Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements

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On 17 June 1930, at dawn, a young woman by the name of Nguyen Thi Giang, disguised as a peasant woman, stood on the edge of a field near the town of Yen Bay, northwest of Hanoi. (See map 2 for places mentioned in this chapter.) Standing quietly beside a number of onlookers, she watched as a man by the name of Nguyen Thai Hoc, along with 12 of his fellow “co-conspirators”, was marched into a nearby field in order to be executed by French colonial authorities. Hoc and the others had been arrested and convicted of organising the Yen Bay Mutiny, one of a number of unsuccessful uprisings planned by the Viet Nam Quốc Dan Dang (VNQDD), the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. According to some newspaper accounts, French colonial authorities had kept the exact date of the executions secret. In order not to attract too much attention, the 13 condemned to death had been transported by special train only the night before from Hanoi. Hoang Van Dao, author of a history of the VNQDD, claims that Nguyen Thi Giang learned from a fellow revolutionary that Nguyen Thai Hoc and the 12 others had been taken to Yen Bay. Wishing to make her way there without detection, she boarded a train apparently “helped by comrades who … disguised themselves as coal burners and mechanics”. It is not clear what Nguyen Thi Giang may have been thinking as she watched the first 12 releases of the guillotine blade and as she waited for the final execution, that of Nguyen Thai Hoc. As she stood quietly watching the grisly spectacle of her lover’s execution
Map 2. Vietnam during the French colonial period
by guillotine,^4 no one, not even French colonial authorities present, suspected that the young woman in peasant clothing was Nguyen Thi Giang, herself wanted in conjunction with the organisation of the Yen Bay Mutiny and for her numerous revolutionary activities as a member of the VNQDD. Noting that Nguyen Thai Hoc had been “calm” at the moment of his execution, the chef des services de police et de sûreté au Tonkin (the French police chief and head of the Surete, the secret police, in Tonkin) simply noted that the execution had been witnessed by approximately 60 people, “mostly women and young people”.^5 Nguyen Thi Giang had managed, as she had countless times before, to elude French police officers who had been looking for her for quite some time.^6

Following her fiancé’s decapitation on the orders of the French colonial administration and at the hands of a Vietnamese executioner,^7 Thi Giang left quietly, undetected by authorities. Two days later, in Dong Khe (also sometimes written as Dong Ve),^8 Nguyen Thai Hoc’s native village, a peasant discovered the body of a young woman in a nearby rice field. The woman, dressed in mourning clothes, had apparently died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.^9 Two letters found in the young woman’s pocket allowed officials to identify her as Nguyen Thi Giang. One of Thi Giang’s sisters, Nguyen Thi Tinh, was also called upon to identify the body. In one of her letters, Thi Giang explained her suicide, stating that she could not bear to live following the execution of her husband, and that she wished to “follow him into heaven”.^10 In order to reach her beloved once again, Thi Giang had used the revolver Hoc himself had given her. Nguyen Thi Giang had allegedly asked Nguyen Thai Hoc to allow her to carry the pistol “so that if he should meet a fatal end, she would use it to kill herself”.^11

The tragic deaths of these two Vietnamese patriots, often recounted in highly romanticised terms, point to a number of serious problems in the writing of Vietnamese women’s history. First, with respect to Nguyen Thi Giang, historians — Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike — have focused mainly on her suicide and on her admission that life without Hoc would be intolerable. As such, she has become one more in a pantheon of Vietnamese woman patriots to choose suicide.^12 According to Vietnamese historians, in the first century of the Common Era the Trung sisters chose suicide over capitulation before Chinese forces. Two centuries later, another woman willing to take up arms for the national cause, Ba Trieu, also chose suicide over surrender. She too had led an armed insurrection against
Chinese troops. The Trung sisters and Ba Trieu may not have opted for suicide because they could not conceive of life without their loved ones, but their decisions to take up arms were nonetheless considered to be motivated by a desire to avenge the deaths of their husbands and their fathers at the hands of Chinese invaders. In each of these cases, these women are depicted as devoted daughters or wives. Devotion to nation and devotion to the men in their lives are depicted as synonymous, as equally heroic, the family but a microcosm of the nation. And in spite of their outstanding achievements as patriots, their filial piety is what has made their forays outside the “inner quarters” acceptable and even respectable. For historians, such an interpretation not only shifts the focus away from that of the women’s accomplishments, but it is also anachronistic. The historiography of the Trung sisters and Ba Trieu attributes to them Confucian ideals and qualities that had yet to reach Vietnam at that point.

The Trung sisters and Ba Trieu are an essential element of Vietnamese historiography and Vietnamese national identity. The willingness of Vietnamese women to take up arms when the nation was in danger highlights Vietnam’s numerous independence struggles against enemies who were often much more militarily powerful, struggles that therefore required the use of all available resources, including women.13 Within the specific context of the period of French colonial rule in Vietnam (1858–1954), the focus of historians studying Vietnamese women has been on the development of a women’s movement, and almost exclusively on those women who participated in anti-colonial resistance within the confines of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). One striking example of this historiographical phenomenon is the first serious study on Vietnamese women, Mai Thi Thu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet's *Women of Vietnam*.14 In their study the authors depict the heroic acts of Vietnamese women in the 19th century and then skip to the creation of the ICP in 1930, thereby ignoring the hundreds of women who participated in anti-colonial movements and activities between 1900 and 1930. Furthermore, the story also links the development of women’s emancipation movements with that of the creation of the ICP even though the VNQDD itself had called for the emancipation of women and had created a women’s section as well as women’s groups and cells.

