II

Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities at War

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In *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* in 1975, General Văn Tiến Dũng quotes his South Vietnamese counterpart General Phạm Văn Phú as often saying "Who controls the Tây Nguyên will control all of the South."[1] Literally meaning Western Highlands, the Tây Nguyên is usually called the Central Highlands in English, and alternatively Hauts plateaux du centre or Pays montagnard du sud(-indochinois) in French. This mountainous region in central Vietnam encompasses the Annam Cordillera (Trường Sơn) and high plateaus between the narrow coastal plains bordering the South China Sea to the east, and Laos and Cambodia to the west. Whatever toponym we use, the quote indicates the strategic importance of these highlands for the control of central and southern Vietnam – during both the French Indochina War and the Vietnam War. In this chapter I will explore the role that the indigenous ethnic groups of this region played in the Vietnam War, in particular in its dénouement with the fall or liberation of Saigon in April 1975.

Until 1954 the Central Highlands were primarily inhabited by some twenty indigenous ethnic groups that the French and Americans collectively referred to as "Montagnards" (mountain dwellers); as Montagnards is not a proper ethnonym, I will refer to them as (Central) Highlanders. The main indigenous ethnic groups in terms of population are the Jarai, Rhadé (now called Êđe), Raglay, and Churu (who speak Austronesian languages, like the Malay, Indonesians, Filipinos, and Polynesians), and the Bahnar, Sedang, Koho, Hrê, Mnông, Stiêng, Bru Vân Kiều, Katu, Gie Triêng, Maa, Ta Oi, Cor, and Chrau (who speak Austroasiatic languages). Their combined population was

1 Văn Tiến Dũng, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (Hanoi, 2000), 48–9. Larry Jackson ("The Vietnamese Revolution and the Montagnards," *Asian Survey* 9, 5 (1969), 328) attributes this quote to General Võ Nguyễn Giáp but I have not found the original source for this.

estimated at around 1 million in 1954, and more recently at around 2.5 million. The ethnic Việt people – or Kinh – were until 1954 largely confined to the wet rice-growing plains of lower than 200 meters in altitude: the Red River Delta in the north, the Mekong Delta in the south, and the coastal plains connecting these deltas. Just as the highlands in the north dominated the northern delta, the Annam Cordillera and Central Highlands dominated the central coastal plain and hence controlled overland access to the southern delta areas, including Saigon.

It was the rapid deterioration of the security situation in the Central Highlands that prompted the US Special Forces to lead Highlander warriors. It was an attack by the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) on an American airstrip close to Pleiku in the Central Highlands that prompted the bombing campaign known as Operation Rolling Thunder and the landing of US combat troops near Đà Nẵng in 1965. And it was the surprise attack by communist forces on the Highland city of Ban Mê Thuột (now Buôn Ma Thuột) on March 10, 1975, and its conquest within two days, that triggered the South Vietnamese military retreat from the Highlands and the consequent collapse of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). It was the silent complicity of indigenous militia and populations around Ban Mê Thuột that ensured the element of surprise in the attack by regular North Vietnamese cavalry, and which arguably accelerated the demise of the RVN in the South – although perhaps it did not alter the outcome itself, that is, the reunification of Vietnam. In all these key episodes in the war, Central Highlanders played an outsized role.

In order to understand this historical outcome, we have to go back to 1962's Operation Switchback, which moved operational control over the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups from the Central Intelligence Agency to the US Army in the course of 1963. But before describing these events of 1963 and beyond in more detail, it is necessary to briefly sketch the history of events leading up to Operation Switchback. After dwelling a bit on the events of 1963 and their immediate aftermath, I will offer a brief and necessarily simplified version of events up until 1975.[2]

2 See also Gerald C. Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954–1976* (New Haven, 1982); Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlands: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1990* (Honolulu, 2003); Po Dharma (with the collaboration of Mak Phoeun), *Du FLM au FULRO. Une lutte des minorités du sud indochinois 1955–1975* (Paris, 2006); and J. P. Harris, *Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954–1965* (Lawrence, KS, 2016).

Colonial Trajectories and the French Indochina War

When French troops arrived in Indochina, the Highlands were regarded as a largely impenetrable hinterland where few Việt people settled and where the imperial court of Huế exerted little control. Around 1850 French missionaries even managed to set up a mission station among the Bahnar group in Kontum, where they remained out of reach of the court that suppressed Christianity as a potentially seditious religion. In Vietnamese, the region was referred to as *rừng mọi* (literally forests of the savages), denoting both geographical and physical distance as well as wildness. Because the area was a hinterland that was surrounded from 1893 by three French protectorates (Annam, Laos, Cambodia) and one colony (Cochinchina), it was initially unclear whether the border should run along the watershed of the Annam Cordillera – as was the case north from Quảng Nam – or more to the west, but during the first decade of the twentieth century the territory covered by the current highland provinces of Kontum, Gialai, Đắk Lắk, and Đắk Nông was assigned to Vietnam. In the 1920s the post–World War I rubber boom led to a land rush on the fertile basaltic plateaus, necessitating the imposition of more systematic colonial rule and bringing not just planters and capital, but also Việt (as well as Chinese and occasionally Indonesian) labor. These developments caused discontent among many indigenous Highlanders, as brought out in the long-lasting and violent Mnông rebellion led by N'Trang Lơng (1914–35) and in the so-called Python God millenarian movement encompassing many ethnic groups throughout the Central Highlands (1936–8).[3]

The economic crisis of the 1930s and the emergence of political threats to colonial rule – domestically from nationalist movements and internationally from Japan and Thailand – induced the French colonial regime to coopt Indochina's ethnic minorities against these perceived threats through a *politique d'égards* (politics of respect), which began with a change of ethnonym from the offensive term *mọi* (savage) to *montagnard* (highlander). The strategic importance of the mountainous regions of colonial French Indochina was recognized early on by French military officers such as Joseph Galliéni and Charles Ardant du Picq.[4] During the French Indochina War (1946–54) the

3 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*; Salemink, *Ethnography*.

