants were allegedly kidnapped by a Bình Xuyên “*comité invisible*” [*ban vô hình*] and held at a secret location on the city’s outskirts. They were released only after signing a “debt note” for one million piasters.⁸⁸

The Bình Xuyên also exerted outsize control over commercial traffic through the city’s waterways. Beginning in late August 1948, the group gained a foothold on Vĩnh Hội Island, and thereafter progressively established military posts on neighboring Chánh Hưng and along the south shore of the Canal de Doublement and Canal de Dérivation.⁸⁹ Despite vocal opposition from the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon, Bình Xuyên troops, by the following year, were operating six such posts along a three-mile stretch of the canals.⁹⁰ Khaki-clad soldiers in motorized sampans routinely stopped and boarded vessels offloading cargo or on their way to the Port of Saigon. Frequent and often indefinite seizures of vessels alarmed the authorities. Even the French military’s liaison officer with the Bình Xuyên at the time, Lieutenant Bourcelot, was unnerved. Of the group’s modus operandi, he reported: “The FANBX boarded many junks loaded with firewood, rice, or various [other] goods, which were either returned to their owners for a price or simply confiscated.” He recalled that a ten-junk convoy seized by the group was released after making a payment of twenty-five thousand piasters and ceding a large portion of its cargo. Another carrying rice was similarly stopped and released after handing over thirty thousand piasters. Neither instance involved a “Việt Minh” vessel, Bourcelot stressed.⁹¹ The regional government’s early 1949 dictate that the group “hand over the [arrested] persons and [seized] merchandise to the Deuxième Bureau for investigation” had routinely been ignored.⁹² The economic impact was not insignificant. Repeated seizures of goods not only caused immediate shortages in the market, but also threatened long-term disruptions to commerce by deterring merchants from bringing their cargo to Saigon-Cholon.⁹³ According to Lê Tấn Nẫm, an official in charge of commerce and industry, these interventions had caused a “marked increase in the

⁸⁶ Bulletin de Renseignements (S/Secteur de Cholon): Exactions Binh Xuyen, No. 1646/SSC/S, 7 December 1948, 10H 4189, SHD.

⁸⁷ Commissaire de Police du 4ème Arrondissement à Chef de la Police Municipale, Irrégularité des agents de Binh Xuyen, No. 5671/A, 10H 3770, SHD; Commissariat de la Police des Ports de Saigon-Cholon à Chef de la Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine, Agissements Binh Xuyen, No. 695-C, 1 November 1948, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁸⁸ Sûreté Fédérale en Cochinchine: Enlèvement des Chinois—Tran Tho, Huynh Van Phuoc, Trinh Dinh Ky, No. 23.556/S, 30 November 1949, 10H 4189, SHD.

⁸⁹ Préfet de la Région Saigon-Cholon à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam, No. 456-S, 19 September 1948, Folder B 04-23, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁰ Préfet de la Région Saigon-Cholon à Commissaire de la République Française en Cochinchine, No. 533-S, 8 November 1948, 10H 3770; Plan de stationnement des Forces Armées Binh Xuyen à la date du 31/8/49, 10H 2215, SHD.

⁹¹ Officier de Liaison auprès des FANBX à Secteur Saigon-Cholon, No. 55/BX, 25 August 1950, 10H 2215, SHD.

⁹² Président du Gouvernement du Sud Vietnam (Absent), Le Ministre du Commerce et de l’Industrie, Chargé de l’expédition de l’affaire courantes (Pham Van Hai) à Bảy Viễn, No. 207/Cab.Mil., 18 March 1949, PTHNV D 7-555, TTLTQGII.

⁹³ Commissariat du 4ème Arrondissement (Gillardeau): Extrait du cahier rapport du Chef de poste de Chanh Hung du 2 Mars 1949, No. 395, 3 March 1949, 10H 4189, SHD; Chef de Division, Port de Commerce, à Chef de Service, No. 470, 7 November 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV; Chef du Service des Eaux et Forêts du Sud Vietnam à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 21763, 8 November 1949, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQII.

[city's] cost of living.”⁹⁴ Such extra-legal taxation would become a fact of life on the waterways of Saigon-Cholon, no target was too large or too small.

Over time, however, the Binh Xuyên exploited its unique political, military, and territorial position to move from merely squeezing local businesses to dominating their industries. Take meatpacking, for instance. As early as 1948, the Prefect of Saigon-Cholon had complained that Binh Xuyên agents were collecting “irregular taxes” on hogs brought in from Cambodia to the slaughterhouses on Chánh Hưng.⁹⁵ According to the police in Chánh Hưng, suppliers to the slaughterhouses had to pay the Binh Xuyên’s “Economic Bureau” 300 piasters per cow or buffalo, and 13 piasters per hog, netting the group tens of thousands of piasters every day.⁹⁶ One Vietnamese official had warned as early as 1950 that the Binh Xuyên fully controlled the “illicit delivery and slaughter” of animals in the region.⁹⁷ This control only tightened as the group itself began procuring livestock to supply its “clandestine” slaughterhouse, whether purchasing hogs in Bạc Liêu under the pretext of supplying its army or “fraudulently exporting” cattle through its installation in the Phú Mỹ region.⁹⁸

The group took a similar approach to shipping. While “taxing” and seizing vessels proved lucrative, the results remained erratic. And complaints from local authorities often brought unwelcome scrutiny. In 1950, the Binh Xuyên was able to stabilize revenue derived from commercial shipping by starting a tugboat company, Công Ty Vận Hà Việt Nam [Vietnam Canal Company], under the direction of Trần Văn Mũi, a one-time Binh Xuyên arms supplier. Ostensibly, the company operated tugboats that moved larger junks between Cholon and Saigon. But like its meatpacking business, the company’s viability ultimately rested on the Binh Xuyên’s coercive power. All junk operators were required to register with the company to move their cargo along the Canal de Doublement and Arroyo Chinois. Implicit in this arrangement is a promise of protection; conversely, recalcitrant junk operators would be exposed to potential acts of piracy. At the end of 1951, fifteen junk operators had registered, netting the company a monthly revenue of 90,000 to 120,000 piasters. That October, Trần Văn Mũi also opened a branch office in Phnom Penh so as to expand the company reach over junks traveling between the Cambodian city and Saigon as well. Vietnam Canal Company collected between 10,000 and 30,000 piasters for every convoy departing Phnom Penh.⁹⁹ Control over cargo traffic opened up ancillary opportunities as well, such as siphoning rice from shipments under their care. In one scenario, according to the Commissariat des Ports Saigon-Cholon, as the junks were docked overnight, waiting to be towed to port, a network of crewmen working with Binh Xuyên agents would remove 20 kg per bag of rice and transfer the loot to a waiting sampan.¹⁰⁰ In a Sûreté

⁹⁴ Conseiller à l’Intérieur à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 1/2/AE/SCP, 4 January 1950, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁵ Préfet de la Région de Saigon-Cholon à Directeur de Cabinet du Commissaire de la République française en Cochinchine, No. 534/c/Cab, 9 November 1948, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁹⁶ Note (SSHC): Lettres de menaces contre les employés des Abattoirs préfectoraux, No. 7124-S/RG, 1 May 1952, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁹⁷ Conseiller à l’Intérieur à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 1/2/AE/SCP, 4 January 1950, Folder D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

⁹⁸ Bulletin quotidien special 8 Mars 1953: Trafic de porcs et de viande, PTHNV D5-245.3; 3 BX trucks carrying pigs (porcs) held by Bac Lieu Province (Gendarmerie report), PTHNV D 7-555; Rapport (Gendarmerie Nationale, Poste de Ba Ria): BX smuggling of cattle, harassment of police Binh Xuyen (10H 5159), 29

⁹⁹ Note (SSHC): Intervention de patrouilles mixtes pour la recherche des armes prohibées sur le terriotire de Saigon-Cholon, No. 7524/C/SG-1, HCI 772, CAOM.