Nguyen Thi Giang’s place in Vietnamese history has therefore been dictated largely by the overwhelming emphasis placed on the ICP. Nguyen Thi Giang, as a member of the VNQDD, engaged in
revolutionary activities similar to those of her counterparts in the ICP, and yet she has mostly been ignored (as has the VNQDD). While revolutionary women who belonged to the ICP, such as Nguyen Thi Minh Khai and Nguyen Thi Dinh, have been the subject of numerous memoirs, biographies and scholarly studies, Nguyen Thi Giang’s attempts to free Vietnam of French rule have hardly been examined. Since victors often command historical analysis, those movements or parties, such as the VNQDD, not present at the moment of success tend to be relegated to the background, present but very much out of focus. Women like Nguyen Thi Giang, whose political activities preceeded the founding of the ICP, are absent from the historical narrative. It seems that “within this framework, Vietnamese women’s political consciousness appears virtually non-existent before the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930”. In addition, much of what is written about her follows a Marxist line and yet focuses primarily on a “love story” rather than on her participation in anti-colonial activities. Ironically, the Marxist interpretation and focus depicts Nguyen Thi Giang as an idealised Confucian widow rather than the fierce nationalist she happened to be.

What has been lost in this approach to the study of Nguyen Thi Giang specifically is the fact that her actions were not merely those of a lovelorn woman. She was, by all accounts, an important and influential member of the VNQDD. Memoirs and historical accounts have grossly ignored her contributions to this nationalist movement in two significant ways. First, Nguyen Thi Giang’s adherence to the VNQDD is attributed to the fact that she was the fiancée of one of its founders, Nguyen Thai Hoc. Second, the actual work she did for the VNQDD is either excluded from historical analyses or is barely mentioned, while her suicide is exalted. What follows on these pages, then, is an attempt to elucidate the life of Nguyen Thi Giang the patriot, her work as one of the most important members of the VNQDD. An analysis of the sources reveals that Nguyen Thi Giang’s contribution to the VNQDD included her work as a propagandist, a liaison officer, a recruiter, an organiser and an intelligence officer. Before delving into her life, however, it is necessary to comment on the sources used in this study.

First, secondary sources pertaining specifically to Nguyen Thi Giang are scarce. There are no monographs devoted entirely to her life, her political ideas, or her specific role and activities within the VNQDD. So far, the only major study of the VNQDD is Hoang
Van Dao’s *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang: A Contemporary History of a National Struggle, 1927–1954*. While Hoang Van Dao does acknowledge Nguyen Thi Giang’s prominence within the VNQDD, and while his monograph does offer glimpses into her life as a party member, the focus is clearly not on her. Still, Nguyen Thi Giang occupies more space in Hoang Van Dao’s study than she does in other publications. She does figure in a chapter titled “Nguyen Thi Giang” in a larger study of anti-colonialism in Vietnam: Lang Nhan’s *Nhung tran danh Phap: Tu Ham Nhi den Nguyen Thai Hoc, 1885–1931*. Here Nguyen Thi Giang’s work is recognised briefly, in general terms. The events surrounding Hoc’s execution are mentioned as well, but most of the rest of the chapter focuses on Thi Giang’s suicide and on her parting letters.

As for archival documents, taken individually, the sources available (French colonial administration memos and correspondence, interrogations, Vietnamese revolutionary memoirs) are problematic. French colonial sources carry their own biases. While French Sûreté officers’ information pertaining to Vietnamese patriots’ activities tended to be fairly accurate, the officers nonetheless often made much of Vietnamese women’s relationships with male revolutionaries, assuming that these women joined the resistance based only on a submissive sense of filial piety. A clear example of this can be found in a 1929 police report written up following an assassination that had been committed by members of the VNQDD, it was suspected, at the Hanoi Botanical Gardens. While enumerating a list of possible VNQDD suspects, including some women, the authors of the police report simply described the women in reference to their respective male companions: “Nguyen Thai Hoc’s mistress is Nguyen Thi Gian (sic); Pho Duc Chinh has Nguyen Thi Tham for a mistress.” As this author has stated elsewhere, “it seldom occurred to these authorities that it was possible to be both filial and politically conscious.” As such, the portrait they paint of Nguyen Thi Giang is strictly that of a young revolutionary woman whose fiancé was a founder of the VNQDD. The crucial role played by Nguyen Thi Giang within the VNQDD sometimes emerges indirectly when we examine the interrogations carried out by the Sûreté of arrested VNQDD members. It is imperative, however, that the motives of the “confessions” elicited by these interrogations be taken into account. It is quite possible that those interrogated and who provided information about Nguyen Thi Giang’s
activities may have implicated her and others in order to save themselves. It is also worth keeping in mind that the “confessions” of these VNQDD members may have been obtained through coercive or violent means. It is necessary, therefore, that the information gleaned from these interrogations or confessions be corroborated by other sources.

As for memos and correspondence written by French colonial administrators, they tend to draw, with broad strokes, what they considered to be threats to the French presence in Vietnam. These threats included any overt demonstrations of nationalist sentiment or any expression in favour of Vietnamese independence. The so-called enemies of the French presence in Vietnam covered a wide political spectrum, from collaborating Vietnamese who sought to improve the economic and educational conditions of their countrymen through constitutional means, to groups, such as the VNQDD, who called for armed rebellion against French colonial rule and who also advocated social and political revolution such as the elimination of the Vietnamese monarchy and the establishment of a Vietnamese republic. In most instances, French colonial officials were quick to dismiss these Vietnamese nationalists as failures, as intellectually and morally deficient.

Vietnamese revolutionary memoirs of course tend to glorify the actions of revolutionaries. For the most part, revolutionary memoirs (hoi ky cach manh) published by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after 1945, and by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after 1975, have focused almost exclusively on those revolutionaries who were members of the ICP. There are but a few that offer a glimpse into the lives and actions of VNQDD members. In these memoirs, the role of Nguyen Thi Giang is depicted in glowing terms, but she is still portrayed mostly as the fiancée of Nguyen Thai Hoc. There is also in these memoirs a tendency to focus on the star-crossed lovers’ fate rather than on Nguyen Thi Giang’s own revolutionary fervour and political ideology. Most of these memoirs highlight only the events surrounding the patriots’ lives or those that reflect what may be considered a “revolutionary” outlook or past. As such, much information is excluded from the narratives, and the portraits that emerge are rather unidimensional. While these memoirs do provide interesting details surrounding events, they are nonetheless often mere chronological accounts of events with little analysis. Equally problematic is the paucity of citations and notes in these biographical accounts or
memoirs. In addition, they often provide contradictory versions of events or different details.\textsuperscript{21}