4 J. Galliéni, *Galliéni au Tonkin (1892–1896), par lui-même* (Paris, 1941 [1913]); C. Ardant du Picq, "Etude du pays Moy au point de vue militaire," 1923, 110–11 [Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, Gougal 49.506]; see also C. Ardant du Picq, "Monographie des pays Moï (Indochine, provinces de Kon Tum et de Ban Mê Thuột)," *Revue des Troupes Coloniales* 19 and 20 (1925/6), *passim*.

truth of their assessments was shown in the battles of Điện Biên Phủ in the northern highlands and of An Khê in the Annam Cordillera (both in 1954), which forced the French to acquiesce to Vietnamese independence and abandon Indochina.[5] During World War II the French colonial army increased its efforts at recruiting Highlanders for their *bataillons montagnards*, holding out the promise that the Highlands territory would become an "autonomous zone" under direct French rule by taking steps to detach it from the Protectorate of Annam. Cut off from France, the pro-Vichy colonial regime of Admiral Jean Decoux celebrated the Highlands as the heartland of French Indochina, epitomized by the status of Đà Lạt as the summer capital and by plans to turn it into a federal capital.[6] These plans all came to naught, however, as in March 1945 Japanese forces staged a coup against the French regime, detaining all French military forces and seeking to enlist Vietnamese nationalists in their struggles against the Allies. The rather sudden Japanese surrender in August 1945 plunged the colony into chaos, with many groups vying for power. In a series of events the Việt Minh emerged as the strongest nationalist group, and its leader Hồ Chí Minh declared independence in Hanoi on September 2, 1945.[7]

After World War II the French army sought to return to a Vietnam in the grip of nationalist fervor. The majority of the French expeditionary force consisted of Africans, North Africans, and Legionnaires, and the French colonial army recruited soldiers and militias from some of the approximately twenty ethnic groups in the Central Highlands between 1946 and 1954 in order to seek allies against a Vietnamese nationalist movement dominated by ethnic Việt. The indigenous Highlanders were culturally and linguistically very different from each other but even more so from the surrounding Việt, Lào, and Khmer populations, and were induced to fight for the French with promises of some measure of cultural autonomy and territorial control. After carving out a separate Highland territory from Vietnam in the form of the Pays montagnard du sud-indochinois (Highlander country of southern Indochina, better known as PMSI) in 1946, the French authorities attached this territory in 1950 to the person of the reinstated emperor Bảo Đại, as his personal Crown

5 Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: Indochina at War, 1946–1954* (Harrisburg, PA, 1961).
6 Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina* (Berkeley, 2011), 228.
7 Stein Tønnesson, "Filling the Power Vacuum: 1945 in French Indochina, Netherland's Indies and British Malaya," in Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson (eds.), *Imperial Policy and South East Asian Nationalism* (Richmond, UK, 1995), 110–43; and David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, 1995).

Domain. The French divide-and-rule tactics were never completely successful and split the Highlander populations whose allegiance was divided. In the 1950s the Việt Minh became militarily ever stronger, and in the spring of 1954 defeated the French expeditionary army in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in the Northern Highlands. Just after Điện Biên Phủ in June 1954, the French elite Groupe mobile 100 of the Groupement de commandos mixtes aéroportés (GCMA) suffered near-annihilation at the Mang Yang pass near An Khê in the Central Highlands, the last major battle before the Geneva Agreements took effect on August 1, 1954.[8]

Buôn Enao and Operation Switchback, 1954–1963

At the Geneva Conference the various parties – France, the Việt Minh, right-wing Vietnamese nationalists, the United States, the USSR, and China – agreed to a temporary troop separation along the 17th parallel in anticipation of elections that would never materialize. This eventually resulted in the temporary existence of two separate Vietnamese states, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) in the north and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south, which both claimed sovereignty over the entire territory of Vietnam. The ceasefire and troop separation meant that many Highlander communist cadres such as Nay Đer, Nay Phin, Ksor Ní, and Y Ngông Nie Kdam went north for training at the ethnic minority training school in Thái Nguyên, in anticipation of their return to the Central Highlands, which for some took more than two decades to become reality.[9] In the southern half of Vietnam, with US support, Ngô Đình Diệm replaced erstwhile emperor Bảo Đại as the head of the French-created State of Vietnam under the Fédération indochinoise, and in 1955 established a nationalist, autocratic regime – the Republic of Vietnam – in which important positions were taken by his relatives.[10] With the French out of the way, Diệm dispensed with the autonomous Crown Domain in the Highlands and abolished indigenous land rights, customary law courts, and vernacular education in, for example, the erstwhile *"franco-rhadé* schools." Diệm also proscribed the use of tribal costume

8 Bernard B. Fall, *Street without Joy*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA, 1964); Shawn F. McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021), 89–93; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*; Salemink, *Ethnography*.

9 Nguyễn Quang Tuệ, "Tìm hiểu thêm về Ông Nay Đer" [Understanding More about Mr. Nay Der], *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* [*Historical Research*] 6, 418 (2016), 66–76.

10 Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

in urban areas and possession of tribal weapons such as spears and crossbows, which Highlanders needed for hunting.

