

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 5, 1985
INTERVIEWEE: BUI DIEM
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

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G: Mr. Ambassador, you came to the South of Vietnam in 1954. Is this correct?

BD: I came to South Vietnam in 1952, and I spent one year in France resuming my activities among the students in Paris and at the same time going back to the university to finish one last part of my mathematics studies that I had before at the university in Hanoi, and then I came back to Saigon in 1954.

G: I see. So you didn't come directly from Hanoi to the South?

BD: Yes, yes.

G: I see. But you are originally from the North?

BD: Yes, I am originally from the North.

G: From Hanoi?

BD: I was born in a small city around fifty kilometers from Hanoi. The name is Phu Ly, a place--

G: Phu Ly?

BD: --that was later on very frequently bombarded by the Americans later, you see.

G: I see.

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BD: But it was a small, provincial town, fifty kilometers [inaudible] of Hanoi. But I came to Hanoi very early, in my early days as a young boy, to go to school in Hanoi itself, and it was in Hanoi that I grew up from the high school years later to the student's years at the university in Hanoi in the 1940s.

G: Did I understand you to say that one of your instructors was Vo Nguyen Giap?

BD: Oh, yes. It was during the years of 1937 or 1938 that I was in a class where Vo Nguyen Giap taught history.

G: Was there any political content to this history?

BD: Oh, yes. I mention it many times to many of my friends that I realize now with hindsight that perhaps the man was predestined for becoming a military strategist, because I remember that he was supposed to teach us French history, dealing with the period of French history between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, so it involved a large part of the French history. But somehow he managed to give us strictly courses on the Napoleon[ic] wars, [inaudible], the war in Europe, and later on he spent a long time on the Napoleon[ic] wars in Russia and the retreat from Russia. So it means that the man, the way I understand it right now, had even from his young years some obsessions with military strategy. Otherwise, he could not choose his course in history this way.

G: Of course. Was he then, or did you know him then to be, a member of the Communist Party?

BD: No, he was somewhat a young colleague of my father, a professor. My father was a professor at the university in Hanoi, and myself frequently I came to his house, and he gave me books about Karl Marx and so forth, you see, and we knew by then that he had some preferences for Marxism. We knew about it, but we had no idea at all about what

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he could do later, you see, because it was a time still under the French occupations and all the things we talked about were only speculations, you see.

G: What was the position of yourself and your family during the war against the French, which begins in 1945?

BD: Well, it is a very complicated situation because beginning by the 1940s, when the French collapsed in Europe, there were a lot of secret organizations among the Vietnamese to prepare the fight against the French, for trying to regain the independence for Vietnam, and all of us of my generation participated in one way or another in these secret organizations. There were many political organizations, many secret organizations. One of them, of course, was the Viet Minh, the Communist Party, under the guise of the larger associations of Vietnamese patriotic organizations. We knew by then that the Communists were organizing their camps in the jungle areas of North Vietnam, and we--I mean the nationalist organization to whom I belonged--tried to prepare our own zones of resistance, too. So I participated in many of these attempts to organize the resistance zone against the French.

G: Did your group have a particular identity?

BD: Oh, yes. By that time--if I can afford it [the time], I would describe it very long about this situation because it was the beginning of what I call later on the parallel development of the nationalist parties in North Vietnam and the Communist Party in North Vietnam. And the parallel development of these two tendencies among the Vietnamese developed later on into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, North Vietnam becoming communist and South Vietnam non-communist. It took its origin from the early days of the 1940s with the birth of the nationalist parties along with the Communist Party. Of course, the

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Communist Party had its origin from the 1930s, and we, the nationalist parties, had our origin from the 1930s too. But the Communists had the advantages of being a continuous organization while we on the nationalist side were to begin with the Vietnam QDD [Quoc Dan Dang], the Vietnam Nationalist Party, to become later on--one faction of it becoming the Dai Viet and QDD and the [inaudible] QDD, and a lot of variations among the Nationalists, you see.