Newspaper accounts are easier to analyse since there was then no attempt to provide an unbiased view of the news. The images of revolutionaries such as Nguyen Thai Hoc and Nguyen Thi Giang that emerge from newspapers depend on the political slant of the papers themselves. While French colonial newspapers such as \emph{L'avenir du Tonkin} referred to the likes of Thi Giang and Hoc as terrorists, newspapers such as \emph{l'Humanité}, published in France, depicted them as martyrs. There is, of course, a broad spectrum between those two polar views. While on their own these sources can be problematic, taken together they allow us to better understand the role played by Nguyen Thi Giang within the VNQDD. While the purpose of this essay is to focus on the importance of Nguyen Thi Giang's role within the VNQDD, it is necessary to first provide a measure of historical context concerning that political movement. Therefore, we will briefly examine the role of Nguyen Thai Hoc in the formation of the VNQDD as well as the political aims and the organisation of the party itself. This will allow for a better understanding of Nguyen Thi Giang as a member of the VNQDD.

\section*{Historical Background}

The establishment of French colonial rule in Vietnam began with a Franco-Spanish attack on the port of Da Nang in 1858. The premise for this attack was the protection of Catholic missionaries who had been subjected to the severe repression and persecutions called for in a number of Nguyen imperial edicts in the 1820s. By 1862 the ruling Nguyen dynasty, recognising its military inferiority, signed a treaty (the Treaty of Saigon) that ceded to France Saigon and three provinces of southern Vietnam. The Nguyen subsequently signed other treaties that ceded further provinces to France, and by 1884 French military troops had made their way to northern Vietnam. That year, a treaty was signed that essentially placed all of Vietnam under French control. French administrators in Vietnam then divided the country into three separate administrative regions: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the centre, and Cochininchina in the south. While Cochininchina was transformed into a colony under direct French administration, Tonkin and Annam were administered as protectorates. In Annam and Tonkin the Vietnamese monarchy and the bureaucracy were
Vietnamese resistance to French rule and domination was immediate. The Treaty of Saigon marked the beginning of what came to be known as the Scholars’ Resistance Movement. Some scholars who had been appointed to various levels of the imperial bureaucracy chose to resist colonial rule by refusing to continue to serve the Nguyen court and by rejecting any collaboration with France. A number of these scholars retreated to their native villages, where they often worked as schoolteachers. Others, such as Phan Dinh Phung, chose the path of armed resistance, mounting attacks against French troops and against Catholic villages.

**Vietnamese Nationalist Movement**

- **1885** Can Vuong Movement (Loyalty to the Emperor Movement) started by scholars in support of Prince Ham Nghi against French takeover
- **1905** Phan Boi Chau starts the Dong Du Movement (To the East Movement)
- **1907** Phan Chu Trinh opens the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc (Tonkin Free School) in Hanoi, promoting *quoc ngu*, the Vietnamese Romanised script, and developing a Western, modern curriculum
- **1917** Creation of the Constitutionalist Party by a group of educated Vietnamese based in Saigon. It called for reforms in education and in economic policies
- **1925** Founding of Thanh Nien (Revolutionary Youth League) by Ho Chi Minh, a party inspired by Marxist-Leninist principles
- **1927** Founding of the Viet Nam Quốc Dan Dang (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) by Nguyen Thai Hoc and others
- **1930** Yen Bay Mutiny, organised by VNQDD
- **1931** Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party by Ho Chi Minh
- **1941** Creation by Ho Chi Minh of the Viet Minh, an alliance of Vietnamese nationalist groups, for the purpose of overthrowing French rule in Vietnam
- **1945** The August Revolution leads to the Viet Minh seizure of power following the Japanese surrender. Declaration of independence of Vietnam

maintained, but they answered to the French colonial administration established in Hanoi.
In 1905, inspired by the Japanese victory over Russia, a Vietnamese patriot by the name of Phan Boi Chau spearheaded the Dong Du (To the East) Movement. Chau’s nationalism found expression in what he believed to be Vietnam’s three affinities with Japan: race, language and culture. Like Phan Dinh Phung, Chau favoured armed resistance. His principal goal was to send young Vietnamese men to Japanese military schools. Another Vietnamese nationalist and a contemporary of Phan Boi Chau’s was Phan Chu Trinh, who believed that Vietnam’s autonomy would be possible only after educational, political and social reforms. In 1907 Trinh opened, along with co-founders such as Luong Van Can, the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc (Tonkin Free School), providing a Western-style modern education to both Vietnamese boys and girls. While colonial authorities shut down the school in 1908 because of its alleged “nationalist” curriculum and activities, a new generation of Vietnamese nationalists emerged, the products of the French colonial education system.

The emergence of these new nationalist currents coincided with the development of the mass press in Vietnam in the 1920s. Through various newspapers, young Western-educated Vietnamese expressed their political views.  

22 Their political leanings covered a broad spectrum of the political scale. Some advocated economic nationalism based on the development of Vietnamese commerce, industry and handicrafts.  

23 Such demands had also been made by more moderate nationalists such as Bui Quang Chieu after the creation of the Constitutional Party in 1917 in Cochinchina, the southernmost administrative region of French-controlled Vietnam.  