At the same time, Diệm resettled hundreds of thousands of Catholic refugees from the North on lands that were appropriated from Highlanders in a region where until 1954 the comparatively few Việt people were confined to a couple of small urban centers such as Đà Lạt, Kontum, Ban Mê Thuột, and Pleiku, and where the rural areas were predominantly populated by indigenous groups living from swidden agriculture, interspersed with some coffee, tea, and rubber plantations. The resettlement of Catholic refugees from the North in the Central Highlands went hand in hand with a series of programs aimed at resettling Highlanders in politically secure villages and promoting modern, market-oriented, sedentary agriculture instead of the subsistence-oriented, rotational, swidden agriculture that most Highlander populations had been practicing for centuries. In 1957 President Diệm inaugurated the Dinh điền program, which is usually (but according to Stan B. H. Tan erroneously) translated as "land development," and which had a special subprogram targeting Highlanders (Dinh điền thượng). The idea was to bring Highlanders together in larger clusters where they would be encouraged to adopt sedentary agricultural techniques – or coerced into doing so – with the assumed added advantage that the larger clusters would be more easily defensible against National Liberation Front (NLF) mobilization. According to anthropologist Gerald C. Hickey, the Dinh điền program was highly unpopular among Highlanders, as they were forced from their ancestral lands and made to give up their highly ritualized lifestyles that were synchronized with swidden cultivation. Moreover, state support for resettled Highlanders was minimal because Diệm believed they themselves should invest in their development, while corruption was rife among officials who were mostly ethnic Việt. In 1959 Diệm and his brother Nhu started the agroville program, which sought to concentrate Highlanders in even larger settlements. In the early 1960s the Dinh điền program became the "strategic hamlet" program, which was a more militarized version of the same concept, intended to separate the fish (guerrillas) from the water (population), to paraphrase Mao Zedong's famous adage. Hickey was one of many observers who linked Highlander discontent to these programs.[11]

11 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 47–89; Salemink, *Ethnography*, 179–210; Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., "CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam," Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001 (declassified, www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/48/3_CIA_AND_RURAL_PACIFICATION.pdf). For a positive interpretation of President Diệm's policies in the Central Highlands, see Stan B.-H. Tan, "'Swiddens,

Diệm's assimilationist nation-building programs and appropriation of their ancestral lands alienated the Highlanders, provoking French-trained Highlander intellectuals and civil servants in 1955 to form a protest movement that they called the Highlander Liberation Front (Front de la libération des Montagnards). In 1958 they renamed this Front "Bajaraka," after the first syllables of the ethnonyms of the four biggest ethnic groups (Bahnar, Jarai, Rhadé, Koho) that demographically dominated the four Highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku (Gialai), Darlac (Đắk Lắk), and Haut-Donnaï (Lâm Đồng). The movement consisted of representatives of most of the larger ethnic groups (Rhadé: Y Bham Enuol, Y Dhon Adrong, Y Bih Aleo, Y Thih Eban; Jarai: Nay Luett; Bahnar: Paul Nur), but was dominated by Rhadé people, who were considered to be the most educated and hence the most "civilized" among the Highlanders. The main leader was the charismatic Y Bham Enuol, who in the course of the next two decades would acquire almost mythical status among Highlanders. When Bajaraka in 1958 mounted demonstrations in provincial capitals calling for restoration of pre-1955 autonomy, Diệm responded by incarcerating most of the Bajaraka leadership and by intensifying his assimilationist policies, with only the Rhadé leader Y Bih Aleo escaping arrest.[12]

In anticipation of the resumption of political and military struggle in the South, ethnic minority cadres who had gone north in 1954 filtered back into the Highlands in the late 1950s with thorough political training. They were accompanied by ethnic Việt, who sometimes adopted the lifestyles of the local populations where they lived, while radio transmissions from the North in the vernacular ethnic languages conducted propaganda against the Diệm regime.[13] In 1959–60, the guerrilla war in the Highlands was renewed with the

Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages': State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955–1961," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, 1–2 (2006), 210–52. For an excellent ethnographic account of the Highlanders' ritualized agricultural lifestyle, see Georges Condominas, *Nous avons mangé la forêt de la Pierre-Génie Gôo (Hii saa Brii Mau-Yaang Gôo). Chronique de Sar Luk, village mnong gar (tribu proto-indochinoise, des Hauts-Plateaux du Vietnam central)* (Paris, 1957), which was published in English after the war as *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Highlands of Vietnam* (New York, 1977).

12 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 47–89; Salemink, *Ethnography*, 179–210; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*. In "Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages," Stan B.-H. Tan criticizes Hickey, Salemink, and other scholars of the Central Highlands, claiming that Diệm's agricultural policies were much more culturally accommodating than given credit for, but he ignores eyewitness accounts of how such policies played out in practice as well as the livelihood and cultural effects of the resettlement of thousands of Việt Northerners in lands claimed and previously used by Highlanders.

13 Interviews and conversations by the author with a number of Vietnamese living in northern Vietnam confirm the picture that as early as 1957 Vietnamese soldiers and

Trà Bồng rising of the Cor and Hrê minorities in the mountains of Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi, reactivating an existing rebel tradition in this area, one that dated back to the 1945 Ba Tơ rising and even further to the Python God movement of the 1930s.[14] These events preceded the establishment of the NLF, formed in 1960 on the basis of remaining Việt Minh cadres in the South with support from the DRVN. The NLF capitalized on Highlander discontent by setting up a Central Highlands Ethnic Autonomy Movement (Phong trào dân tộc tự trị Tây Nguyên) headed by the one Bajaraka leader, Y Bih Aleo, who had escaped imprisonment by going underground and joining the communist resistance. As president of its Central Highlands Ethnic Autonomy Movement, he would become vice chairman of the NLF.