I went to China immediately after the takeover of the Communists in North Vietnam. I mean after the revolution, their revolution of August 1945, and after their public statement to the effect that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born in September 1945. Immediately after that, we--Vietnamese Nationalists--reacted, and, personally, I went to China around the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946. I went back and forth between Hanoi and Hong Kong, between Hanoi and Canton, and I came back to Hanoi by November 1946, and at which [time] I was caught by the war between the French and the Viet Minh by then. And when the war broke out between the French and the Viet Minh in December 1946, I got into the communist zone and lived there for more than two years inside the communist zone until the day, very late in 1950, when the Bao Dai solution came to--well, I remember that it was after the agreement of Bao Dai with the French at the Bay of Along, and there [was] the beginning of solutions of Bao Dai, that along with many other Nationalists, we escaped from the communist zone to come to the nationalist zone later.

G: I see. Did you join the Bao Dai government then?

BD: Well, many of my friends by that time joined the Bao Dai government. They were not happy about this solution. They knew very well that it was not a perfect solution, but

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many of our friends were convinced that if Bao Dai was not a perfect solution, it was one way to go further in terms of asking more from the French and in view of establishing a nationalist entity to stand up and to represent Vietnam by then and to oppose the Communists, who attempted to control the overall territory of Vietnam by then.

G: Had you been approached by the Viet Minh before this time?

BD: Well, I lived in the communist zone for many years, and I did participate in a peripheral way in the activities by then, because they knew me well in the sense that they had my file as a Nationalist opposing the communist views. But they had some sort of tolerance for me because my father was a high-ranking member of the patriotic front that they organized during the resistance, and so they had some tolerance for me, and I was a participant in a peripheral way on the [inaudible] matters, you see, during the years I had been in the communist zone. I got to the Catholic zone of Phat Diem later to participate actively in the anti-communist organization of the Catholic zone by then.

G: I see. What was your ideological orientation now? You were an anti-communist? Is that correct?

BD: Yes. There is no problem about it. In my early days, even before I became a high school student and where I had Vo Nguyen Giap as a teacher of history, I had been approached many times by communist *cadres* by then, and many of these people even lived in my family. They brought to me magazines from Russia. By that time it was in the early days of the communist world. It was in 1936 and 1937, and the magazines were full of photos, talking about their completions of the Soviet world and so forth. It was something very new for me. But somehow--I don't understand even now--it was perhaps a matter of traditions in the family or something else, I don't know. But I opposed communism from

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the early days of my childhood. I said to them that, "I can accept everything, but in a sense, I am somewhat a rebel because I cannot accept the kind of disciplines imposed on everyone." I said to them that, "If I disagree with you, what else could I do?" They said to me that, "No, you cannot disagree. You have to accept the position of the party, and you have to act exactly according to the instructions of the party." And I said to them, "Sorry. I cannot do that because, well, I think that sometimes I disagree with your arguments, and if I disagree with you, I can never accept the instructions or the orders from you." And so even in the early days when I was a young boy of fourteen or fifteen, I was inundated with communist literature, but somehow I had reacted to this already by that time.

G: I see. So which of the nationalist factions were you more closely identified with?

BD: Well, later on, as I have mentioned to you, for men of my generation unless you are somewhat special, you see, all of us belonged to one organization or another. And at that time, due to the fact that there were many organizations, it didn't make any difference at all that you enter one group or another. Many of my friends are Viet Minh, communist organizations. And I was close to a friend of mine, Dr. [Dan Van] Chung, who later became one of the leaders in South Vietnam. He was by then Dai Viet, and he invited me to go to the [inaudible] and Dai Viet--

G: What was his full name, sir?