While some advocated Vietnamese autonomy through constitutional means and through collaboration with France, others, influenced by revolutions in China and in the Soviet Union, were more radical in nature, calling not only for Vietnam’s independence but also for political and social revolution. Such was the case of Thanh Nien, the Revolutionary Youth League, a political movement founded by Ho Chi Minh while in exile in Canton. Thanh Nien was inspired by the Marxist-Leninist approach adopted by Ho Chi Minh while he was a student in Moscow in the early 1920s. Thanh Nien would later become the Indochinese Communist Party. The Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, founded in Vietnam in 1927, was more vague about its ideological leanings. Its members nonetheless viewed themselves as revolutionaries.
The Viet Nam Quốc Đang

The VNQDD was founded by a group of Western-educated Vietnamese including Nguyen Thai Hoc, who was born in 1903 and trained as a schoolteacher. Unable to persuade the French colonial authorities of the need for reforms, including freedom of the press, he decided to organise a political movement. The VNQDD was modelled on the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang). It originated in 1925 with the establishment of a bookshop in Hanoi (Nam Dong Thu Xa), intended to provide a “center for study and propaganda”. According to French colonial authorities, the bookshop, which was housed in the home of a schoolteacher named Pham Tuan Tai, was intended also to engage in publication. Those affiliated with the study centre, including Nguyen Thai Hoc, had been greatly influenced by Sun Yat Sen and the 1911 Revolution in China. The group focused primarily on nationalism and carried out propaganda and recruitment campaigns — mostly in student circles in the urban areas but also, to some extent, among factory workers and rural peasants. From the study centre emerged the VNQDD in 1927. By then the Guomindang “was sweeping to political power in China”. According to the historian Alexander B. Woodside, young Vietnamese nationalists such as Nguyen Thai Hoc “fervently hoped” the Guomindang would “support a Pan-Asian movement of confrontation with Western colonialism”. When such a movement failed to materialise, Nguyen Thai Hoc created a Vietnamese version of the Guomindang. French colonial officials, while seriously concerned about the creation of yet another anti-colonial organisation, nonetheless derisively referred to the VNQDD as but a “servile” copy of the Chinese model.

Most VNQDD members were young, French-educated Vietnamese: students, teachers and journalists. However, the party was also able to recruit members from among Vietnamese soldiers and traders. Colonial administrators attempted to explain the growth of the VNQDD by suggesting that it had been the outgrowth of political ferment in 1926 in Vietnamese schools. For a period of one year, Vietnamese students had engaged in school strikes, mostly to protest the fact that they could not openly mourn the death of the patriot Phan Chu Trinh.

While the party’s ideological orientation was neither sophisticated nor complex, its one driving force was the call for Vietnamese independence through armed struggle if necessary. The party also called
Nguyen Thi Giang and the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang

for the establishment of a Vietnamese republic. The VNQDD was not a Communist movement per se, but its structure was nonetheless similar to that of Communist organisations. Such had also been the case with its Chinese counterpart, the Guomindang, which in Canton benefited from the advice afforded by the presence of political advisers from the Soviet Union.\(^\text{33}\) In spite of such influences, however, the VNQDD, according to Vu Van Thai, was characterised by “vagueness in its social programs” and by the fact that it was “without a solid doctrinal basis.”\(^\text{34}\) The VNQDD was organised into local branches of approximately 19 members. Beneath the local branches were small cells of three members.\(^\text{35}\) The branches also had subcommittees: propaganda, organisation, finance, intelligence.\(^\text{36}\) Part of the party’s agenda was the emancipation of women. There were women’s branches in addition to the general branches. The purpose of these was to group women in order to educate them about issues such as equality and emancipation. Though it is impossible to quantify the level of women’s participation in the VNQDD, it is clear from archival documents that not only were women present in the women’s branches but also, as was the case with Nguyen Thi Giang and Nguyen Thi Bac, some women served the party beyond the women’s branches and held positions of leadership within the party.

All members were asked to take an oath of loyalty and willingness to sacrifice “life and property for the party.”\(^\text{37}\) Betrayal of the party or of its members could result in severe retribution, including death. Between 1928 and 1929 the party expanded rapidly. Hoc and his fellow revolutionaries had been successful in recruiting students, small business owners and civil servants.\(^\text{38}\) By 1929 the party boasted 1,500 members and at least 120 cells.\(^\text{39}\) By 1930 the party, it is estimated, counted 70,000 members, attesting to the talent and to the success of its recruiters and propagandists.\(^\text{40}\)

The VNQDD planned for its revolution to take place in four phases. The first phase was organisational in nature. This included recruitment and the establishment of branches and cells. It was during this first phase that members were to be educated in revolutionary theories and practices. The second phase was to consist of various types of covert activities, such as bombings and targeted assassinations, which would eventually lead to a major insurrection. These violent actions were to serve two purposes. In the first place, the targets were those structures, institutions and people considered to be symbolic of French colonial rule in Vietnam. It was also hoped that
such attacks would destabilise French colonial rule. The third phase was that of the major insurrection. The hope was that the agitation fomented in the second phase would mobilise large masses of Vietnamese into a major armed offensive. The fourth and final phase would be that of “reconstruction”, when the VNQDD would seize power and establish an independent Vietnamese state.

However, informants had made their way into some branches of the VNQDD. In fact, official colonial administration documents reveal that there had been informants within the party since its creation in 1927. Because of this, the French Sûreté was aware of nearly all party meetings, of who attended the meetings, and of the decisions taken at these meetings. This explains why, shortly after the party was founded, Nguyen Thai Hoc was already being followed closely by the French Sûreté in Vietnam. The VNQDD came under even greater scrutiny after February 1929, when René Bazin, a French recruiter (for work on plantations), was assassinated. Believing that the VNQDD was responsible for Bazin’s death, French colonial authorities quickly rounded up and arrested VNQDD members. A professed admirer of Sun Yat Sen, Hoc drew a parallel between this situation and that of the Guomindang in 1911, in particular the “heroic deaths of the 72 Youth Heroes in an abortive revolt in Canton on the eve of the 1911 Chinese revolution”. Hoc decided that the time was ripe to prepare for the general insurrection. Aware of the presence of infiltrators and to ensure its survival, the party therefore organised, in 1929, the assassination of members it deemed to have betrayed the party cause. In spite of such measures, the safety of the party was further undermined by “a series of accidents involving explosions in homes of VNQDD members manufacturing explosives”. These incidents, of course, further alerted the French Sûreté in Vietnam, and Nguyen Thai Hoc believed that if the party was to survive the revolution had to begin as soon as possible. Such was the context within which a number of successive attacks, including one in Yen Bay, were planned.