¹⁰⁰ Rapport d’Enquête (Commissariat des Ports Saigon/Cholon): A/s trafic de riz effectué par les Binh Xuyen, 20 January 1952, 10H 4188, SHD.

Nationale account, the crewmen would deliver the Bình Xuyên 100 kg bags of rice at a rate of 100 piasters, which the latter could resell at 300 piasters on the market. Each delivery reportedly netted the Economic Committee upwards of 60,000 piasters.¹⁰¹

When the Bình Xuyên took over the Phú Mỹ region in 1953, the group was able to leverage its military role directly into financial opportunities. Ground transportation into and out of Saigon-Cholon was a case in point. As with meatpacking and shipping, the Bình Xuyên initially imposed taxes. In 1952, for example, the group reportedly charged passengers leaving Cholon for the western provinces a 20% tax on top of their fares.¹⁰² By 1953, the Bình Xuyên had established its own coach service. Called Nghĩa Hiệp—meaning knightly or chivalrous—the company offered service between Saigon-Cholon and Bà Rịa-Cap St Jacques. Route Nationale 15 (RN 15), forming a major stretch of this line, had long been in a state of disuse due to the threat of insurgents. It was finally reopened in September 1953 thanks to heavy military presence. Bình Xuyên units, dispatched to both the highway and the Phú Mỹ region, were vital to the area's security. The group's military importance translated directly to Nghĩa Hiệp's dominance. Bảy Viễn started with 6 coaches—two Isoblocs and four Renaults. In an effort to monopolize the transport business there, Nghĩa Hiệp unbeatable prices. Fare for a trip from Bà Rịa to Saigon, typically running 70 piasters, was discounted to 30 piasters. Bảy Viễn also had the Poste de Phú Mỹ, under his son's command, to intercept competing coaches for searches. Nghĩa Hiệp coaches, on the contrary, did not have to stop for searches at all. The Secteur de Biên Hoà command wanted the the Bình Xuyên in Phú Mỹ to stop harassing those traveling on RN 15.¹⁰³ Yet another tactic was for Nghĩa Hiệp drivers to intentionally cause accidents for competitors.¹⁰⁴ These measures pushed many competing services to the brink of bankruptcy, eventually selling their vehicles to Bảy Viễn at a discount. Once monopoly was achieved, fare prices predictably rose, often doubling the fares originally charged by the now-defunct competitors.¹⁰⁵

Gambling

While the Bình Xuyên profited handsomely from an array of business interests, none was comparable to the gambling industry. Between 1948 and 1951, Bảy Viễn and the Lai brothers carefully plotted their path to the lucrative prize—the gambling monopoly in Saigon-Cholon. They drew on all of the Bình Xuyên's inherent advantages, particularly its political cachet, elite connections, and coercive capacity, to ensure their victory.

The French High Commission first began to entertain the idea of legalizing it in 1946, as it received multiple requests from Chinese and French business interests to operate casinos in Saigon-Cholon. Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Thinh of the newly established Republic of Cochinchina was opposed, however.¹⁰⁶ He stressed that “there was much more [for the Federal and Cochinchinese governments] to lose in prestige and reputation than their respective budgets

¹⁰¹ Bulletin Quotidien Dirurna No. 205 du 28-12-51, No. 205, 27 December 1951, PThTQGVN 1524, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰² CFTSV à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam: A/s perception par les Binh Xuyen d'une taxe sur les autocars, No. 555/Cab/Mil, 6 March 1952, D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰³ Secteur de Bien Hoa à S/Secteur de Baria, No. 882/I22, 9 February 1954, 10H 5159, SHD.

¹⁰⁴ BR (Secteur de Baria): Concurrence déloyale du service de transport voyageurs des Binh Xuyen, No. 1822/I82, 31 October 1954, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹⁰⁵ Fiche de renseignements (S/Secteur de Ba Ria 2B): Activités BX - Trust des cars sur la RN15 et dans la Province de Ba Ria, No. 257/I82, 10H 5407, SHD.

¹⁰⁶ Bao Dai, 265.

could stand to gain.”¹⁰⁷ Still, High Commissioner Thierry d’Argenlieu favored the arrangement for several reasons. For one, the French authorities realized that criminalizing gaming was a futile endeavor that only aided in the spread of clandestine gambling dens. The police, already overwhelmed by an intense insurgent war, could not also overcome the “illegal exploitation of the [Indochinese and Chinese populations’] immoderate love of gaming.” Legalization and strict circumscription—limiting the number and location of venues—brought gaming under government control. In turn, this would “lead to the closing of clandestine gambling dens and to the employment of the police for more urgent and vital security tasks.” The concession would also bring in much needed revenue. Daily fees would help offset the federal government’s expenditures, especially as Cochinchina had difficulty generating income. As an added benefit, the gaming establishments would indirectly funnel a significant amount of illicit capital generated by the black-market back to state coffers.¹⁰⁸

In early 1947, the High Commission convened a committee of French military and civilian officials to study incoming proposals. Beyond finding the highest bidder, the committee expressly sought to limit gaming to the predominantly Chinese population of Cholon and ensure that the future concessionaire had not collaborated with the Japanese during World War II. This was one reason why Châu Ký, known to have operated the Grand Monde under the Japanese, lost the bid to Lương Lập Phán (aka Paul Luong Lap). The latter emerged as the top choice ostensibly because of his “morality and solvency” and imprisonment and torture by the Japanese. His rumored connection to the Federal Commissioner of Finances, M. Gonon, also a member of the committee, likely helped his cause.¹⁰⁹ The federal government and concessionaire thus signed a six-month contract, during which Lương Lập Phán agreed to pay a daily fee of 150,000 piasters to operate two locations, including “Parc d’Attractions du Grand Monde.” When this first contract expired in August 1947, another well-connected Cholon businessman, Lâm Nhuận, won the bid with an offer of 201,500 piasters per day.

Up to this point, the gaming concession had been a federal affair and its proceeds flowed directly into the federal budget. But in late January 1948, at the urging of Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Xuân, High Commissioner Émile Bollaert agreed to transfer the concession to the South Vietnamese regional government’s jurisdiction, in time for the next round of bidding. In February 1948, Triệu Tường took over the concession at a daily fee of 262,800 piasters. Before World War II, the onetime bakery owner had shrewdly parlayed connections he developed with colonial officials as a caterer, including former Colonial Council member Trần Văn Khá, into lucrative stakes in the industry. Through these ventures, he gained notoriety in the world of gaming.¹¹⁰ After winning the bid, however, Triệu Tường immediately ran into trouble. His predecessors—Lâm Nhuận and Lưu Tang—still owned the gaming equipment and the famed Grand Monde. The three men would eventually join forces. Despite these difficulties, the government received over 91 million piasters in fees during the six-month stretch. Triệu Tường would go on to win a yearlong contract for 1949 as well, increasing the daily fee to 325,100 piasters. What began as a short-term experiment had become, by the end of 1949, a monopoly that encompassed three gaming establishments and contributed roughly 27 percent of the South

¹⁰⁷ Président du Gouvernement Provisoire de la République de Cochinchine à Ministre de l’Agriculture, du Commerce et de l’Industrie: Réouverture du Grand Monde, No. 72/C/MI, 20 August 1948, D 01-200, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰⁸ Note pour Monsieur le Président du conseil sur la ferme des jeux de Cholon, 17 February 1947, 174QO/89, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques.

¹⁰⁹ “Bọn tướng Tàu sông bạc Đô thành: Lương Lập Phán nhờ Gonon lập sông bạc Đ.T.G,” *Dân Đen*, 28 June 1955.

¹¹⁰ “Bọn tướng Tàu sông bạc Đô thành: Triệu Tường lập Kim Chung,” *Dân Đen*, 20 July 1955.