Helped by Diệm's oppressive policies toward the Highlanders, the NLF rapidly expanded its control in minority areas across the Highlands in 1961, thus alarming Diệm's American allies. In order to counter this development in the absence of a serious US Army combat presence, the CIA tried out a new counterinsurgency concept, forming a Village Defense Program with self-defense militia known as the Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups, later renamed Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs), led and trained by US Special Forces. The program was started by Colonel Gilbert Layton of the Combined Studies Division, a local branch of the CIA operating under the auspices of William Colby. Layton got in touch with a young agricultural engineer with the International Voluntary Services (IVS, a forerunner of the Peace Corps) in Darlac (later Đắk Lắk) province, David Nuttle, who at the time was dating Layton's daughter Bonnie. Nuttle was fluent in Vietnamese and in the Rhadé language, and was willing to leave the IVS in order to join the CIA. The idea was that he would organize the village of Buôn Enao – close to Ban Mê Thuột city – against the NLF, promising arms, land, and agricultural support, plus medical care provided by a Special Forces medic, Sergeant Paul Campbell. A Special Forces team was then brought in to train and lead the Highlanders, and the Special Forces medic offered medical care and trained young Rhadé women as nurses. Rhadé men were trained in the use of firearms, and built a defensive fence around the village. In addition, Special

political cadres were sent to the South in order to prepare for the revolution. See also Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 47–73; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 237.

14 Phạm Kiệt, *Từ núi rừng Ba Tơ. Hồi ký* [*From the Mountains and Forests of Ba To: Reminiscences*] (Hanoi, 1976); Ta Xuan Linh, "How Armed Struggle Began in South Vietnam," *Vietnam Courier*, March 1974, 19–24; Ta Xuan Linh, "Armed Uprisings by Ethnic Minorities along the Truong Son," *Vietnam Courier*, September 1974, 15–20, and October 1974, 18–21; Salemink, *Ethnography*.

Figure 11.1 Members of the Rhadé hill tribe with an American military instructor (1962). Source: ullstein bild Dtl. / Contributor / ullstein bild / Getty Images.

Forces organized a Mobile Strike Force trained in regular military combat and that would come to offer protection in case a village was attacked.[15]

The program caught on and, radiating out from Buôn Enao, dozens of villages were organized and trained in a similar manner, to the point that by mid-1962 the NLF was no longer a major security threat in Đắk Lắk province and was "rolled back" in other Highland provinces at a time when the war was still a small-scale guerrilla conflict and did not yet involve US ground troops.[16] Given the still "irregular" or "unconventional" nature of the war in

15 Interviews of William Colby (April 1990), Gilbert Layton (May 1990), and Paul Campbell (May 1990): Gilbert Layton papers (papers that Layton handed to me in May 1990, and currently in my possession); Ahern, "CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam"; Dr. J. P. Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency* (Camberley, Surrey, Sandhurst Occasional Papers No. 13, 2013); Willam E. Colby, with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago and New York, 1989).

16 Colonel Francis J. Kelly, *US Army Special Forces 1961–1971* (Washington, DC, 1973).

the early 1960s, motivated and well-armed Highlanders were mostly capable of fighting off NLF attacks. US intelligence reported that the NLF became increasingly unpopular with Highlanders as their soldiers were mostly dependent on local provisions, in particular before the Hồ Chí Minh Trail began to allow for motorized transport in December 1961. This forced NLF militia to requisition, or simply take, food from villagers, who were largely subsistence farmers not producing enough of a surplus that could be bought or confiscated without endangering Highlander food security.[17] The combined result of these developments – as detailed in intelligence reports at the time – was an increasing defection of NLF Highlander fighters, who did not want to take food from Highlander villages or seek to control such villages with violence rather than propaganda. In those early days of largely unconventional warfare, these rather small-scale developments mattered greatly even in military terms. For a brief period in 1962, then, Buôn Enao became a success story, visited by high-ranking military officers and diplomats from the United States and Australia and also by Ngô Đình Nhu, the brother of Diệm, who was in charge of security. J. P. Harris estimates "that it was considered, at a very senior level in the US military, to be the most impressive thing Americans had yet achieved in Vietnam."[18] While impressed by the results, most of the officers failed to understand its tactical concept, which went beyond conventional tactics by privileging civic organization. For example, they tended to rely on superior firepower and aerial bombardments even when those alienated local populations.[19]

Around the same time as, and parallel to, the Buôn Enao program, the so-called Mountain Scout program was set up in many Highland provinces of the RVN. In contrast with the CIDG program, the Mountain Scout program was initiated in 1961 by the RVN's Directory of Montagnard Affairs in Huế and became operational in 1962, again funded by the CIA. It consisted of small groups of lightly armed Highlander men who would conduct social (civic) action and propaganda along with intelligence gathering and small-scale military action. These small groups were under the command of Vietnamese district chiefs in the Highlands, who were reportedly often scornful of the Highlander fighters under their control, thus alienating the Mountain Scouts and making them much less effective than the CIDG. CIA personnel were

17 J. P. Harris, *Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954–1965* (Lawrence, KS, 2016).
18 Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 29.
19 Ahern, "CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam"; Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*.

also dismayed by the massive diversion of funds and the gradual deemphasis of the civilian aspects of the program, which in 1963 became exclusively military. In comparison with the CIDG, the Mountain Scout program was politically and militarily much less successful.

In spite of the CIDG success in rolling back the NLF, "within a few months the whole enterprise had largely disappeared, leaving a lasting legacy of increased racial bitterness and tension between Highlanders and Vietnamese."[20] The high-profile success of the program had raised suspicion among a number of South Vietnamese officers, and ultimately with President Diệm, that armed Highlanders fighting for their own protection practically under US command – and largely in the absence of South Vietnamese soldiers – constituted a return to the days of French colonial divide-and-rule policy of the PMSI and Crown Domain, and hence were a threat to Vietnam's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Egged on by Colonel Lê Quảng Trọng, commander of the 23rd Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) based in Ban Mê Thuột, Diệm ordered that village defenders be disarmed and the mobile strike force be disbanded, and in August 1962 Ngô Đình Nhu withdrew his Vietnamese Special Forces (Lực lượng đặc biệt, or LLDB) from the CIDG villages.[21] By the end of 1962, Operation Switchback had shifted operational control of the CIDG from the CIA to the US Army, which ordered the American Special Forces to resume their role as advisors to their South Vietnamese counterparts.