BD: Dr. Dan Van Chung, and he was a member of the Dai Viet Party, and invited me to join the Dai Viet Party, and so I joined the Dai Viet Party. We knew nothing about a Dai Viet Party, you see. I have very funny stories about the Dai Viet Party because I remember at that time, they had a very, very prestigious chief, Mr. Truong Tu Anh. All of us among

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the nationalist circles, we know the name of Mr. Truong Tu Anh. He died later in 1945. But when I was brought into the Dai Viet Party, it was a kind of secret cells of three to five, you see. We were not supposed to know beyond the circle of three or five because we were kept into secret organizations, secret cells like that. But somehow, I rebelled against it. I said that, "No. I cannot accept this. I have to see the chief because I cannot accept--all of the people from the cell are my friends. They are my comrades. And at the university, I see no difference between them and myself." So I asked to see the chief, you see. And little by little, they brought me to see Mr. Truong Tu Anh, the chief of the national Dai Viet Party. And he said to me that, "Well, Diem, you have to learn about the philosophy and the theory of the party." And I said to him by then, "No. I cannot accept it because I know that the man who is building up his theory about the party is a classmate of mine, and he is no better than I am in philosophy," because he got less points than I got in my philosophy class, so I didn't accept it to learn the party theory from him. "All I want is action. If you think that I can be useful in being a man of action, all right, but I refuse to come to him and to have to learn from him lessons about party." (Laughter)

And so Mr. Truong Tu Anh agreed to me, and from then on, I became very close to him. He sent me to China, helping my uncle, the former prime minister, Tran Trong Kim, to establish himself in Hong Kong, and to have contacts with Bao Dai at that time. And I served as a kind of liaison man between Hanoi and China because we fought against the Communists even by then already, and so we thought that it was prudent for us to have some kind of base in South China, and so I went to Hong Kong, helping my

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uncle, Tran Trong Kim, the former prime minister, and helped some other Nationalists to go to Canton, too, and so to establish some sort of base for the Nationalists in China.

G: How was your position affected then, to back up just a little bit, at the end of World War II when the Nationalist Chinese Army came into the North?

BD: Oh yes, it was a very, very turbulent period, and somehow I got involved in politics from the very early days of my life at that time. I was a student at the University of Hanoi at that time. I finished my studies of mathematics and science at the University of Hanoi in 1944 and 1945, but the circumstances were such that I got involved early in politics not only due to my belonging to the secret organization, but to another accident in the family, and the accident was my uncle, Tran Trong Kim, becoming prime minister with the Japanese in March 1945. My uncle, Tran Trong Kim--my aunt is my father's sister, you see, and Mr. Tran Trong Kim was married to the sister of my father, and I am a nephew in the family. But due to the fact that Mr. Kim had no son at all, I became somewhat as his son in the family. And as soon as--he had some problems with the French before. He had been brought by the Japanese to Singapore before 1945, and after 1945 he was brought back from Singapore by the Japanese, and he had been asked by Emperor Bao Dai at that time to form the first government after the Japanese gave back to Vietnam its independence. It was after March 1945. It was a very short period between March of 1945 to August 1945 at which [time] we had the revolution from the Communists. So the government of Mr. Tran Trong Kim lasted just a few months between March and August. As soon as he formed his government, he asked me to join him in Hue, the capital of Vietnam by then, and Emperor Bao Dai was there. Mr. Kim had the first government of the independent Vietnam by then, and I joined Mr. Kim by then, and I did not participate

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in the government because I was too young, but I fully participated in the political activities at that time, you see.

G: I see. Okay. Then when the Nationalist Chinese came in--

BD: When the Nationalist Chinese came in, I was halfway between Hue and Hanoi at that time, and Mr. Kim sent me back to Hanoi to watch over the situation in Hanoi by that time when the Chinese came in. And the Chinese came after the surrender of the Japanese. And by the time the Chinese came in, it was already the end of the government of Mr. Kim.

G: What was the relationship of your political party with the Nationalist Chinese?