The Yen Bay Mutiny, also referred to as the Yen Bay Uprising, took place in February 1930. After months of planning, on 10 February 1930 armed VNQDD rebels attacked the French military garrison at Yen Bay. Despite the ultimate failure of the uprising, what proved to be most disturbing to French colonial authorities was the fact that the VNQDD had been successful in recruiting Vietnamese soldiers and that the attack on Yen Bay was to be followed by a series of other attacks on French garrisons. Similar attacks were carried out five days
later in Phu Duc, Vinh Bao and a number of other towns, with the participation of Vietnamese soldiers. During the attacks, a number of French officers were killed and the rebels were able to confiscate weapons. A Vietnamese district administrator, Hoang Gia Mo, was reported to have been “captured, tried and sentenced by the people and beaten to death”. The attacks were followed by demonstrations, protests and general unrest.

All of the attacks carried out by the VNQDD were quickly repulsed by local militia led by French officers. Repression against the VNQDD was swift and efficient. French colonial authorities also used bombing strikes in the surrounding countryside to further halt the rebellion. Eleven days after the uprising, one newspaper reported that there had been more than 300 arrests. By 20 February Nguyen Thai Hoc was already captured in Hai Duong province, east of Hanoi, after a 40-day manhunt. One month later, the sentence of execution came down for Hoc and 12 of his comrades.

Nguyen Thi Giang

Nguyen Thi Giang was born in 1906 in the village of Bac Giang, near Phu Lang Thuong in northern Vietnam. Thi Giang was one of three sisters, and all of them eventually engaged in nationalist movements. Very little is known about the socio-economic circumstances of the family. Given that both Thi Giang and her older sister Thi Bac were literate, it is safe to assume that they had spent time in the Franco-Vietnamese educational system and that their family could afford to send them to school. Thi Giang first met Nguyen Thai Hoc in 1929, shortly before the VNQDD became widely known to French colonial authorities and before many of its members were arrested or driven underground. She was only 22 years old when Hoc convinced her and Thi Bac to join the VNQDD. The sisters’ initial functions within the party involved “relations and propaganda.” As Nguyen Thi Giang was soon able to demonstrate her commitment and her abilities to the party, her responsibilities within it became more significant. It became clear that Nguyen Thai Hoc trusted her implicitly with sensitive information.

If historiography has ignored the work of Nguyen Thi Giang as a member of the VNQDD, French colonial authorities were very much aware of the depth of her involvement and her influence within that movement. In his report on anti-colonial movements, Sûreté chief
Louis Marty stated that the VNQDD had a women’s section and that the women involved in it played a “not-negligible” role. With respect to Nguyen Thi Giang specifically, Marty described her as one whose “revolutionary activity surpassed that of Nguyen Thai Hoc”. One of Thi Giang’s key roles was that of a propagandist. The VNQDD’s propaganda service was multifaceted. One of its aims was the writing, publication and dissemination of books, periodicals and pamphlets explaining the party’s aims and principles. In addition, a “military” section of the propaganda service was created in order to recruit into the VNQDD Vietnamese soldiers in the colonial army.

As a propagandist, Nguyen Thi Giang travelled extensively throughout northern Vietnam in order to inform Vietnamese of the VNQDD’s mission and activities. Thi Giang would explain the VNQDD’s political agenda and strategies either to individuals sympathetic to the cause of Vietnamese independence, or to groups, even entire villages. The propagation of the party’s ideas also entailed the clandestine publication of numerous political tracts and pamphlets, many of which had been written by Nguyen Thi Giang herself. The role of propagandist carried with it significant dangers, for in colonial Vietnam there was neither freedom of expression nor freedom of assembly. Any small group of Vietnamese gathered to engage in political discussion was in danger of arrest and imprisonment. Speakers at such gatherings were considered to be leaders of an anti-French movement and faced serious penalties, such as lengthy prison terms and hard labour. If they were convicted of having incited any form of violent political action, they could be executed. The travels of Nguyen Thi Giang were made all the more difficult by the fact that French colonial authorities had begun the practice of requiring the acquisition of identification papers for Vietnamese travelling throughout French Indochina. Nguyen Thi Giang, once she became known as a member of the VNQDD, would have to resort to the use of disguises as well as counterfeit identity papers. She was indeed engaging in risky business. Between 1929 and 1930, French colonial authorities, largely through the use of informants, were aware of Nguyen Thi Giang’s travels and of her work as a propagator of the VNQDD’s political ideas. After having found some explosives in the village of Noi Vien (in Bac Ninh province), Sûreté officials reported to the résident supérieur du Tonkin that Nguyen Thi Giang was a frequent visitor to the village, where she participated in “revolutionary conferences.” In the course of these propaganda campaigns, Thi Giang was often accompanied by her sister
Nguyen Thi Bac. As indicated in one of its reports, The French Sûreté acknowledged the VNQDD’s success when it came to propaganda:

The propaganda was well received by young civil servants, particularly teachers and students. It also found great favour in military circles. Many indigenous sub-officers in the artillery, infantry, financial administration and aviation had joined the party.60

As the scholar Oscar Chapuis has noted, “a significant number of those Indochinese guards had rallied VNQDD thanks to the propaganda network led by two women, Cô Giang (Nguyen Thi Giang), and Cô Bac (Nguyen Thi Bac)”61

While travelling throughout Tonkin, Nguyen Thi Giang was also able to exercise other functions. As one of the party’s liaison officers,
she ensured effective communication between cells, branches and other VNQDD members. Thi Giang’s liaison work allowed the VNQDD to inform its spread-out members about upcoming actions, about potential dangers (such as the presence of informants within cells or branches), and about the arrests and imprisonment of some of their fellow members. In addition, rather than using the postal system (where mail could easily be confiscated by colonial authorities), liaison officers carried with them written instructions and correspondence between members of the VNQDD. In and of themselves, each of these documents was highly incriminating. According to Hoang Van Dao’s history of the VNQDD, Nguyen Thi Giang was also able to successfully conduct “any work the party gave her”, thus enhancing her standing within its ranks: “When Nguyen Thai Hoc disguised himself and lay low in the provinces of Hoa Binh, Ninh Binh, and Phu Tho [see map 3], where the mountains provided extra difficulties and dangers, she always brought him news and information and conveyed his instructions to the party local chapters.”