On the US side, the rapid expansion of the Buôn Enao experiment had made the program logistically too big to finance and handle for the CIA, which in the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba had come under increased scrutiny in the United States itself, and had come to be seen as unfit to lead an essentially military operation. The heavy involvement of US Special Forces almost from the beginning of the Buôn Enao experiment and during its expansion made it logical to turn command and logistics over to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) under Operation Switchback. The decision was made in May 1962 – six months after the beginning of the Village Defense Program – that the Department of Defense would take full responsibility over budget and operations by fiscal year 1963, but already before that MACV had a growing role in the training and command of the CIDG through the Special Forces. Colonel George Morton, incoming commander of the 1st Special Forces, reportedly had a conventional view of

20 Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 29.
21 Ahern, "CIA and Rural Pacification," 60, 109; Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*.

warfare, while "MACV commander General Paul Harkins had misgivings about military absorption of the Station's paramilitary work."[22] At the same time the CIDG success whetted the US Army's appetite for reliable jungle fighters who would be deployable anywhere; hence, "MACV intended to take over CIDG completely and militarize it."[23] Instead of a village defense program, the CIDG militia essentially became a source of tribal soldiers – like the *bataillons montagnards* of French colonial times – who would eventually fight at the iconic Special Forces camps such as the Plei Me and A Shau camps, where North Vietnamese and American troops fought major battles in 1965 and 1966.

These changes were greatly resented by the Highlander militias, who suffered contempt and discrimination from their Việt commanders and felt let down by their American partners. Simultaneously, the US Army greatly expanded the scope and radius of the CIDG and the Mobile Strike Forces. Its tactical concept was changed from essentially village defense, meaning that villagers were recruited, trained, and armed to defend their home villages against the NLF, to offensive operations from remote military camps far away from their home villages, often in border areas, while seeking to interdict North Vietnamese "infiltration" along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. This was an important change, not only because the original concept of village defense was abandoned and replaced by a regular military concept that, according to all reports, simply did not work, but also because of the effect it had on the Highlander militias. Instead of forming self-defense militias, Highlanders practically became mercenaries paid by and fighting for Americans, separated from their familiar home environments.[24] The men became professional soldiers, outside local village and kinship structures – uprooted youth (*déracinés*), as the French missionary Jacques Dournes had called the *bataillons montagnards* during the French Indochina War.[25] In addition, they were commanded by Việt military officers whom they loathed, whereas the US Special Forces only had an advisory status in this equation.

22 Ahern, "CIA and Rural Pacification," 98.

23 Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 30–1.

24 The term mercenaries comes from S. L. A. Marshall, *Battles in the Monsoon: Campaigning in the Central Highlands, Vietnam, Summer 1966* (New York, 1967), 22.

25 Jacques Dournes, *En suivant la piste des hommes sur les Hauts-Plateaux du Viêt-Nam* (Paris, 1955), 72. See also Christian Simonnet, *Les tigres auront plus pitié. La mission des Grands Plateaux* (Paris, 1977), 261–5. During field research in the Central Highlands in 1991 I encountered elderly Jarai men who had been in the CIDG and who considered themselves to have been *American* soldiers, as their pay came from the United States and their hope and loyalty were vested in the American presence in the Central Highlands.

With Operation Switchback, the Highlander militias in the CIDG became disaffected with their military mission. Away from their villages and kin groups, the expanding CIDG became a less effective fighting force, and the NLF mounted more and more assaults on the Special Forces camps in the course of 1963. Harris reports that "when the Communists mounted an offensive in central Darlac in late July 1963, they met little resistance: villagers apparently surrendering quite readily the inadequate armament the government had left them."[26] Highlanders complained to Nuttle and other CIA personnel about RVN hostility, about partial disarmament, and about the diminished material benefits. As Nuttle resigned from the CIA, around half of the Highlander militia defected between January 1963 (38,500) and January 1964 (19,000), and by mid-1963 Buôn Enao – now run by Vietnamese LLDB – was no longer a fighting village. While the CIA did not have the resources to run the program and was no longer in control, MACV considered the CIDG to be a Vietnamese military force which should therefore fall under South Vietnamese command. The breakdown of the original CIDG effectiveness predicated on the Buôn Enao philosophy was not unknown among leading US military and political persons, but according to Thomas Ahern it did not receive much attention:

> US attention to CIDG decay was distracted, less than three months after the program's transfer to MACV, by the outbreak of the Buddhist-led dissidence that signalled the intensity of popular alienation from the Diệm government. The urban disorder that preoccupied both governments did not affect the Switchback schedule, however, and MACV took over support of the last program, the Mountain Scouts, on 1 November 1963, the day on which dissident generals overthrew President Ngô Đình Diệm.[27]

When interpreting the relative and temporary success of the CIDG, it is important to bear in mind the context of its time. In the early 1960s the NLF had just been formed, the insurgency had just started, and the flow of fighters and materiel down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail was still only a trickle.[28] The NLF

26 Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 32.

27 Ahern, "CIA and Rural Pacification," 117.

28 Nguyễn Bá Công et al., *Trận đồ bát quái xuyên rừng rậm* [*The Forest Battle of the Eight Trigrams*], internal publication (Hanoi, 1979); John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1999); Pamela McElwee, "'There Is Nothing That Is Difficult': History and Hardship on and after the Ho Chi Minh Trail in North Vietnam," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 6, 3 (2005), 197–214; Virginia Morris with Clive Hills, *The Road to Freedom: A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail* (Bangkok, 2006); David Lamb, "Revolutionary Road," *Smithsonian Magazine* 38, 12 (2008), 56–66; Vatthana Pholsena, "Highlanders on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," *Critical Asian Studies* 40,