BD: Oh, yes. As I have mentioned to you, there were many Nationalists and parties by then, and by then, the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang was closer to the Chinese than we were. The Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang by then had for leaders Mr. Nguyen Tuong, who later became foreign minister in a coalition government with the Communists, and many other leaders who were very close to the Chinese. And along with the Chinese, they came back from China, and many of them established a kind of corridor along the Red River Delta in which they had some armed forces, you see. We in the Dai Viet Party first of all had no connection with it, you see. We had some liaison with the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang Party, but we didn't control this area going from the Red River Delta to the frontier of China. We by then tried to establish some sort of bases in the Thanh Hoa area, in the area of Vinh and so forth. But later on, we participated in many conversations in view of uniting all the Nationalists and by then, the Dai Viet Party established a school of military *cadre* in Chapa in the northern part of Vietnam in the province of Lao Cai, very close to the border to China. And it was a very, very, very serious attempt to organize a

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military resistance against the Communists because the Dai Viet, by then, did succeed in enrolling a lot of Japanese officers serving as *cadres* for teaching the school of military *cadres*, in Lao Cai. And the Vietnamese students were very enthusiastic about it, and hundreds of them joined the military school in Chapa. I was among them, but as soon as I arrived there for a few months, Mr. Truong Tu Anh, the leader of the Dai Viet Party, asked me to come back and to serve as liaison to go to China later on.

So I stayed there for three months, but later on, the military school ran into difficulties because the French began to come back by then, and the troops of General [Marcel] Alessandri came back to Vietnam through China, and the Dai Viet Party *cadres*, military *cadres*, had encounters with the French, and they suffered a lot. But at the same time, the Communists began to try to eliminate the Nationalists, and many of my friends were killed along the route going from the border of China to the town of Viet Tri, just at the middle of the Red River Delta. Many of my friends--students, by then--were killed by the Communists in ambushes, you see. It was a very troubled period because--not only was there fighting between Vietnamese Nationalists and Communists along the delta river, but even in Saigon, where the political situation was very much active, the city was under control of the Communists, of course, because they had a government, the provisionary governor of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was in operation by then. But we still have the Chinese troops. Many of the nationalist troops had their own headquarters, and at that time there was a lot of conflicts between the two sides.

But my point in describing these kinds of things is to say a very simple thing. This very simple thing is that it is untrue to say that the Communists were the only ones who fought against the French by that time. There were many nationalist organizations

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at that time, and they fought against the French. Later on, in the course to power, the Communists tried to eliminate all the old nationalist troops, and in the fight against the French for the independence of the country, the Nationalists were in a sort of difficult situation. They could not side with the French because all of us Vietnamese wanted the independence of the country, but in the same time, they understood that it was difficult for them to get along with the Communists because the Communists squeezed them out or tried to exterminate all the Nationalists, you see.

And so later on, as soon as there is even a slight possibility of having another solution, the Nationalists tried to stick to it, hoping to improve the solution--I mean, for instance, the Bao Dai solution--for having a legal basis, some kind of identity, to fight against the French, and at the same time again the Communists, you see, and it was gradually later on that this group of persons, of Nationalists, became the southern part of South Vietnam, the French reluctantly giving back to the Vietnamese the beginning of independence. And later on, it was helped by the Americans to achieve this independence, and this part of South Vietnam [was] becoming stronger and stronger but subjected to infiltration and to attack from the other side, and by then we come to the period of 1965 and 1966. That is at least my explanation of the Vietnamese Nationalists and how things happened, you see.

G: Were you at that time acquainted with Ngo Dinh Diem?

BD: Yes. I am not a personal acquaintance of Mr. Diem, but as I have pointed out to you earlier, I was in the Catholic zone of Phat Diem in 1946 and 1947, and the Catholics by then began already their organization against the Communists, and they backed Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, and I was in this organization for years before getting back to the nationalist

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zone. I later on had very long conversations with his brother, Mr. Ngo Dinh Luyen, who became later an ambassador to London, and I discussed a lot of problems with Mr. Luyen, and I came back to see Mr. Diem in 1954. But personally, I am not an acquaintance of Mr. Diem and, in fact, later on during the nine years of Mr. Diem, I was in the opposition.

G: I see. That would put you in a very difficult position, would it not, because Mr. Diem was very hard on his opposition?

BD: Oh, yes. It is quite true that we went through a very difficult period. Many of our friends had been jailed by Mr. Diem. Some of them had been killed, too. Myself, I was lucky, but we went through some sort of difficult period of time.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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