

## THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE FRENCH PEOPLE DURING THE RESISTANCE OF THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE AGAINST THE FRENCH COLONISTS WHICH LED TO THE VICTORY OF DIEN BIEN PHU

Dinh Xuan Lam<sup>(\*)</sup>

It is possible to confirm that from the outbreak of World War II to the spring of 1944 when the resistance against Fascism in France was coming to an end, in a context that every connection between France and Vietnam was nearly disrupted, the French Communist Party did not know anything about the development of the Revolution in Vietnam. From the summer of 1940 to the victory of the August Revolution in 1945, the Indochinese Communist Party was completely separated from the outside world and all connections with the French Communist Party were cut off. Ettine Fajon, a member of the the French Communist Party Politbureau stated: *"I did not think the steering committee (of the French Communist Party) knew anything about Indochina"* (1, P. 61). Elie Mignot, a standing member of the Colonial Committee of the French Communist Party from August in 1945 also admitted: *"In 1945 and 1946, we had very little information of Vietnam. We knew the August Revolution through some pieces of news in the newspapers. These pieces of information were not sufficient for understanding the situation happening in Indochina"* (1, P. 62). Raymond Barbe, a standing member of the Colonial Committee from the summer of 1945 added: *"As far as I know, until the uprising*

*which led the Viet Minh to power in August and September in 1945, the French Communist Party had not had any information for evaluating the situation of the war in Indochina. Only after a few days when newspapers announced that the Viet Minh was in power, I was told by Vietnamese comrades in France that Ho Chi Minh was Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had been well-known to the leaders of the French Communist Party. As soon as the news was confirmed, it was immediately sent to the leadership of the French Communist Party,"* (1, P. 70).

Meanwhile, the design of the French Imperialists to reoccupy colonial countries (including Indochina) had revealed quite early. Even when World War II had not ended and France had been invaded by the Germans, the provisional republican government of France (the Resistance government) in Alger led by Commander De Gaulle called for a meeting in Brazzaville (the Congo) to discuss colonial issues (from January 1<sup>st</sup> to February 8<sup>th</sup> in 1944). At the meeting, the idea of liberating colonial nations was ignored. Rene Pleven, representative of the French provisional government, announced frankly that "under French Imperialism, there were national issues to be liberated and there were no racial discriminations to get rid of (...); the overseas nations knew nothing of national independence except the national independence of France." (1,

<sup>(\*)</sup> Professor, Department of History, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, VNU.

P.73-74). By August 1944 when Paris was liberated, the Government of the resistants, which had just won a victory for the nation, issued an order to establish an army led by Commander Leclerc and this army was assigned with the mission to move towards the Far East to fight against the last allies of Hitler – the Japanese Fascists. After France had been liberated, the De Gaulle government issued Ordinance on the future of Indochina (March 24<sup>th</sup> in 1945). This document is, in essence, the restoration of the colonial regime in Indochina. In that historical context, many French communists could avoid being ideologically influenced. The thing that needs to be confirmed immediately is that before then the relationship between French communists and the Revolution of Vietnam had been close and had gone through the mill in many historical periods. Red Assistance, the struggle commission for releasing political prisoners carried out many fierce fights against brutal terrorist actions by French Imperialists at the beginning of the 1930s. Then in 1936 and 1937, the French People's Front with communists working as activists stood side by side with Revolutionary fighters and the Vietnamese people to fight for basic democratic interests.

Because the relationship between the Indochinese Communist Party and the French Communist Party was disrupted for a long time and partly because the political situation of France and the world after the liberation of France (France had just won the victory over facism and there was an inner split among the political alliance of forces of the four victorious superpowers) determined the policy of the French Communist Party on colonial countries in general and on Indochina in

particular, that is, combining the progressive forces in the mother country with those in the colonies to fight for new democratic rights. This policy shows that the targets of the French Communists by that time were like those of the Democratic Front period, they were unable to realise the fact that there had been many changes in the political life of the peoples in the colonial and dependent nations. Ejién Farong's speech at the Congress of the French Communist Party held in June, 1947 can be quoted to illustrate the idea at that time: *"In the general situation of the world at the moment, the French Union is still the best organization for the implementation of the aspiration of the colonial peoples with the assistance of the French working class and the French people (...). Please stay with us in the French Union."*

In that specific historical context, the French Communist Party could not have the right policy on colonial countries. However, there were quick changes after September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945. Through electric waves, the Declaration of Independence was transmitted to every corner of the earth. On behalf of the provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people, President Ho Chi Minh solemnly declared *"Vietnam went away from French Imperialists' relationship and abolished the privileges of France in Vietnam"* (5, P. 21). At the same time, President Ho Chi Minh also announced incisively in the world *"Vietnam has the right to enjoy independence and freedom, and in fact has is an independent and free country. The entire Vietnamese people have determined to devote all their spirit and forces, their lives and wealth to holding fast to that freedom and independence"* (5, P. 22).