Nguyen Thi Giang’s work as a liaison officer therefore allowed the VNQDD to continue to plan and to carry out its objectives even though many of its members, especially its leadership, were forced underground because they were already in the French Sûreté’s cross hairs. Without capable liaison officers, the VNQDD could not have carried out a significant number of its planned activities. Such was the assessment of Sûreté officials who stated in a 1934 report that Nguyen Thi Giang had served as a liaison officer between her lover, the imprisoned Nguyen Thai Hoc, and the new leaders of the party. Following the arrest of Nguyen Thai Hoc in February 1930, Le Huu Canh had taken over the leadership of the VNQDD. Thanks to Nguyen Thi Giang, Canh was able to effectively communicate with Hoc while the latter was held in Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi. By this time, Thi Giang had become the VNQDD’s principal adviser. French Sûreté chief Louis Marty stated in one of his reports that Nguyen Thi Giang had been an “indefatigable” liaison officer.

The significance of Nguyen Thi Giang’s efforts to continue the VNQDD’s activities and to establish communications between Le Huu Canh and Nguyen Thai Hoc needs to be highlighted here, for the efforts reveal much about Thi Giang’s devotion to the cause of Vietnamese national independence. Prior to the Yen Bay Uprising, in late 1929, a measure of dissension had developed within VNQDD ranks. Some members had objected to Nguyen Thai Hoc’s position that immediate armed insurrection should take place. The dissidents believed
that the time was not ripe for such actions, that they could be dangerous to the party and to the cause. This small faction was led by Le Huu Canh. One of Canh's followers, Nguyen Doan Lam, had even broken his oath to the VNQDD by refusing, on a number of occasions, to execute orders given to him by Nguyen Thai Hoc. Hoc was so angry with Canh that he called him a traitor and ordered his assassination. The assassination attempt failed, but the incident nonetheless created a rift within the party between those who supported Nguyen Thai Hoc and those who agreed with Canh. Once Hoc was arrested following the Yen Bay Uprising and Le Huu Canh had taken over the leadership of the VNQDD, Nguyen Thi Giang opted to work with Hoc's rival in order to ensure the survival of the VNQDD. By becoming the liaison between Hoc and Canh, Nguyen Thi Giang was able to keep intact her loyalty to both Hoc and the VNQDD. She was also able not only to inform Hoc about the VNQDD's actions, but also to keep him fully involved as a party leader and member, his position therein having been inevitably compromised by his imprisonment. Furthermore, she contributed greatly to the party's ability to continue its activities while under the threat of severe repression from French colonial authorities. By ensuring that communications took place between Hoc and Canh, Thi Giang also contributed to mending the rift between the party's factions. These actions demonstrate that Nguyen Thi Giang was not merely a “follower” of Nguyen Thai Hoc, but also a highly capable strategist.

Liaison work also allowed the VNQDD to plan concerted actions against specific targets. Since Nguyen Thi Giang was a liaison officer, her safety hinged upon her ability to elude informants, Sûreté officers and the police. According to an unsigned short biography of Nguyen Thi Giang, the work of liaison officer was an “exhausting assignment” for her. Like many liaison officers of illegal political parties or movements, Nguyen Thi Giang conducted much of her work in disguise. Up until her death in June 1930, she had been able to escape security agents. At one point, while she was meeting with another VNQDD leader, Doan Tran Nghiep, the police broke into the house and Nghiep was immediately arrested. Nguyen Thi Giang somehow managed to escape amid the confusion. This was no small feat given that her work within the VNQDD was well-known to the Sûreté and given that “her description was known to all the colonialist agents”. Thi Giang was easily identifiable since she had a specific physical characteristic: she was severely cross-eyed. Thi Giang's ability to outwit and to elude
the Sûreté proved crucial to the VNQDD as she often aided other VNQDD members in their attempts to hide from French colonial authorities. During the manhunt that followed the Yen Bay Uprising, for example, Nguyen Thi Giang helped VNQDD member Nguyen Van Hien by finding and taking him to the home of a fellow VNQDD member, Thi Truyen, where he was to remain in hiding until it was safe for him to travel. Thi Giang later accompanied Hien when she took him to an isolated home in Haiphong from which he was able to escape from Vietnam to China.71 Such aid, provided to wanted members, proved crucial to the survival of the VNQDD because after the severe repression that had followed the Yen Bay Uprising and after the execution of Nguyen Thai Hoc and the suicide of Nguyen Thi Giang, the VNQDD was able to regroup by moving its operational bases to southern China.

Nguyen Thi Giang’s work within the VNQDD also included the planning and organisation of covert actions and plots against both French political figures and institutions, and against Vietnamese considered to be traitors to the VNQDD. In December of 1929, for example, the Sûreté found, in a ditch in the village of Noi Vien in Bac Ninh province, at least 150 explosive devices hidden in large urns. The Sûreté arrested six men suspected of having fabricated the explosive devices. One of the accused, a man by the name of Dang Xuan Lien, claimed that the bombs had been crafted at the home of a schoolteacher named Thang under the instructions and the orders of Nguyen Thi Giang.72

During the Yen Bay Uprising itself, Nguyen Thi Giang had been more than a mere bystander or companion to her fiancé. Nguyen Thai Hoc had called upon her and her sister Nguyen Thi Bac, and a third woman by the name of Do Thi Tam, to form the Yen Bay troop unit.73 Present throughout the planning stages, it was Nguyen Thi Giang who had informed Nguyen Thai Hoc that the ICP, not wanting to be upstaged by the VNQDD, was also planning political and military actions in the area.74 The ICP had also distributed a number of flyers announcing the VNQDD’s imminent attack upon the Yen Bay garrison.75 On the day of the uprising, while Nguyen Thai Bac and others, disguised as Vietnamese peasant women selling produce, transported caches of weapons by train from Phu To to Yen Bay, Nguyen Thi Giang was already in Yen Bay, steering troop units to safety in the nearby Rung Son mountains.76 From there she was in constant, direct communication with the commanders of the troop units.77 In spite of
its ultimate failure, the Yen Bay Mutiny had been able to get off the ground because of the efforts of Nguyen Thi Giang.