was at the time largely dependent on its hold over local populations – by persuasion, force, or a combination of the two. And although the US military, political, and intelligence forces were deeply implicated in combating the emergent insurgency, it was not until March 1965 that US ground troops were deployed in Vietnam. The war changed from a smaller-scale counterinsurgency to more conventional warfare, as the DRVN poured more troops and heavier weapons down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. The Tết Mậu Thân Offensive in 1968 exposed much of the Southern infrastructure and wiped out a major part of the local guerrillas of the NLF, which therefore became even more reliant than before on Northern conventional forces. In conditions of large-scale conventional warfare the effectiveness of both guerrilla and counterinsurgency tactics – as embodied by the CIDG – was questionable, but in the early 1960s such tactics could still make a major difference, as events on the ground had shown.[29] But in what follows I will not engage in counterfactual analysis about the outcome of the war if other tactics had been employed; instead I will focus on the important consequences of the demise of the CIDG for the Vietnam War; for the Highlanders themselves, in particular for their eventual aspirations for autonomy; and – indeed – for the postwar situation. In the violent and insecure environment of the early 1960s, the CIDG camps – now military camps commanded by Vietnamese LLDB and advised by US Special Forces – became like pressure cookers, waiting to explode.

The Rise and Demise of FULRO, 1963–1965

In 1962 some of the Bajaraka leaders who had been in jail since 1958 were released by President Diệm as an act of goodwill, but Y Bham Enuol remained incarcerated. This created completely new situations for the various leaders of Bajaraka, and they responded differently.

In 1962–3 Colonel Layton of the CIA's Combined Studies Division used Christian and Missionary Alliance contacts among the Rhadé to negotiate with NLF vice president Y Bih Aleo over his defection to the RVN, among other things in exchange for the release of Y Bham Enuol. Although the

3 (2008), 445–74; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley, 2013).

29 See, for instance, Kelly, *US Army Special Forces, 1961–1971*. A dissenting view on Operation Switchback and the Buôn Enao turnover can be found in "Four Glaring Errors Often Made by Historians" by Lieutenant Stephen Sherman, the preface to Seth A. Gitell, Jim Morris et al., *Broken Promise, Betrayal as Usual, and Other Readings about US Army Special Forces and the Montagnards of South Vietnam* (Houston, 1996).

negotiations – code-named Operation Linus – were given the green light by US ambassador Frederick Nolting and General Paul Harkins, US military commander in Vietnam, as well as by President Diệm and his brother Nhu, the intended meeting was sabotaged by the Darlac province chief Lê Quảng Trọng, who had the meeting place bombed by the RVN air force.[30] But this event was dwarfed by the so-called Buddhist Crisis in 1963, which pitted the Buddhist majority against the regime of the Catholic Ngô family in the RVN. The crisis came to a head in June 1963 with the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in protest against the regime, and the raids on Xá Lợi and other Buddhist pagodas in the RVN in August.[31] The social unrest triggered a military coup against the Ngô brothers on November 2, 1963, setting in motion a whole string of military coups and countercoups, and triggering an initial relaxation of policies against Diệm's adversaries, including in the Central Highlands. Thus, in February 1964 Bajaraka's charismatic leader Y Bham Enuol was released by the prime minister, General Nguyễn Khánh, and subsequently appointed province vice chief for Montagnard affairs of Darlac province.

Meanwhile, in 1963 some of the more "radical" Bajaraka leaders, including Y Dhon Adrong, had crossed the border to Prince Norodom Sihanouk's Cambodia to seek refuge and support, and were put in contact with Cham and Khmer Krom irredentist movements. Within Vietnam, both the Cham and Khmer ethnic groups had experienced the loss of territory and resources during Vietnam's historical expansion from the Red River Delta in what has been called the "southward march" (*nam tiến*) from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.[32] The "postcolonial" situation, in which the Việt were demographically, politically, and culturally dominant in the new state, inspired some Cham intellectuals to seek the renaissance of the erstwhile Cham "kingdom," and some Khmer groups in the Mekong Delta to seek reintegration with the Khmer homeland, Cambodia. Eventually a coalition was formed between two irredentist groups, one Khmer and one Cham – the Front de Libération du Kampuchea Krom and the Front de Libération de

30 Salemink, *Ethnography*, ch. 6.

31 Edward Miller, "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist Crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, 6 (2015), 1903–62.

32 Po Dharma, *Le Pāṇḍuranga (Campā), 1802–1835. Ses rapports avec le Vietnam*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1987); Raymond Scupin, "Historical, Ethnographic, and Contemporary Political Analyses of the Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, 2 (October 1995), 301–28; Philip Taylor, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty* (Singapore, 2014).

Champa – and the Highlander autonomy movement, which went by a series of different names over time.[33] Eventually this coalition movement adopted the name Front Unifié de Libération des Races Opprimées – better known as FULRO – that exploded onto the scene in 1964 with simultaneous revolts in five Special Forces camps.[34]

In the Special Forces camps, ethnic tensions ran high because of the enhanced command roles assumed by Vietnamese Special Forces, and of their attempts to disarm Highlander militia in camps that were deemed "secure." The FULRO shadow command structure came under the influence of radical Highlanders in Cambodia, led by Les Kosem, who was in the Buôn Sarpa camp at the time. This strongman behind the movement was a well-connected ethnic Cham major in the Cambodian army, who received tacit support from Prince Sihanouk and General Lon Nol for the promotion of the idea that the Central Highlands constituted *haut Champa*, that is the highland region located between the erstwhile Cham kingdom on the coast of central Vietnam and the Cham populations on the Mekong River in Cambodia.[35] In a surprise move, on September 20, 1964, Highlander militia revolted in five camps, killing a number of Vietnamese commanders and taking many American and Vietnamese Special Forces hostage. The rebels demanded the reconstitution of the "special status" that the Central Highlands had enjoyed under Emperor Bảo Đại, as well as their own armed forces and flag. A move to take Ban Mê

33 Initially the Front de Libération des Montagnards, it became the Front de Libération du Kampuchea Nord; Front de Libération des Hauts Plateaux du Champa; Front de Libération Dega-Cham; and Front de Libération du Pays Libre Dega-Cham. See Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*.