Right after that, there were changes in the words of the French Communists' papers. The politbureau of the French Communist Party advanced an announcement on September 20<sup>th</sup> and then organized a meeting on January 12<sup>th</sup>. Obviously, at the end of the last three months in 1945, the French Communist Party was aware of their backwardness in updating information. But it was not until spring 1946 that the links between the two parties were established. On November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party issued the Directive on nation-wide resistance, in which it predicted that after the general election in October, 1945, the French Communist Party would be the strongest force in the French Parliament. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1946 as soon as the Preliminary Agreement had been signed by Vietnam and France, the Central Committee of Indochinese Communist Party decided to establish contacts with the French Communist Party in order to carry out concerted actions. Then, on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1946, the National Assembly delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam led by Mr. Pham Van Dong arrived in France and there was a meeting between the Vietnamese delegation and Mr. Muarice Thorez, Mr. Jacques Duclos and Mr. Andre Marty on May 7<sup>th</sup>, at the head office of the French Communist Party. At that time, the steering committee of the French Communist Party was accurately and sufficiently informed of the situation in Vietnam. Because of lack of information before that time, misunderstanding was caused by some things such as the announcement of the Indochinese Communist Party that *"it dissolved itself"* in November, 1945 the news was clarified. The "confidence" and "mutual agreement"

of two parties were set up. Later, when answering interviewers about the restoration of the relationship between the two parties of leading the National Assembly delegation to France in April, 1946, the delegation leader, Mr. Pham Van Dong, confirmed: *"Yes, it was" There were no other possibilities. We had close contact...We made great efforts to inform the French Communist Party of the situation, the French Communist Party became a big party but it could not understand everything"* (1, P. 71).

Right after that, the L'Humanite', a newspaper of French Communist Party, considered the Preliminary Agreement as the manifestation of "a realistic policy" of the French government. After that there was a number of articles carried in the newspaper demanding the French government to expel reactionaries and imperialist-minded soldiers from the expeditionary army and send to Vietnam democratic-minded ones to fight against the policies of colonial monopoly capitalists. The French Communist Party actively fought against the scheme for separating South Vietnam from Vietnam and raised its voice to expose Thierry d'Argenlieu – High Commissioner of France in the Pacific region and Max Andre' the delegation leader at the conference who was representative of corporations and Indochina Bank during the Fontainebleau conference.

As for us, we put no hope in French Colonialism. Although our government signed the Preliminary Agreement with representative of the French government to set up foundations for an official agreement, the standing committee of the central party issued the Directive entitled: "The current situation and our policy" (March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1946). After analyzing the

cunning schemes of French Imperialism and their lackeys, our Party finally confirmed: *"If the French keep the self-governing policy on Indochina in accordance with the declaration on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1945, we will carry out our fight against them and we will carry out a long-term resistance against them, using guerilla warfare. We will stop fighting if they recognise the independence of Indochina,"* (6, P. 44). Together with making clear the primary principles of the negotiation between Vietnam and France, which are independence and cooperation on the basis of equality, France had to admit our people's rights to independence and self-control, we recognised the right to station temporary of the French army in Vietnam. The Directive emphasized that *"The most important thing is that when negotiating with France, we not only continued preparation, but also were determined that we did not allow the negotiation with them to wear down the fighting spirit of our people"* (6, P. 46). Three days after the agreement had been signed; the standing committee of the central party also issued a Directive entitled: *"Reconcile to advance* (March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1946) in order to make clear the reason why we needed to be a friend of France, criticizing the erroneous tendencies which might occur in officials, party members and people, watching out in case the French Colonists would break their promise, and take advantage of dôtente and actively prepared for the resistance throughout the country.

A few days after the Preliminary Agreement had been signed, the reactionaries in France and Indochina broke their promise, restively trying their utmost to undermine the negotiation, intentionally cutting off every dôtente.

These actions forced our people in the whole country to stand up to fight against the enemies. On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1946, President Ho Chi Minh issued an **Appeal to the whole country to carry out the war of resistance against the French:** *"We want peace and we make concessions. But the more concessions we make, the nearer French Colonialists come to us because they are determined to invade our country again.*

*No! We would rather sacrifice everything than lose the country and be slaves"* (6, P. 86).

At that time, there were many noticeable events in France. In January, 1947, Vincent Auriol, a member of the Socialist Party won the election and became President of France, the cabinet of Paul Ramadier was set up and there were five ministers who were members of the French Communist Party in the new government. The French Communist Party still kept on fighting for a peaceful solution to the *Vietnam issue* and demanded the government of Ramadier to negotiate with the government of Ho Chi Minh. In spite of the fact that the French Communist Party was a big party in France at that time, it was not strong enough to gear the political direction for France.