Vietnamese government's budget.¹¹¹

Bảy Viễn was no stranger to this business. As Trần Văn Giàu's enforcer in 1945, he "had taken the initiative to harshly tax all Chinese [gambling den] operators who docilely submitted to this form of ransom to run their lucrative industry in peace."¹¹² After getting driven out of the city by Franco-British forces, Bảy Viễn's men trickled back into town to carry out a bloody guerrilla war. Thanks to Maurice Thiên's machinations as a double-agent, Saigon-Cholon would become home to a sprawling network of Bình Xuyên insurgents. This clandestine presence gave Maurice Thiên leverage to strike a deal with Triệu Tường, then the newly minted concessionaire, to provide security for his casinos. These establishments—first the Grand Monde and later the Cloche d'Or—not only bankrolled Bình Xuyên insurgent activities, but also became venues for the circulation of the group's agents.¹¹³ As detailed in the previous chapter, this arrangement also involved the Cochinchinese government's National Intelligence Service as well as an arm of French military intelligence, which made common cause with non-communist nationalists to win the Bình Xuyên over from the Việt Minh. The funding scheme was exposed by the Sûreté Fédérale and briefly interrupted the Bình Xuyên's relationship with Triệu Tường. Once Bảy Viễn rallied, the protection arrangement resumed.

But the Bình Xuyên leader would emerge as Triệu Tường's direct competitor for the gaming concession. This development was in line with the Bình Xuyên's shift from extraction to investment in other industries, like meatpacking and shipping. Bảy Viễn was no longer satisfied as a glorified security service for, and thus only a minor beneficiary of, this lucrative industry. More immediately, he was exposed to the whims of the powerful concessionaire. One incident in particular highlighted the financial vulnerability of his position. In late 1948, Triệu Tường reportedly agreed to pay the Bình Xuyên 40,000 piasters per day for casino security as well as support for his bid to renew the concession lease for 1949. Bảy Viễn agreed, promising to lend his influence with the regional government. Yet, upon winning the bid, Triệu Tường reneged on his offer. He was now only willing to pay 120,000 piasters per month—a tenth of the original. Bảy Viễn rejected it out of hand. He even warned his men that if any of them were caught working for the casinos, they would be shot. Triệu Tường promptly offered the job to Maurice Thiên. Despite the explicit order to the contrary, he accepted. On discovering this insubordination, Bảy Viễn did not immediately confront his onetime confidant. But according to French intelligence, this betrayal was at the root of their eventual estrangement.¹¹⁴ The fact that Triệu Tường not only "squeezed" Bảy Viễn at a time of financial need, but also tried to fracture the Bình Xuyên ranks added fuel to his resentment. Even though the business arrangement of protection soon resumed in 1950,¹¹⁵ the plot to take over the concession was underway.

Bảy Viễn did not make his move for nearly two years. He needed to build up the political and financial wherewithal to mount his challenge. On the political front, a crucial source of support would come from Bảo Đại. Though indirectly linked since Bảy Viễn's time in the maquis, the

¹¹¹ Note sur la question des Jeux (1950), T 31-69 (P1), PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹¹² Information: Nguyen Van Tu, 7 December 1945, 10R 70, SHD; "Bọn tướng Tàu sông bạc Đô thành: Lương Lập Phán nhờ Gonon lập sông bạc Đ.T.G.," *Dân Đen*, 25 June 1955.

¹¹³ Captured Document: Nguyen Binh: Ordre Secret, No. 568/T5, 14 October 1947, 10H 4186, SHD; BR (TFIS), No. 119/2S, 16 March 1948, 10H 4186, SHD; BR (Sous-Secteur Saigon-Cholon): Affaire Maurice Thien, No. 841.SSC, 8 April 1948, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹¹⁴ Note (Sûreté Fédérale): Activités des Binh Xuyen, Maurice Thien, No. 2800/S, 17 February 1949, 10H 4186, SHD.

¹¹⁵ FFVS (2B): Arrestation par les V.M. du Directeur du "Grand Monde," No. 883/2S, 1 September 1950, 10H 4023, SHD.

two men did not meet until Bảo Đại's return to Saigon in mid-1949.¹¹⁶ In the latter's honor, a nationalist coalition group, founded by Trần Văn Ân and which counted Bảy Viễn among its prominent backers, hosted a high-profile banquet at the Saigon-Cholon City Hall [Dinh Độc Lý]. It was here that ex-emperor and ex-convict made their acquaintance.¹¹⁷ The following year, Bảy Viễn was invited to visit the Head of State's villa in Đà Lạt.¹¹⁸ According to Bảo Đại, they cemented their friendship on a hunting trip: "All day we walked together. At night, we found ourselves in a *mọi* village. Around a fire, we talked," Bảo Đại recalled, "Very quickly, the conversation took on a tone of confidence."¹¹⁹ During one such conversation, Bảy Viễn broached the idea of taking over the gaming concession in the interest of the government. He told Bảo Đại that casinos in Saigon-Cholon were a valuable revenue source for the Việt Minh. The concessionaire, in fact, paid the insurgents more than the government itself. Bảo Đại encouraged Bảy Viễn to submit a bid later that year.¹²⁰ Lai Hữu Tài at the same time lobbied the regional government. He capitalized on Bảy Viễn's patriotic bona fides to frame the choice of concessionaire in nationalist terms. "Vietnamese businesses should be run by the Vietnamese and not by foreigners," the government was told.¹²¹

Financially, the Bình Xuyên leader faced an uphill battle. By 1950, Triệu Tường had formed a consortium with former competitors, Lâm Nhuận and Lư Tang (the latter being the proprietor of the Grand Monde), as well as a group of Hong Kong and Macau investors represented by Giang Khol. With their combined financial might, they successfully bid on the contract for 1950. Each constituent group operated one of the three sanctioned casinos—Triệu Tường at the Cloche d'Or [Kim Chung], Lâm Nhuận and Lư Tang at the Grand Monde [Đại Thế Giới], and the Hong Kong-Macau group at the rue Boresse venue. Trần Văn Hữu underscored their economic significance when he urged the Justice Ministry and the Prefect's office to stamp out illicit gambling to protect the concession: "The question is of importance, since this leaseholder pays a [daily] fee of 471,000 piasters, which supplies a considerable part of the budget's resources."¹²² Eager to renew the contract, set to expire at the end of the year, the consortium informally offered to further increase the daily fee by 20 percent to 566,000 piasters, in addition to a 15-million-piaster security and a month's fees in advance. The security and the advance alone would inject 30 million piasters into government coffers. Capital-rich and politically connected, the incumbent proved a formidable adversary.¹²³

Bảy Viễn and Lai Hữu Tài had to find a way to at least approximate this financial capability. So, despite the explicitly nationalist tone of their argument to the government, they

¹¹⁶ Bao Dai, 263.

¹¹⁷ Trần Văn Ân, *Thư-Hồi Ký* 2, 6.

¹¹⁸ Bảy Viễn initially seemed uninterested. He had been put off by the government's previous efforts to flatter him with such invitations while refusing to provide needed financial support to his group. During a dinner at A.M. Savani's home, Bảy Viễn declared that "he would be happier to receive the new subsidies than to be invited to accompany the Prime Minister on his trips, which are very expensive." It was Savani who advised Bảy Viễn to accept. See Fiche (FFVS): Entrevue avec le Colonel Le Van Vien, No. 1343/2F, 30 November 1950, 10H 3770, SHD.

¹¹⁹ Bao Dai, 264.

¹²⁰ Bao Dai, 265-66.

¹²¹ Note (BST de Cholon): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 890 S/RG, 16 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD; Darcourt 361.

¹²² Gouverneur à Ministre de la Justice, 16 March 1950, T 31-63, PTHNV; Gouverneur à Préfet de la Région Saigon-Cholon, No. 168-C/Cab/L, 16 March 1950, T 31-63, PTHNV, TTLTQGII. The exact figure was 471,600 piasters per day.