34 In the various documents distributed during the Conférence des Peuples Indochinois in Phnom Penh, February 25, 1965, FULRO was referred to as Front Unifié de Libération de la Race Opprimée, i.e. of one single "race."

35 Les Kosem (1927–76) was close to Major Lon Non, younger brother of General Lon Nol, who was the military commander of Cambodia and who replaced Prince Sihanouk as head of state after a US-supported coup in 1970. When the emergent Khmer Rouge crushed Les Kosem's irredentist Cham dream, he restyled himself the leader of the Khmer Muslims, as most of the Cham in Cambodia and the Vietnamese Mekong Delta were Muslim. In 1974 he fled to Malaysia with as many Cham refugees as he could take; he died there on December 7, 1976. See also Mervyn A. Jaspan, *Recent Developments among the Cham of Indochina: The Revival of Champa* (Hull, 1969); Jacques Dournes, "Recherches sur le Haut-Champa," *France-Asie* 24, 2 (1970), 143–62; Les Kosem, *The Martyrdom of Khmers Muslims* (Phnom Penh, 1974), https://archive.org/details/TheMartyrdomOfKhmersMuslims; Raymond Scupin, "Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, 2 (October 1995), 301–28; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*; Po Dharma, "Viếng thăm mộ Thiếu Tướng Les Kosem, sáng lập viên phong trào Fulro" [A Visit to the Grave of General Les Kosem, a Founding Member of the FULRO Movement], *Champaka*, April 24, 2013, www.champaka.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=777:viengtham&catid=80:2012&Itemid=92.

Thuột city was thwarted, however, and in four camps US mediators were able to secure the release of the Vietnamese Special Forces in exchange for a nonviolent response on the part of the South Vietnamese army.[36] Radicalized by Les Kosem, the Buôn Sarpa CIDG defected to Cambodia, where they would constitute a small military presence in Mondulkiri province, adjacent to Darlac. A group of these Highlander militia fetched Bajaraka leader Y Bham Enuol from his residence in Ban Mê Thuột and took him to Cambodia, where he was followed by hundreds of Highlander militia. Y Bham was to stay most of the time in Cambodia – in the latter years in detention in Phnom Penh – until he died there at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in April 1975.[37]

After the FULRO rebellion in September 1964 a series of confused negotiations took place between the various military government parties of the RVN and Highlanders associated with FULRO's loose organization, interspersed with various real or attempted FULRO uprisings in CIDG/Special Forces camps. In Cambodia FULRO presented itself as an alliance of irredentist movements claiming parts of Vietnam, namely the Front de la Libération des Khmer Krom, Front de Libération des Hauts-Plateaux du Champa, the Front de Libération du Kambuja Nord, and the Front de Libération du Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois. In reality this coalition was a front for Cambodia's head of state Prince Sihanouk, who harbored territorial claims to parts of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.[38] This became clear at the Conference of Indochinese Peoples (Conférence des Peuples Indochinois), which he organized in Phnom Penh on February 25, 1965. This conference was intended to be the diplomatic launching pad for FULRO, with the distribution of a history of FULRO as well as one of the Front de Libération des Hauts Plateaux du

36 Interviews of General John "Fritz" Freund (May 1990) and Captain Vernon Gillespie (May 1990). See also Howard Sochurek, "American Special Forces in Action in Viet Nam: How Coolness and Character Averted a Bloodbath When Mountain Tribes Rose in Revolt," *National Geographic* 127, 1 (1965), 38–65; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 91–108; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*. A copy of the "Déclaration du Haut Comité du Front Unifié de Lutte de la Race Opprimée" (FULRO, with "race" in the singular) was signed on September 20, 1964, by Y Bham (on behalf of the Highlanders), Chau Dara (on behalf of the Khmer Krom), and Po Nagar (on behalf of the Cham), with Po Nagar being an alias for Les Kosem: Echols Collection, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.

37 François Ponchaud, *Cambodge année zéro* (Paris, 1977), 15–16.

38 Sarin Chhak, *Les frontières du Cambodge. Tome 1. Les frontières du Cambodge avec les anciens pays de la Fédération Indochinoise. Le Laos et le Vietnam (Cochinchine et Annam). Préface de SAR le prince Norodom Sihanouk* (Paris, 1966). For a more contemporary discussion about Cambodia's border troubles with Thailand, see John Burgess, *Temple in the Clouds: Faith and Conflict at Preah Vihear* (Bangkok, 2015); and Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu, 2015).

Champa, authored by Les Kosem under the alias Po Nagar, and *Extraits de l'Histoire des Hauts-Plateaux du Centre-Vietnam (Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois)*, authored by Y Bham. Although FULRO was supposed to be the umbrella organization of three different irredentist movements of Highlanders, Cham, and Khmer Krom, a reading of all three *Historiques* makes clear that both the organizational and personnel structure and the territorial and representative claims overlapped, with Vietnam's Central Highlands claimed by Central Highlanders as the Hauts Plateaux du Sud-Indochinois – the French colonial designation – and by Cham as the Hauts Plateaux du Champa.

During the conference a new theory was proposed that sought to create a "racial" basis for the coalition of Highlanders, Cham, and Khmer Krom as belonging to the same race, indicated with the neologism of "*Austriens*" (not to be confused in English with Austrians, which in French is rendered as *Autrichiens*). It postulated a racial bond between Khmer, Cham, and Highlanders, which was contrasted with the Việt – referred to with the derogative label of "Yuon" or "Yuan" by their neighbors – and which facilitated Cambodian territorial claims to parts of South Vietnam. The idea of a *race austrienne* was concocted by Charles Meyer, French advisor to Sihanouk, on the basis of the linguistic categories of Austronesian and Austroasiatic, designations of the language families that included Cham, Rhadé, Jarai, Raglai, and Churu (Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesian) and Khmer and all other Central Highland vernaculars (Austroasiatic or Mon-Khmer). In the *Historique* of the Hauts Plateaux du Champa Khmer, Cham, and Highlanders were also considered to belong to one race, namely the Kham – conveniently sharing an etymological root with Cambodia.[39] It is clear from these convoluted ethnic and racial fabrications that they were intended to justify alliances against one common enemy, namely the Việt – whether incorporated in the RVN, NLF, or DRVN.