However, under the pressure of the struggle of the French people and the French Communists and with the fierce counter-attacks of the Vietnamese army and people, the French Colonists had to change their scheme. In March, 1947, Emile Bolaert was appointed to be Commissioner in Indochina. On the surface, his "mission" was for peace but in essence his presence was to finish the war by a military attack to crush our regime and then played the **"Bao Dai card"** in order to establish a puppet government

which was the lackey of them. To cope with a new scheme of the enemy, on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, the standing committee of the central party issued the Directive: *"What did Bo-la say? " And "What do we have to do? " to show clearly: "Every force of our nation is encouraged to fight against the French Colonists scheme - "use the Vietnamese to fight against the Vietnamese" and prepare to fight against the enemy's great attacks in the coming months: "military victory helps political success" (6, P. 144-145). The Directive confidently concluded: "We are not lonely. Only when we unite closely, the whole people carry out the war of resistance for a long time, and we have the right policies, we will certainly win. Then, it is not the enemies such as Bo-La who can pose conditions upon us, but it is the unity and fierce struggle of our nation and of the French people that will force French reactionary colonists to surrender" (6, P. 144-145).*

To implement the Directive of the central party dated October 15, 1947 (*to smash the winter attack of the French enemy*), (6, P.146-161), our army and people in all battlefields nation-wide cooperated closely with the army and people in Viet Bac to fight with fortitude and win a glorious victory, which fostered the confidence of the army and people throughout the whole country to achieve the final victory in the long resistance war of Vietnam.

At that time, in France, the fight of the alliance forces against the political policies of the French Communist Party became more acute. Prime Minister Ramadier decided that five ministers who were communist party members had to resign from the government. In that situation, although the French Communist Party

made a great effort to fight for a peaceful solution, obviously the balance of power did not allow the French Communist Party to create essential changes. However, the French Communist Party made the right decision which was dynamic and flexible: no limitation; that was, the *Vietnam issue* was not limited to the scope of two camps in the world. From 1947 to 1954, the French Communist Party attempted to lay bare to the French people that the war in Indochina increased France's dependence on America and was threatening the independence of France; and at the same time the Party made the French people understand that the fight for peace in Vietnam was closely related to the protection for France's independence from American Imperialism. The newspapers of the French Communist Party such as *L'Humanite'* and *France Nouvelle* carried many articles which demanded French Colonialists to put an end to the war in Vietnam, to negotiate immediately with the government of Ho Chi Minh and to make clear the interests of Vietnam and France. At the Parliament meeting, delegates who were members of the French Communist Party raised their voice to condemn the fighting factions. At the meeting on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the female comrade Jeannette Vermersch angrily condemned the fighting factions: *"You forget that the Vietnamese people are living in their own country. They are not invaders, but you yourselves are... It was not the Vietnamese people who dropped bombs in Marseille, it was you yourselves who dropped bombs in Hai Phong... Do I feel indignant? Yes, it is me who feel indignant. I am indignant when I think of millions of children being hungry and living in poverty, when I think of millions of proletarians who are being exploited by*

you; Yes, I am indignant because most of the members of our Parliament are imperialists..." (1, P. 220-221). French social organizations (such as General Confederation of Labour, Women Union, and Youth Union) carried out various forms of fighting such as collecting signatures to demand for peace in Vietnam in order to hand over them to members of city councils, members of Parliament, ministers, governors...; meetings and demonstrations were held in the whole country; organising meetings under the name "We are for Vietnam"; French mothers demanded the French government to return to them their children when they are alive, not when they are in coffins; they wore mourning for their children; organizing ballot-box to demand peace for Vietnam, etc.

Also at that time, from 1949 to 1953, there were many changes which were not favorable for the imperialists in the world as well as in Vietnam. The Chinese liberation army moved to the south to get close to the northern border of Vietnam. In 1950, the war in Korea broke out and three years later the American Imperialists and their henchmen had to withdraw into the South. In Vietnam, the resistance war against the French developed into a new stage, the border provinces in the north from Cao Bang to Lang Son were all liberated. The American Imperialists took advantage of France's miserable situation in Vietnam to interfere in Indochina. The shadow of America was covering the independence of France. Henri Navarre admitted: "*The most dangerous thing of American aids was its political purpose... American aids have interfered more deeply in our work, and the consequence is that we will lose Indochina even though their aid may help us win the war in this region*" (4).