¹²³ Note (SSHC): Ferme des Jeux, No. 18/S, 18 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

assembled a consortium comprised exclusively of Chinese businessmen—some well-known, others obscure. Of them, Huỳnh Đại was most recognizably part of the Cholon business establishment as the proprietor of Đại La Thiên (Grand Paradis), the famed Cholon dance hall. Another, Charles Choy (aka Hà Tư), was an infamous Chinese “adventurer” who had been Triệu Tường’s right-hand man in setting up La Cloche d’Or.¹²⁴ These two men functioned as intermediaries between Chinese capitalists in Cholon and Phnom Penh and Bảy Viễn.¹²⁵ A third key backer, recently arrived from Hanoi, was Trần Phước (aka Trần Phúc, aka Trần Tăng). His relationship with Bảy Viễn went back decades. In 1936, he was convicted as an accessory to a robbery perpetrated by Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí; investigators had discovered that their getaway car belonged to Trần Phước.¹²⁶ For this association, he received five years of hard labor and was eventually expelled from Indochina in 1941.¹²⁷ He reportedly made his way to Macau and became involved in gaming.¹²⁸ Trần Phước also brought along a coterie of investors, including a shareholder in the Arc en Ciel dance hall, a Phnom Penh merchant and professional gambler, and a former member of the incumbent’s Hong Kong group.¹²⁹

As expiration of the 1950 contract drew near, competitors clamored to gain an advantage. There were mixed signals emanating from the government initially. Both Bảo Đại and Trần Văn Hữu, Prime Minister since May, wanted to abolish the gaming concession for the sake of the government’s reputation.¹³⁰ But it became clear that no alternative revenue source was in the offing, save for politically unpalatable taxes. While the political leaders waffled over the issue, rival consortiums searched for a competitive edge. Lâm Nhuận approached Nguyễn Văn Thiên, interim governor Lê Tấn Nắm’s chief of staff, to obtain a six-month extension. The concessionaire also intimated that the Bình Xuyên chief was “currently making life impossible by demanding a considerable increase in the taxes and fees that he collected.”¹³¹ Triệu Tường, on his end, asked Trần Văn Khả to lobby on his behalf.¹³² Bảy Viễn and Lai Hữu Tài, confident in their relationship with Bảo Đại, pressed for a “direct contract” [*marché de gré à gré*] with the government rather than endure a public bidding war. Unbeknownst to the Bình Xuyên leaders, however, Trần Văn Hữu had submitted the incumbent’s proposal to the *commission d’adjudication*. After some back and forth with its representative, Phan Công Thành, the commission approved a 15-day extension, at the end of which a new round of bidding was to commence.¹³³ While Bảy Viễn had applied pressure on his competitors—from raising “taxes” on their businesses to outright threats on their lives—a favorable outcome ultimately depended on

¹²⁴ “Bọn tướng Tàu sông bạc Đô thành: Triệu Tường lập Kim Chung,” *Dân Đen*, 20 July 1955.

¹²⁵ Note (SSHC): Ferme des Jeux de Saigon Cholon, No. 1096 S/RG, 18 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD; Note (BST de Cholon): Ferme des Jeux, No. 18/S, 18 January 1951, 10R 118, SHD.

¹²⁶ “Bọn cướp trại cura cầu Bình Triệu đã lọt vào lưới pháp luật,” *Diễn Tán*, 12 September 1935.

¹²⁷ “Hai vụ cướp tại làng Bình Đăng (Cholon) và trại cura ông Huỳnh Văn Thái,” *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, 30 October 1936.

¹²⁸ A 1964 article in Nguyễn Thế Truyền’s paper *Thân Dân*, claims that Trần Phước moved to Hải Phòng after “paying his debt to society,” worked for the Japanese, and continued to live there in peace after the end of World War II. Only at Huỳnh Đại’s personal intervention did Trần Phước return to Saigon where he became Bảy Viễn’s financial advisor. See “Bọn đề bọc điều: Trần Phúc, một Phạm Tăng của Bảy Viễn,” *Thân Dân*, 7 February 1964.

¹²⁹ BST: Ferme des Jeux de Saigon-Cholon, No. 1184 S/BST, 19 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹³⁰ Note (SSHC): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 890 S/RG, 16 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹³¹ Note (SSHC): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 9 S/RG, 2 January 1951, 10R 118, SHD. This Nguyễn Văn Thiên should not be confused with Maurice Thiên (aka Tư Thiên), who shares the functionary’s name.

¹³² BST: Ferme des Jeux de Saigon-Cholon, No. 1184 S/VST, 19 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹³³ Procès-Verbal: Commission pour la prorogation du fermage des Jeux du 1 au 15 Janvier 1951, 27 December 1950, T 10-581, PTHNV; Procès-Verbal (2), Commission pour la prorogation du fermage des Jeux du 1er au 15 Jan 1951, 28 December 1950, T 10-581, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

his political connection.¹³⁴ Upon hearing of the commission's decision, a furious Bảy Viễn twice dispatched Lai Hữu Tài to Đà Lạt—on 30 December and 3 January—to ask for Bảo Đại's intervention. The head of state promised his support. An “exchange of telegrams followed” between the Imperial Cabinet and the South Vietnamese government, and Bảo Đại reportedly “gave the order in writing” to the interim governor to grant the concession to Bảy Viễn's consortium.¹³⁵

On 10 January, Lê Tấn Nắm and Bảy Viễn's representative, Nguyễn Văn Cơ,¹³⁶ officially signed a one-year agreement. After some last-minute haggling,¹³⁷ the two sides agreed to a daily fee of 523,476 piasters—an 11 percent increase over that in 1950—as well as a six-million-piaster security deposit.¹³⁸ Once victory was in hand, Bảy Viễn moved to ensure a smooth transition. His adversaries were defeated, but they could be troublesome still. Lâm Nhuận, for instance, had threatened to undercut the casino's business by staging free theatrical performances at the Grand Monde day and night. And Lư Tang, after all, still owned both the Grand Monde and the rue Boresse building. To neutralize his foes, Bảy Viễn offered them the option to invest in the newly christened Société Vietnamiennes pour les Attractions Populaires. One French intelligence report indicated that the ex-concessionaires were to “sell” their assorted gaming equipment and furniture—worth about two million piasters—in return for a stake of equal value in the new company.¹³⁹ This allowed the businessmen to mitigate their losses while Bảy Viễn's new venture could avoid having to procure the necessary materiel on short notice. A later report claimed that Lâm Nhuận and Lư Tang each invested three to four million piasters.¹⁴⁰ The flipside of their pragmatism was no doubt fear. French intelligence reported that “it is this fear of retribution that stops them from openly standing in opposition to the Bình Xuyên.”¹⁴¹

Front Populaire

In 1953, Bảy Viễn was presented with an opportunity to take control of a bona fide mass political organization. It would be the final piece to the ambitious developmental plan Lai Hữu Tài had formulated in 1948, which included an armed force, independent territory, economic dominance, and finally a political party. Known variously as Front Populaire or Front Cochinchinois, it was founded by Nguyễn Tấn Cường in November 1945 to promote Cochinchinese separatism—an effort by the French settler population to prevent the colony's absorption into any unitary Vietnamese state.¹⁴² The Front counted among its leadership such important political figures as Lê Văn Hoạch and Nguyễn Văn Tâm. By 1949, the organization had an estimated base of 20,000-25,000 members. At that point, its original, guiding doctrine of

¹³⁴ Note (SSHC): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 9 S/RG, 2 January 1951, 10R 118, SHD.

¹³⁵ Note (SSHC): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 890 S/RG, 16 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹³⁶ Thiếu Tướng Lê Văn Viễn: Ủy Nhiệm, 8 January 1951, T 10-581, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁷ Thủ hiến Nam Việt: Tổ chức vườn chơi sông bạc Kim Chung, No.65/VP/TH, 7 January 1951, T 10-581, PTHNV; Đại Tá Lê Văn Viễn: Tổ chức vườn chơi Kim Chung, No.1552/MV, 8 January 1951, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁸ Note (SSHC): Ferme de Jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 711 S/RG, 12 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD; Đại Tá Lê Văn Viễn: Tổ chức vườn chơi Kim Chung, No.1552/MV, 8 January 1951, PTHNV; Marché de gré à gré pour l'exploitation de maisons de jeux de hasard sur le territoire de la Région Saigon-Cholon pendant la période du 16 Janvier 1951 au 15 Janvier 1952, 10 January 1951, PTHNV T 10-581, TTLTQGII.