Following the Yen Bay Uprising in 1930, it became clear that members of the VNQDD were in grave danger. French colonial authorities immediately cracked down on the movement, searching out and arresting suspected members of the party. Not only were Nguyen Thai Hoc and other leaders arrested, but so too was Nguyen Thi Bac, Thi Giang’s sister. Thi Bac was taken to Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi prior to the trial in which she was convicted of having endangered the security of French Indochina. Thi Bac was sentenced to 20 years in prison. She was then deported to Con Dao Prison (Poulo Condore), where she remained until 1936, when the metropolitan French Popular Front government freed a number of colonial political prisoners. Upon her release, Thi Bac would continue to work for Vietnamese independence as she reportedly allowed Vietnamese revolutionaries to gather at her home in Bac Ninh (just north of Hanoi).

Immediately after the Yen Bay Uprising, the colonial administration asked the French Sûreté in Vietnam to conduct an inquiry into the causes and sequence of the events. The minutes of the inquiry’s sessions reveal that Nguyen Thi Giang was a key player in the Yen Bay Uprising. The interrogation of a suspected VNQDD member, Le Van Canh, centred around a plot to assassinate Governor General of Indochina Pierre Pasquier. Canh testified that he had written a document, dictated by Nguyen Thi Giang, in which the assassinations of Pasquier as well as numerous others (high-level French administrators, Vietnamese mandarins, and Vietnamese traitors to the VNQDD) were mandated. The document had been written in invisible ink on the orders of Nguyen Thi Giang and stated that it was time to remove the capitalist yoke that was oppressing Vietnam and that the assassination of Pierre Pasquier would serve as a lesson. Le Van Canh explained further that Nguyen Thi Giang’s instructions included comments about positive and negative policies. The positive policies called for the recruitment of as many party members as possible, while negative policies called for the assassination of as many enemies of the party as possible.

Pasquier’s “death sentence”, as dictated by Thi Giang, echoes the party’s ideology and purpose: “The country lost, the family dispersed, the race decimated for almost one century, our Annamite people are ruthlessly under the boot of the French imperialists and the capitalists, and are painfully reduced to the condition of beasts of burden.”
The words Thi Giang used to justify Pasquier’s execution were very similar to those she wrote in one of her suicide letters. In the letter, addressed to Nguyen Thai Hoc’s parents, Nguyen Thi Giang alluded to the pain of the loss of national sovereignty:

Dear Father and Mother, I die because of my circumstances. I cannot convey the harm done to my family and I cannot avenge the insult to my country. I offered my chaste heart in Hung Vung temple. Now, I return to our father’s native land and use this pistol to end my life. Please be generous and accept your ungrateful daughter-in-law’s respectful prostration. Respectfully yours, Nguyen Thi Giang.

In her letter Nguyen Thi Giang also expressed her regret at not being able to die under the tricolour flag of her country, and at leaving “in danger” her fellow revolutionaries.

It is also likely that in addition to high-level French colonial administrators, Nguyen Thi Giang was responsible for the assassination of VNQDD members suspected of having betrayed the party. According to French colonial intelligence reports, Thi Giang in all likelihood ordered the assassination of Nguyen Van Ngoc, a suspected Sûreté informant. Ngoc, who had been arrested with other VNQDD members, was found strangled in prison in 1930. A few days later, according to Sûreté officials, Thi Giang ordered the assassination of another VNQDD “traitor”: Pham Thanh Duong. Duong had apparently provided information to the Sûreté to lead them to the party’s bomb reserves. According to the Sûreté, Nguyen Thi Giang was also directly involved in the assassination of a man by the name of Nguyen Binh. On 30 May 1930, two VNQDD members attacked and killed Binh, an administrator responsible for “payments” who was carrying 10,000 piastres. Binh was killed in broad daylight on a Hanoi street.

On the night of Binh’s assassination, a meeting took place in which Nguyen Xuan Huan, one of the co-conspirators in the assassination plot, identified a woman named Thi Lê as also being present at the meeting. When arrested, Huan was shown a police photograph of Nguyen Thi Giang, whom he identified as Thi Lê. The police then became aware that Thi Lê was one of Nguyen Thi Giang’s numerous aliases. The purpose of the meeting had been to determine what to do with the funds stolen from Nguyen Binh. According to the Sûreté, 5,000 piastres had been sent to the Yunnan section of the VNQDD and the rest of the money had been sent to businesses in Hanoi and
Haiphong whose purposes and profits were intended to finance the VNQDD’s activities.93

After the mutiny and after the arrests of Nguyen Thai Hoc and other VNQDD members, Nguyen Thi Giang, who had escaped but who was being sought by the Sûreté, had proposed a plan to attack Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi in order to free Hoc and the others. Unable to accomplish this by the time of Hoc’s execution, Nguyen Thi Giang made her way to the execution grounds in Yen Bay — but not merely to be a silent witness to her fiancé’s execution. She had developed a plan to bomb the execution grounds and to free Hoc and his comrades. Fearing the possibility of such actions, French colonial authorities had brought in an additional 400 soldiers to provide security and to monitor the area. Thi Giang was therefore unable to follow through with her plans.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate that Nguyen Thi Giang’s participation and work in the VNQDD was considerable. Thi Giang’s work as a propagandist, a liaison officer and an organiser allowed the VNQDD to develop a political programme, to recruit significant numbers of members and to mount several “military” actions against colonial rule. The point here is not to glorify the violent actions of Nguyen Thi Giang and the VNQDD or to ponder upon the necessity of an anti-colonial armed insurrection. As noted above, French colonial officials recognised Nguyen Thi Giang’s prominent role within the VNQDD, even stating that she may have been more revolutionary or more politically active than Nguyen Thai Hoc. Ironically, in spite of such recognition, Sûreté reports focus almost exclusively on Nguyen Thai Hoc and his male compatriots within the VNQDD, making clear a gender bias. Given her prominence and her level of activity within the VNQDD, Nguyen Thi Giang should be given, at the very least, equal consideration to that of Nguyen Thai Hoc. Nguyen Thi Giang’s contributions to the Vietnamese nationalist cause deserve to be part of the historical landscape. While sources are scarce and varied, they nonetheless clearly point out that she was a patriot and that she had chosen the VNQDD as a means towards national independence. The evidence also demonstrates that she was an important and influential member of the party.