In that situation, for the sake of internationalism and of the national interests of France, the French Communist Party sped up the struggle to end the invasion war in Vietnam. The demand they raised at that time was stronger; they could not remain at propaganda level, rather they had to carry out more active struggles. In response to the appeal by the French Communist Party, the French General Confederation of Labour launched demonstrations at the ports where there were ships loaded with weapons and equipment to Indochina. From Marseille, Toulon, Le Harve to Dunkerque, Angler..., everywhere there were demonstrations of the workers against loading commodities on ships to Vietnam in spite of the suppression, punishment, and even arrest and imprisonment of reactionary government. The struggles of the port workers as well as other struggles throughout France were always connected with the demand for peace, for the withdrawal of the French expeditionary army from Vietnam, and for negotiation with the government of Ho Chi Minh. Representative of the fierce struggle movements of the French people and workers at that time were Mr. Raymond Dien who lay on the railway to prevent trains from carrying weapons to Vietnam (February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1949) and the campaign to demand releasing Henri Martin, a member of the French Communist Party who used to be present at the battle field of Indochina. When coming back to France, he denounced the crimes of the French invaders in Vietnam. During three years (1950-1953), the communists, the working class, the women union and the youth union of France carried out various struggle activities. They made the case of *Hangrimaxtan* become the fuse resounding

the *Vietnam issue* among the people of France and constituted the strongest force in every place in the countryside and cities of France to struggle for peace in Indochina. The good feeling and conscience of the French people, including many intellectuals who were anti-communists, were awoken in the fight against the dirty war which the French Colonialists were carrying out in Indochina. Finally, facing the fierce struggle movements of the people, the French President had to give order to release Henri Martin. The *L'Humanite'* joyfully confirmed that it was a noble victory of unity and of the activities to protect freedom and peace for Vietnam.

At this time, in the battlefield of Indochina, the French expeditionary army fell into more and more miserable situation. The Vietnamese people and army cooperated closely with the armies of Laos and Cambodia to speed up encounter-attacks in all battlefields, liberated many areas, caused more damage to the French army, and disintegrated the puppet army. France was on the brink of a disaster. France could not carry out the war alone. It was obvious that anyone who was the leader of France at that time would have to admit the fact (1, P. 291-292). On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1953 when Paul Reynaud had just come back from Indochina, he reported bitterly to President Vincent Auriol: "*I think if we continue bleeding in the war in Indochina, we commit a crime against France*" (2).

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1954, the entire winter-spring war (1953-1964), with the peak which was Dien Bien Phu campaign, ended successfully. Only one day after Dien Bien Phu campaign had ended, the *Indochina issue* was mentioned at the Geneva conference. At that time, the warlike

government of Joeph Laniel was overthrown by the parliament of France and the new government of Mende France held power with the approval of communist parliamentarians. Soon after that, French communists tried their best to expand the front against the war in Indochina. Their activities were not only positively responded by French people and religious organizations but also created strength to change the attitudes of the people who were by nature anti-communist such as Albert Sarraut, Edouard Daladier, Edouard Herriot, and even the French Prime Minister Mendes. Many meetings with ten thousands of people to demand for peace in Vietnam were held during the conference. The French Communist Party criticised timely the design to occupy more land in the south of Vietnam: "*to cease fire is the prerequisite for a long-term peace and there cannot be long-term peace without political solutions. If the French government thought that they could cease fire and carry out negotiation together with encouraging the policies of building the bases for America's invasion around Democratic Republic of Vietnam, it was a great mistake*" (1, P.303). The French Communist Party was determined to object to the design of the French Colonialists in the South of Vietnam. The design was that Vietnam was separated and latitude No.17 was considered as a strategy frontier.

The result was that on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1954 the Geneva Agreement on Indochina was signed and it was obvious that the French communists made a great contribution to that success. For the French communists, the victory in Dien Bien Phu and the Paris conference were considered as the shared success of both the French and the Vietnamese people. At the meeting on July

22<sup>nd</sup>, 1954 in Paris, Jacques Duslos explained: *"This victory is not the result of the good want of some people, but it is the result of people's activities which isolated the reactionary government of America in France, and it made capitalists expose differences in their interests in contrast with the interests of the capitalists directly related to America"* (1, P. 310).

For the French communists, peace restored in Vietnam and Indochina in 1954 was the great victory of peace in the world. To understand the stature and significance of this resistance war of the French people under the leadership of the French Communist Party, it is possible to quote the general judgment of a French historian as follows:

*"In Vietnam, although the fighting against the colonists had existed before World War II. there have never been any wars which lasted so long a time from 1944*

*to 1954... It can be concluded that the struggle against the war in Indochina was first initiated by the French communists, then it became the people's first long-lasting resistance against French Colonialism"* (1, P. 394).

With its own active and great activities, the French Communist Party radically implemented a thesis on the coalition between the national liberation movements in colonial countries and the revolutionary party in the mother country. In the spirit of this meaning, a thorough investigation into the activities of the French Communist Party and the French communists who stood side by side with the Vietnamese people in the nine-year resistance war (1946-1954) will contribute to consolidating and strengthening the mutual understanding and fostering the friendly relations between the two parties and the people of the two countries.

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