¹³⁹ Note (SSHC): Ferme des jeux de Saigon/Cholon, No. 890 S/RG, 16 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹⁴⁰ BST: Ferme des Jeux de Saigon-Cholon, No. 1184 S/BST, 19 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹⁴¹ Note (SSHC): Ferme des Jeux, No. 18/S, 18 January 1951, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹⁴² Devillers, 174; Goscha, *Vietnam*, 216

Cochinchinese separatism had become muted, given that its president Nguyễn Tấn Cường was serving in Nguyễn Văn Xuân's "unionist" Provisional Central Government.¹⁴³ Despite its origins and its anti-DRV politics, members of the Front maintained communication with the Bình Xuyên with the hope of dislodging it from the Việt Minh. Notably, its secretary-general, Nguyễn Văn Tuệ, had befriended Bảy Viễn and Mười Trí on Poulo Condore and advised them politically during the Japanese Occupation.¹⁴⁴ In the lead-up to Bảy Viễn's purge, DRV intelligence claimed that the Front, through its "Comité des Démarches auprès des Résistants Binh Xuyen," was working with Maurice Thiên to bring the Bình Xuyên out of the maquis.¹⁴⁵ Once Bảy Viễn rallied, Nguyễn Tấn Cường quickly struck up a relationship with him, and became an important ally at the top of the Police Municipale.¹⁴⁶

The primary reason that Nguyễn Tấn Cường passed the presidency of the Front to Bảy Viễn was financial. Until 1953, the organization was supported in large part by the government at 25,000 piasters per month, supplemented by membership fees.¹⁴⁷ Nguyễn Văn Tâm, after replacing Trần Văn Hữu as prime minister, discontinued this subsidy. The decision was political, for it more or less coincided with the end of Nguyễn Tấn Cường's tenure as head of the Police Préfectorale. It appears that Nguyễn Văn Tâm held a grudge against Cường's continued support for Trần Văn Hữu.¹⁴⁸ Another important factor was that there had been a steady decline in the size and zeal of the membership since 1951. Many, in fact, had quit to join the Bình Xuyên instead, especially those who wanted to avoid the draft. This drain on the Front's membership also meant a decline in its membership dues.¹⁴⁹ Bảy Viễn, in contrast, had the means to not only support but expand the Front.

There was, however, resistance. Internally, news of Bảy Viễn's takeover reportedly caused confusion among members unable to accept the reality that this state-sponsored organization now resided with the infamous paramilitary group. Some resigned, though the majority stayed.¹⁵⁰ Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm, who had initially been a leader of the Front, expressed his alarm. In his view, Bảy Viễn's aim was to "transform this inoffensive enough organization into an instrument of war capable of supporting his personal aims and to promote his intention to extend his force's field of action beyond the territorial limits that have been imposed upon on him at the time of his *ralliement*." Under the cover of party branches, the Bình Xuyên leader intended to install armed posts throughout Saigon-Cholon.¹⁵¹ At Tâm's request, the governor underscored the dangers of this development to General Bondis, noting that the group could effectively skirt restrictions the commander had imposed in 1951.¹⁵²

¹⁴³ Note de la Direction de la Police et de la Sûreté Fédérales sur les partis nationalistes vietnamiens, No. 4930/SG/SD, 14 March 1949, HCI CD 176, CAOM, pp. 23-24.

¹⁴⁴ Résumé d'un entretien avec M. Nguyen Van Te, Secrétaire Général du Front Populaire Conchinchinois, 3 November 1946, No. AC/cc/3, HCI Conspol 127, CAOM.

¹⁴⁵ Captured Document: Front Populaire set up committees for assassination and to approach the Binh Xuyen. PTHNV D 61-88

¹⁴⁶ Sûreté Fédérale: Activités Nationalistes, Forces Binh Xuyen, No. 18284/S, 14 December 1948, 10H 4187), SHD.

¹⁴⁷ Fermeture de la nouvelle Section Front Populaire créée au Quartier de Khanh Hoi, 1 September 1952, No. 1205/S/IP, B 04-46, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁴⁸ Extrait de la Note No. 109 S/RG du 5 janvier 1953 de SSCO, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁴⁹ Bulletin Quotidien Dirsuma, No. 182, 29 November 1951, PThTQGVN 1524, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁰ Bulletin Quotidien No.69 du 24 Mars 1953, 24 March 1953, 1302/DIRSURNA/RG/1B-S, PThTQGVN 1396, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵¹ Président du Gouvernement à Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam, No. 119-Cab, 26 May 1953, D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵² Gouverneur du Sud Vietnam à FTSV, No. 2832/Cab.Mil., 7 June 1953, D 7-555, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

Nguyễn Văn Tâm's warning was prescient. Over the following year, local authorities would note an upsurge in Front activities. In May, three new branches had opened in Gia Định and Thủ Đức.¹⁵³ In June, Front elements—including the section chief of Gia Định—and Bình Xuyên men had arrived in Mỹ Tho to open another branch office. They had already been holding regular meetings at their temporary location with local residents.¹⁵⁴ These developments appear to be part of a “tour” of southern provinces by the Front central committee to assess the conditions for further expanding the organization. In July, the Front leadership, emissaries from regional affiliates, and Bình Xuyên representatives met to discuss their findings. Of particular interest was the possibility of stationing Bình Xuyên troops at these branch offices.¹⁵⁵ Throughout 1954, Front branches cropped up in Gò Vấp, Bà Rịa, and Vũng Tàu.¹⁵⁶ And though Front activities raised alarms, even among the French military, a Biên Hoà sector commander noted that they could not simply ban an officially recognized political party “out of hand.”¹⁵⁷

The Front also served as a feeder system for the Bình Xuyên force. Some existing members directly joined the Bình Xuyên army, as one Sûreté report detailed. According to this account, members first register their names with the secretary-general who forwards the list to Bảy Viễn. After a convocation at the head office, they would be directed to Bình Xuyên headquarters. There, they submit to a medical exam as well as questioning by Bình Xuyên intelligence agents. The recruits then sign an engagement contract ranging from two to five years, and receive a military identification card and uniform. After a period of training, they would be assigned either to the Bình Xuyên Zone or another locale where the group was stationed.¹⁵⁸ While Bảy Viễn technically only encouraged Front members who had not received a mobilization call to join, the Sûreté determined otherwise. In fact, large numbers of draft-eligible young men had, with the help of Front personnel, fled to the Bình Xuyên Zone to dodge the draft.¹⁵⁹

Exemption from the draft was consistently and explicitly touted as a benefit of joining either the Front or the Bình Xuyên. Recruiters exploited the widespread fear of conscription to pad the organization's numbers.¹⁶⁰ In Cholon Province, for instance, Bình Xuyên agents traveled from village misleadingly selling the idea that, unlike the national army, joining the Bình Xuyên reserve would require no actual military action. The young men would only serve in the Bình Xuyên ranks for a short time, after which they would be sent home with a certificate shielding them from conscription.¹⁶¹ Nguyễn Tấn Nhị, head of the Front's youth wing called Thanh Niên Phụng Sự, promoted the reserve as the only way to avoid being deployed to battlefronts in the

¹⁵³ Rapport d'Ensemble Mois de Mai 1953, PTHNV, E 03-192.

¹⁵⁴ Note (Sûreté Nationale): A/s des activités du MAT TRAN BINH DAN à Mytho, No. 2009-S/PS, 6 September 1953, D 61-7, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁵ A/s Conference secrète (Front Populaire) du 22 Juillet 1953 au siege central de ce Front, no. 87 ru President Thinh, Saigon, 6 August 1953, No. 12609-IB/S, D 61-7, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁶ Bulletin mensuel: Période du 21 décembre 1953 au 20 janvier 1954, 29 January 1954, 1686/IB/S, D 5-300, TĐBCPNP; Bulletin quotidien No.346 du 2 mars 1954, 2 March 1954, 677/DIRSURNA/RG/1B/S, Folder 14594, PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁷ FTSV: A/s activités du Parti “MAT TRAN BINH DAN” (Front Populaire du Sud Vietnam), No. 3571/I22, 25 May 1954, 10H 5407, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵⁸ Daily compensation included 20 piasters, 1 liter of rice, and another 5 piasters for food.