While she was engaged (perhaps even married) to Nguyen Thai Hoc, much of her work was accomplished on her own, since the
couple’s revolutionary activities seldom allowed them to spend time together. She was not a mere follower of Nguyen Thai Hoc but rather a genuine companion in arms. While her suicide was indeed a spectacular gesture, and while one of her final letters was a testament to her love for Nguyen Thai Hoc as well as an expression of regret that she could not avenge the harm that Hoc’s execution had wreaked upon their family, what is most often ignored is the patriotic tone of those letters as well as her commitment to the VNQDD’s aims: “I have not restored to my country its glory, I have not avenged my family. Although I am still young, I have already sacrificed myself for the cause of the people. But the road to progress is long.”

To focus simply on her devotion to Nguyen Thai Hoc is reductive at best. It is clear that Nguyen Thi Giang was equally devoted to the cause of Vietnamese independence and was a nationalist in her own right.

Notes

1. The Yen Bay Mutiny, also referred to as the Yen Bay Uprising, took place in February 1930 when members of the Viet Nam Quôc Dan Dang attacked the French military garrison at Yen Bay. See Nicola Cooper, France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), pp. 93–4.
4. There is no evidence that Nguyen Thi Giang and Nguyen Thai Hoc were married, although Thi Giang did mention a ceremony of sorts in her suicide note. Historians have referred to Thi Giang as Thai Hoc’s fiancée, while other sources, such as official colonial sources, have referred to her as his mistress.
5. Archives nationales d'outre mer (hereafter ANOM), Fonds ministériels (hereafter FM), Nouveaux Fonds (hereafter NF), Dossier 2626, Police de l'Indochine, Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin, Note confidentielle 7880.
7. “Nguyen Thai Hoc va Pho Duc Chinh da bi hanh hinh hom 17 Juin”. In one of her letters Thi Giang alluded to a ceremony and vows, which meant that she may have married Hoc. In any case this would have been a second marriage for Hoc since he was already married to another woman when he met Nguyen Thi Giang.


9. One source claims that Thi Giang shot herself in the heart: *Co Giang: Follow Him to Heaven*. However, photos found in the colonial archives, and taken upon the discovery of her body, reveal instead a wound to the head.


11. Hoang Van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, p. 490.


13. This notion is examined closely in Kathleen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998).


16. Hoang Van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*.

17. Lang Nhan, *Nhung tran danh Phap*.

18. It should also be noted that this particular study suffers from a lack of citations.


21. Most discrepancies concern specific dates. In some cases the sources differ when it comes to birth dates or the ages of the protagonists. In other instances precise dates are not available.
24. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
31. A study conducted by Gail Kelly in 1971 demonstrated that members of the VNQDD tended to be “more literate and better educated than the communists” and “by far better educated than the population as a whole”. Gail P. Kelly, “Education and Participation in Nationalist Groups: An Exploratory Study of the Indochinese Communist Party and the VNQDD, 1929–1931”, *Comparative Education Review* 15, 2 (June 1971): 232.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
56. Marty, *Contribution à l'histoire*.
57. Ibid.
59. ANOM, *Service de liaison avec les originaires des territoires français d'outre-mer* (hereafter SLOTFOM), Série 3, Carton 131.
64. Ibid.
65. Hoang Van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, p. 127.
67. Ibid., p. 20.
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68. Co Giang: Follow Him to Heaven, p. 34.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. ANOM, GGI, Dossier 65444, Déclarations de Nguyen Van Hien, dit Nguye Hay Hien, dit Thien Nhien, dit Vuong Tien Vinh, dit Hong The Hung, Octobre 1937.
72. ANOM, SLOTFOM, Série 3, Carton 131.
73. ANOM, SLOTFOM, Série 3, Carton 131, p. 73.
74. Ibid., p. 90.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., p. 91.
77. Ibid.
78. Thu Ha (ed.), Danh Nu Trong Truyen Thuyet va Lich Su Viet Nam [Women in Legend and History of Vietnam] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Lao Dong, 2009), p. 112. Some sources claim that Nguyen Thi Bac had been sentenced to death. This discrepancy may likely reflect the fact that the sentence was reduced to 20 years in prison at Con Dao after an appeal. French colonial archival documents are replete with the commutation of convicts’ sentences after appeal.
79. ANOM, Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin (hereafter RST), Dossier 2244.
80. Ibid.
81. ANOM, Police de Sûreté, Commissaire Spécial, Procès verbal, RST, 1930.
82. Ibid.
83. The French referred to the Vietnamese as Annamites, from the name “Annam”, used by the Chinese in past occupations and signifying the Pacified South. In spite of the pejorative and negative connotations of this term (pacification serving as a euphemism for colonialism), it was used not only by the French but by Vietnamese as well.
84. ANOM, Déclaration du VNQDD sur la sentence de mort d’un serviteur de capitalistes impérialistes franÁais à Gouverneur général de l’Indochine Pasquier.
85. The term “native land” here refers to the native village.
86. Hoang Van Dao, Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, p. 490.
87. ANOM, GGI, Dossier 65536, Police de l’Indochine, Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin, Suicide de Nguyen Thi Giang.
89. Hoang Van Dao, Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, p. 79.
91. ANOM, RST, Commissariat special de la Sûreté, 21 Août 1930.
92. Ibid.
94. ANOM, GGI, Dossier 65536, Police de l’Indochine, Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin, Suicide de Nguyen Thi Giang.