¹⁵⁹ Sûreté Nationale: A/s Intégration des membres du Front Populaire du Sud Vietnam dans les rangs des FAN Bình Xuyên, No. 13134/IB-S, 14 August 1953, D 5-271, PTHNV, TTLTQGII.

¹⁶⁰ BR (FTSV): A/s activités Bình Xuyên, No. 12519/2SC, 15 October 1953, 10H 5159, SHD; Sûreté Nationale: Hoạt động của MAT TRAN BINH DAN ở Cai Lậy (Mytho), No. 276-S/PS, 25 March 1954, D 61-7, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

¹⁶¹ FTSV: A/s activités Bình Xuyên et Caodaistes, No. 1764/2, 19 February 1954, 10H 4190, SHD.

north or Laos.¹⁶² Thanh Niên Phụng Sự specifically had been a key part of the Front's militarization effort since August 1953. All sections of the Front were required to have Thanh Niên Phụng Sự group. And every Sunday, members were required to undergo military training—including handling weapons and elementary combat—and take a political-military course.¹⁶³ While the youth wing was estimated to number ten thousand, but the actual number of reservists was likely much lower.¹⁶⁴ But the illusion of having escaped military service would soon be shattered. In March 1954, the Bình Xuyên made the decision to mobilize all reservists. Everyone holding reservist certificates had to report to the Bình Xuyên training camp. Half of the men would be stationed in the Bình Xuyên Zone while the other half would be deployed as reinforcement to Bà Rịa, Vũng Tàu, and Đà Lạt.¹⁶⁵

Sûreté Nationale

So far, we have seen that the Bình Xuyên was far from cowed by the Franco-Vietnamese disarmament operation at the end of 1951. While the French military placed greater restrictions on its armed presence inside Saigon-Cholon, the group was virtually left to its own devices outside the city. Indeed, military and financial necessity led the military command to simultaneously extend the Bình Xuyên's territorial reach while turning a blind eye to its predatory economic activities. Bảy Viễn was later able to leverage the group's military, territorial, and economic power to take over a ready-made mass organization, providing him with both a political platform and a recruiting instrument for his army. Even in terms of the group's relationship to the security forces, a vocal proponent of the operation, was far from incident-free. Because of the still smoldering antagonism between the Bình Xuyên and the Sûreté Nationale, reciprocal violence remained the order of the day. While the latter reported attacks on its agents and kidnappings (and even assassinations) of its agents, Bảy Viễn accused the service of apprehending and disappearing his men.

While Sûreté and the Bình Xuyên were always on the verge of open conflict, the service itself was experiencing institutional difficulties. In 1952, Nguyễn Văn Tâm succeeded Trần Văn Hữu as prime minister and decided to promote Mai Hữu Xuân to lead the Services des Police et Sûreté Nationales. The prime minister, however, hardly trusted his ostensible collaborator.¹⁶⁶ He was reportedly not allowed to move into a large empty office previously occupied by the Minister of Interior. More importantly, Nguyễn Văn Tâm kept Xuân on a short leash. A French report on the service's morale observed: "There is a current of near-open discontent in Mai Hữu Xuân's faction toward the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior who continues to direct the Sûreté Nationale and hardly cares about the sensitivity and self-esteem of the Service's members."¹⁶⁷ The relationship further deteriorated. Suspecting Xuân of conspiring with the recently ousted Trần Văn Hữu to return to power, Tâm reportedly threatened: "I warn you for the

¹⁶² Bulletin quotidien No.357 du 16 mars 1954, No. 881/DIRSURNA/RG/1B/S, 15 March 1954, Folder 14594, PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁶³ Bulletin quotidien No.345 du 1er mars 1954, No. 653/DIRSURNA/RG/1B/S, 1 March 1954, Folder 14594, PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII; BR (FTSV): Activités politiques Vietnamiennes, Le front populaire du Sud Vietnam (Mat Tran Binh Dan), No. 3251/2, 31 March 1954, 10H 5407, SHD.

¹⁶⁴ Fiche de Renseignement (MLBX): Le Front Populaire du Sud Vietnam, No. 9/2/D/LBY, 3 April 1954, 10H 4190, SHD

¹⁶⁵ Sûreté Nationale: V/v Bình Xuyên động viên lính trừ bị của Mặt Trận Bình Dân, No. 4831/PC-1/M, D 61-7, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII; Fiche (CFTSV): Convocation de Réservistes, No. 3158/2, 27 March 1954, 10H 4189, SHD.

¹⁶⁶ Note SSCO No. 8566 du 28 mai 1952, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁶⁷ Extrait No. 13799 S/RG du 1ère September 1952, A/s de l'état d'esprit de la Sûreté Nationale, SPCE 54, CAOM.

last time. If I again learn that you do not confine yourself strictly to your task of policing, don't count on my pity any longer, you will be crushed.”¹⁶⁸ After Tâm installed Nguyễn Văn Tôn as Sûreté chief of south Vietnam, Xuân's authority was further diminished. The service was dangerously factionalized. Xuân and his partisans even schemed to pull back on their activities in an effort to damage their adversary.¹⁶⁹ Finally, on 1 April 1953, Mai Hữu Xuân was replaced by Lê Quang Hồ, the Minister of State.¹⁷⁰ Not long after his appointment, there were grumblings inside the service, particularly among many Mai Hữu Xuân partisans, that the new director was not up to the job.¹⁷¹ Overall morale had sunk to a new low.

After Bửu Lộc, at his cousin Bảo Đại's urging, formed a new government to replace Nguyễn Văn Tâm's, he decided to reinstall the former director. On 14 January 1954, Lê Quang Hồ officially transferred the post back to Mai Hữu Xuân.¹⁷² But rumors had been floating around that a Bình Xuyên leader, likely one of the Lai brothers, wanted to take over the directorship. After all, there were political considerations; Bảo Đại reportedly promised Bảy Viễn a major role in the new government in exchange for his support.¹⁷³ There had, however, been pushback from both the so-called “political milieu” in the capital and among those in the service.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, this was Bửu Lộc's excuse for not granting the Bình Xuyên either the Ministry of Interior or the Sûreté Nationale. In response, Bảy Viễn refused to support the new government.¹⁷⁵ Mai Hữu Xuân's tenure would last little longer than three months. Despite his cousin's opposition, Bảo Đại appointed Lai Văn Sang as the new director of the Sûreté. Public security for all of Vietnam was in the hands of the Bình Xuyên.

Mai Hữu Xuân, who initially joined the Prime Minister's cabinet as an advisor, found his footing in the National Army.¹⁷⁶ On the General Nguyễn Văn Hinh's intervention, the ex-Sûreté director became the Chief of Military Security at the rank of colonel. He also brought along some three hundred Sûreté and the Police Préfectorale agents who had resigned en masse.¹⁷⁷ From a position shielded by the military, Mai Hữu Xuân and his followers would create a parallel security service, frequently targeting Bình Xuyên affiliates, including the security services. One of the most notable was the November assassination of Lai Hữu Tài's bodyguard.¹⁷⁸ Some public interactions devolved into brawls and firefights. The irony of the role reversal was hard to miss.

Final Confrontation

When Ngô Đình Diệm was installed as the new prime minister on 7 July 1954, the Bình Xuyên had just been handed control of the Sûreté Nationale. At the time, Bảy Viễn likely did not

¹⁶⁸ Note No. 19649 S/RG du 11 décembre 1952 du SSCO, Le Président Nguyen Van Tam et le Directeur Général de la Sûreté Nationale, M. Mai Huu Xuan, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁶⁹ Note No. 4079 S/RG du 16 mars 1953 de SSCO, A/s de la Sûreté Nationale, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷⁰ Extrait de la Note No. 5089 S/RG du 1er avril 1953 de SSCO, Au sujet de M. Mai Huu Xuan, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷¹ Note No. 17409 S/RG du 24-11-1953 de SSCO, Etat d'esprit du personnel de la Sûreté Nationale de Saigon, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷² Extrait de la Note No. 629 S/RG du 14 janvier 1954 de SSCO, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷³ Extrait de la Note No. 19159 S/RG du 29 décembre 1953 de SSCO, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷⁴ Note (Service Français de Sécurité), No. 5578/C/SG.I, 30 December 1953, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷⁵ Note (Service Français de Sécurité) No. 164 C/SG-I, 12 January 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷⁶ Note (SSCO): Réaction du personnel de la Sûreté Nationale à la suite du départ de M. Mai Huu Xuan et de son remplacement par M. Lai Van Sang, No. 5939 S/RG, 1 May 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁷⁷ Note (SSCO) No. 6911 S/RG, 22 May 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM; Buttinger, 816.

¹⁷⁸ Fiche (CFTSV): Crimes commis dans Saigon-Cholon dans la nuit du 5 au 6 Novembre 1954, suivis d'enlèvement d'armes, No. 9402/2, 7 November 1954, 10H 4189, SHD.

view the long-absent nationalist with much worry. After all, the Bình Xuyên was an entrenched part of south Vietnam's power structure, enjoying French military patronage as well as Bảo Đại's confidence. Diệm, though enjoying American support, lacked the solid infrastructure that Bảy Viễn or other so-called "sect" leaders had. Armed force, economic wherewithal, and political connection at the highest levels of state appeared ensure the Bình Xuyên's position of strength. In fact, Bảy Viễn was preoccupied with possible FAVN schemes, pushed unsurprisingly by Mai Hữu Xuân and Trần Bá Thành, to neutralize the Bình Xuyên. Diệm had made his intention to end the gambling monopoly and change the leadership of the Sûreté clear, but Bảy Viễn must have not believed that the prime minister could muster the authority.¹⁷⁹ Bảy Viễn would inform Diệm that both questions should be left up to Bảo Đại. Behind the scenes, he lobbied the head of state to keep Diệm at bay.¹⁸⁰ When Lai Văn Sang was ordered to resign, he flatly refused. It was increasingly clear that the Bình Xuyên leadership, far from being satisfied with the economic and territorial concessions, was intent on being a leading force in national politics. After all, the group had become a leading force among the vocal Third Force made up of the "big five".¹⁸¹

The Bình Xuyên that Ngô Đình Diệm encountered—unlike the iterations that fought for the Việt Minh, rallied to the French, or that was chastened by the its French patrons in 1951—was at the height of its power. But Diệm, in many ways like Nguyễn Bình before him, refused to bargain with Bảy Viễn despite counsel to the contrary.¹⁸² What transpired is well-known: As 1954 turned into 1955, despite early signs of a unified, "sect"-led front and Diệm's teetering on the verge of dismissal, the Prime Minister was able to out-maneuver his adversaries through a strategy of divide and conquer. As the situation escalated toward civil war, the apparent unity of the opposition fractured. When armed conflict did erupt, the Bình Xuyên was handily defeated.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Note (Services Français de Sécurité): Attitude des FA Binh Xuyen, No. 3061/C/SG-1, 15 July 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁸⁰ Note (Services Français de Sécurité): Position du Gouvernement Ngo Dinh Diem, No. 3080/C/SG-1, 16 July 1954, SPCE 54, CAOM.

¹⁸¹ François Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam : l'échec de la troisième voie, 1938-1955* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 545-46.

¹⁸² Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2013), 101.

¹⁸³ See *Misalliance* and Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013).

Epilogue: A Prodigal Return?

In late July 1967, Liberation Radio broadcasted an address responding to Hồ Chí Minh's letter of congratulations. Given on behalf of the "Bình Xuyên patriotic forces," the speech recounted their twelve-year anti-American struggle, proclaimed their determination to fight, and urged former Bình Xuyên fighters to join the insurgency.¹ The voice of militancy belonged to Võ Văn Môn (aka Bảy Môn), at the time a colonel and a Central Committee member of the National Liberation Front. But his résumé was hardly straightforward. During the August Revolution, he served as a leader of an armed group in Thủ Thiêm, just outside Saigon, and then as a battalion commander for the unified Bình Xuyên forces under the Việt Minh. After Bảy Viễn's purge in 1948, he remained with the Việt Minh and had become a battalion leader in Regiment 309. But fear of being accused of siding with the disgraced leader led him to leave the maquis roughly a year later.² On 20 April 1949, Bảy Môn left the maquis and joined the resurrected Bình Xuyên.³ Although the documentary record is spotty, we know that in subsequent years he participated in pacification campaigns launched by the French military and rose from company to battalion commander. In this latter position, he won a Silver Star from Prince Bửu Lộc for bravery.⁴ But the Bình Xuyên's confrontation with Ngô Đình Diệm and its swift defeat by the National Army forced him to seek refuge once more with the depleted insurgency.

After the National Army swiftly defeated the Bình Xuyên forces in the city, it was only a matter of months before the entire organization disintegrated. Inside the Bình Xuyên, mounting defeats and declining morale caused the rank-and-file to flee and the leadership to implode.⁵ It was in this context that the Việt Minh-Bình Xuyên relationship was revived.⁶ The man spearheading this effort was Đào Phúc Lộc, more commonly known by his alias Hoàng Minh Đạo.⁷ A native of Quảng Ninh who joined the ICP in 1939, Đạo was a veteran operative for the Việt Minh throughout the First Indochina War. In September 1948, he was sent south to lead a military intelligence group. After the signing of the Geneva Accords, he went underground to head an organ devoted to "mobilizing" enemy troops [*bình vận*].⁸ The Bình Xuyên was a prime target. In fact, the Việt Minh had tried on multiple occasions to win Bảy Viễn back.⁹ Between

¹ NFLSV Official Hails Ho Chi Minh's Letter, 25 July 1967, Box 06, Folder 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 - National Liberation Front, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2310614031>, Accessed 08 Jul 2020.

² Trần Bạch Đằng, *Chung một bóng cờ: về Mặt trận dân tộc giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: Chính trị quốc gia, 1993), 906.

³ Colonel Le Van Vien à Président du Gouvernement Provisoire du Sud Vietnam, Non. 53/AM, 23 April 1949, 10H 3770, SHD.

⁴ Bản Tuyên Dương Công Trạng Cấp Sư Đoàn, 27 June 1954, Folder 13321, PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII.

⁵ Phiếu tin báo, Unnumbered, 7 June 1955, Folder 4343, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII; Bản tin tức: Căn cứ Quân sự Bình Xuyên trong khu Rừng Sát, Document 767/M/VP, 14 July 1955, Folder D 61-93, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII; Bản tin tức: Căn cứ Quân sự Bình Xuyên trong khu Rừng Sát, Document 2072/Cab/Mil, Folder D 61-93, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII. Phiến loạn Bình Xuyên, Document 1780/M/HCSR, 26 September 1955, Folder T 99-63, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

⁶ Trần Bạch Đằng, 266

⁷ He additionally went by Năm Đồi and Năm Thu.

⁸ Nguyễn Kim Thành, *Chuyện Chưa Biết về Người Anh Hùng* (Hà Nội: nxb Công An Nhân Dân, 2005), 419-423.

⁹ Hồ Sơn Đài, "Quá Trình Chuyển Hoá Một Bộ Phận Vũ Trang Bình Xuyên Thành Lực Lượng Vũ Trang Cách Mạng Sau Năm 1954" (unpublished essay), 4. In late 1953, for instance, it was speculated that Việt Minh units had staged an assassination attempt to look like it was perpetrated by the National Army. An Army lieutenant was promptly executed, but despite promises of support and autonomy, the defection never took place. See Fiche de Lecture: A/s de la tentative d'assassinat du General Le Van Vien, Unnumbered, 1 August 1953, Folder 14684,

1954 and early 1955, one of Đạo's agents was able to establish rapport with Bảy Môn, then commander of Battalion No. 3, often visiting him to discuss current events, particularly the DRV's victory in Điện Biên Phủ. Đạo subsequently ordered the Biên Hoà Provincial Committee [Tỉnh Ủy Biên Hoà] to organize a delegation to officially approach Bảy Viễn.¹⁰ As the political situation became untenable—likely after being pushed out of the city—Bảy Viễn asked to meet the higher-ups. Đạo and Võ Văn Khánh, then the deputy party secretary for the Eastern Region [phó bí thư liên tỉnh ủy Miền Đông], quietly slipped into Rừng Sác, meeting Bảy Viễn on his gunboat. His choices, Khánh reportedly told Bảy Viễn, were limited.¹¹ After a night of tense negotiations, Bảy Viễn finally agreed to let Bảy Môn's battalion rejoin the Việt Minh.¹²

Bảy Môn's career seemed to have come full circle. The Việt Minh had few illusions about the potentially unruly group. The insurgents could look to both their own experience trying to control a jealously autonomous Bảy Viễn and the State of Vietnam's inability to rein in the group as valuable lessons for dealing with what remained of the group. After moving from Bà Rịa to Đồng Tháp Mười (War Zone D), the cadres went about rebuilding and reshaping Bảy Môn's force. This allowed the southern cadres to maintain a tight hold on the ideological orientation of the armed group. For instance, they often reactivated former Việt Minh commanders. According to testimony of Nguyễn Văn Lương, a captured Battalion 3 commander, he was a former Vanguard Youth member and later a Việt Minh platoon leader in Thủ Dầu Một who left the resistance due to illness. In early 1956, two cadres brought along two Bình Xuyên soldiers and took him to meet Bảy Môn, who offered him a position as platoon-level commander in charge of training in the military arts. He accepted.¹³ In other cases, the insurgents conscripted locally (fifty-seven from Mỹ Long village, thirty-seven from Hàng Tây village, and twenty-nine from Bình Thanh Trung village).¹⁴

Others had more complicated career trajectories, not unlike that of Bảy Môn. Thái Hoàng Ân, commander of Battalion 2, revealed during interrogations that he had been a Vanguard Youth member and later became a Việt Minh commander. In 1954, his commanders were regrouped to the North. Having nowhere to go, his sister introduced him to Bình Xuyên commander Thái Hoàng Minh. When the Bình Xuyên was defeated by the Army, he returned to Mỹ Tho. The following year he joined Battalion 2 Revolutionary Army, which merged with a Hoà Hảo battalion to form Battalion 2 Bình Xuyên.¹⁵ Or Lê Văn Khương, platoon leader in Thái Hoàng Ân's battalion, who was also a Vanguard Youth member and a deputy hamlet squad leader in Nhơn Ninh up to 1954. In 1955, fearing arrest he briefly joined the Popular Front only to see it dissolved by the government. He then joined Trần Văn Soái's forces, again, only to see the Hoà Hảo leader defect to the government soon after. Several months later, he met Thái Hoàng Ân, who recruited him into Battalion 2.¹⁶

PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁰ Nguyễn Kim Thành, 294.

¹¹ Ibid, 295

¹² Ibid, 284; Lời khai của Nguyễn Trương Cang tự THÁI HOÀNG ÂN, Tiểu Đoàn trưởng Tiểu Đoàn 2 giải Phóng Quân Bình Xuyên, Unnumbered, 9 November 1957, Folder 4538, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

¹³ V/v bắt tên Nguyễn Văn Lương, chánh trị viên quân đội Bình Xuyên, Document 2946/CT/T, 24 December 1956, Folder D 01-243, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

¹⁴ Phiếu tin báo: Hoạt động của BẢY MÔN và dư đảng BÌNH XUYỀN, Document 0266/TĐAN/PTT/M, 3 May 1956, Folder 4343, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁵ Lời khai của Nguyễn Trương Cang tự THÁI HOÀNG ÂN, Tiểu Đoàn trưởng Tiểu Đoàn 2 giải Phóng Quân Bình Xuyên, Unnumbered, 9 November 1957, Folder 4538, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁶ Lời khai của Lê Văn Khương tự Lê Quang Dũng (Trung đội Trưởng Trung đội 675 của TĐ 2 BX), Unnumbered, 31 October 1957, Folder 4538, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

What set the DRV's integration of the Bình Xuyên apart from the early ICP cadres and the French military was the unyielding emphasis on ideological control. In late 1956, the cadres set up a "reeducation course" to train Bình Xuyên remnants in the military arts and, most importantly, politics. Bảy Môn was made the head of this training course, no doubt to suppress any rank-and-file opposition.¹⁷ Vietnamese historians describe the process of reeducation as one of progressive enlightenment as ideological positions vis-à-vis Americans and the French were clarified. And in spite of anxiety among Bình Xuyên fighters over their history of antagonism and fear about being supplanted, great effort on the part of Bảy Môn, self-respect, and patriotism made the course a success. Many fighters even became Party members.¹⁸ But based on documents captured and interrogations carried out by the South Vietnamese military, the initial round of reeducation was insufficient. In late 1958, after the attack on Dầu Tiếng rubber plantation, Battalion 3 along with another bandit-turned-insurgent group were subjected to three months of reeducation. Afterwards, communist cadres were inserted into leadership positions while Bình Xuyên commanders were simultaneously demoted.¹⁹ Morale within its ranks was low. Even Bảy Môn, who communist historians present in a favorable light, was said to have tried to duck military activity by claiming old age.

Although the Eighth Plenum instructed the Southern Regional Committee in October 1955 to court the anti-Diệm "sect" elements, it was not until 1960 that the prospect of violent struggle was endorsed via Resolution 15.²⁰ In the intervening five years, southern cadres harnessed and built upon the military capacity of these elements, including the Bình Xuyên, to wage attacks throughout the South. The rising level of violence prompted Lê Duẩn to warn in 1958 that if the party fails to sanction violence, it risks losing control.²¹ The Bình Xuyên forces under communist control, in the meantime, carried out robberies and exactions across the South, frequently crossing into Cambodia to escape government pursuit, to cause disruption and replenish the insurgency's coffers.²² The Bình Xuyên as a distinctive organizational component of the southern insurgency came to an end by the early 1960's, even though its personnel were still very much part of the war effort. By early 1961, in a move reminiscent of Nguyễn Bình's after the purge of Bảy Viễn, Bảy Môn's forces were reorganized and scattered across the various insurgent units.²³ The following years saw both Bảy Môn's ceremonial ascent as NLF Central Committee member and his actual disempowerment. From 1960 onward, he by turns headed academies training new military recruits and the officer corps, and managed the War Zone D base and farms under its control.²⁴ It appears that around this time, regular communication with Bảy Viễn ceased.²⁵

¹⁷ Mở lớp chính huấn để giáo dục nhóm tàn quân BÌNH XUYỀN, Document 5722/DPG/CQ/51, 7 September 1956, Folder 4136, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

¹⁸ Hồ Sơn Đài, "Quá Trình Chuyển Hoá," 6-8.

¹⁹ Hiện trạng Tiểu Đoàn 3 Bình Xuyên và toán cướp "Bồi Liều" tại Quân khu I, Document MVD/14, 13 January 1959, Folder 5878, PTTĐICH, TTLTQGII.

²⁰ Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam 1954-60* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 51; Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 186.

²¹ Lien-Hang Nguyen, 44-45

²² Phúc trình: Về vụ cướp tại sở Cao Su Bến Cùi (SIPH), Document 015/4/HBQG, 7 April 1957, Folder D 01-246, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII.

²³ Hồ Sơn Đài, "Quá Trình Chuyển Hoá," 8.

²⁴ Trần Bạch Đằng, 906.

²⁵ Cựu Thiếu Tướng LÊ VĂN VIỄN dự định trở về Việt Nam, Document 533/PTUTB/P, 24 March 1965, Folder 19781, PThTVNCH, TTLTQGII.

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