39 See the *Historique du Front Unifié de Lutte de la Race Opprimé* (especially p. 2); *Historique du Front de Libération des Hauts Plateaux du Champa* (especially p. 19); *Extraits de l'Histoire des Hauts-Plateaux du Centre-Vietnam (Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois)* – copies of which are in my possession. See also Charles Meyer, "Les mystérieuses relations entre le Roi du Cambodge et les Pötao des Jarai," *Etudes Cambodgiennes* 4 (1965), 14–26; and Charles Meyer, "Kambuja et Kirata," *Etudes Cambodgiennes* 5 (1966), 17–33. In his book *Derrière le sourire khmer* (Paris, 1971), 269–70, however, Charles Meyer attributes this racial idea to "the strange Lon Nol." Hickey attempts to trace the genealogy of the term in his *Free in the Forest*, 115–16. Note the use of a linguistic category to denote a race, much like the Nazis applied the linguistic category of Aryan to race. The author of the English-language Wikipedia entry on FULRO wrote of Les Kosem that he was "suspected to have been working as a double agent for both the Cambodian secret service and the French" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Front_for_the_Liberation_of_Oppressed_Races).

Highlanders and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975

On a nationwide scale the unraveling of the security situation in the Central Highlands after Operation Switchback was compounded by the political instability of the RVN after the Buddhist crisis and the killing of the Ngô brothers, leading to more brazen attacks on RVN and US positions by the NLF and its DRVN allies. A fierce attack on February 7, 1965, by the PLAF on the American helicopter base Camp Holloway near Pleiku in the Central Highlands provoked a massive military response, with a heavy bombing campaign against the North (Operation Rolling Thunder) and the landing of US marines near Đà Nẵng in March 1965, initiating a military buildup that would reach more than 500,000 at its height in 1968. In other words, while there had been US Special Forces in Vietnam who operated in an advisory capacity only, there was now a direct and growing combat presence of the US military in Vietnam, not unlike the direct French presence in the Highlands during the French Indochina War. The enhanced US presence seduced Highlanders to see a wide assortment of American agents – Special Forces officers, missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, CIA, US Agency for International Development, and International Volunteer Service officers, and even anthropologists – as trusted or at least potential protectors or go-betweens in their deliberations with the RVN government and army. This bond – real or assumed – between some Highlanders and some Americans raised suspicions among many Việt officials, who tended to see Highlanders as primitive, naive, and gullible, and as disloyal and potential traitors.[40]

The expanding presence of the US military after 1965 was matched by the increasing role of the Northern People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in the war, giving it a more conventional flavor, with emphasis on use of heavy firepower and the air force instead of the guerrilla and counterinsurgency tactics that had characterized the NLF and CIDG approaches in 1962. Relying on their superiority in terms of technology and firepower, the US Army preferred pitched battles on empty terrain, unencumbered by the presence of local populations, and this preference applied even more to the air force, which sought to create "free fire zones," where the population had been removed and it had license to "kill everything that moves." In order to create such a battlefield, local populations were forced into refugee camps, and those resisting or avoiding resettlement would be labeled "VC" (Viet Cong), meaning followers of the NLF, who could then be legitimately killed. According to Gerald

40 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 47–131; Salemink, *Ethnography*, 179–210.

Hickey, two-thirds to four-fifths of the Highlander population had been moved or resettled at least once during the war, and the use of force and violence was often excessive, sometimes leading to atrocities. Needless to say, these policies and military tactics were highly unpopular among Highlanders and those Americans who opted to work *with* them, such as missionaries, aid workers, intelligence personnel, and Special Forces. As an embedded anthropologist, Hickey saw it as his duty to warn against such policy programs and military tactics, but to little avail.[41]

In this confused and depressing situation, FULRO fragmented and reconfigured in alliance with a variety of different interest groups in the RVN, the United States, and Cambodia. Depending on the vantage point, FULRO has been interpreted in very different ways, if only because it was hardly a unified organization. Some Highlander leaders pursued a military career in the ARVN or working directly with the US Special Forces; many young Highlanders were eager to pursue military careers – both with the CIDG and beyond. Some civil leaders of Bajaraka and FULRO oscillated between oppositional and governmental positions, with the Catholic Bahnar leader Paul Nur and the Jarai leader Nay Luett eventually taking up ministerial positions in the RVN. Some Highlander leaders continued to follow the NLF. Some leaders pursued the FULRO dream in Cambodia, in conjunction with Prince Sihanouk and from 1970 the Lon Nol regime. This FULRO branch was dominated by the Cham colonel Les Kosem, who used it as a vehicle for furthering Cham claims in both Vietnam and Cambodia and for his personal ambitions within the Cambodian political landscape.

It would require too much space to discuss in detail the series of events from 1965 onward, as the history of the Central Highlands, the Highlanders, and FULRO is complex. In his *Free in the Forest*, Hickey describes in great detail the many armed groups of Highlanders that emerged and vanished, moving in and out of the South Vietnamese armed forces, but invariably legitimizing their authority with reference to FULRO and its Rhadé leader Y Bham Enuol.[42] Until 1968 Y Bham resided at his FULRO headquarters at Camp le Rolland in Mondulkiri province in Cambodia across the border from Darlac, where he became more and more alienated from the various armed FULRO

41 Interviews of Gerald C. Hickey (April 1990); Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 132–204; Salemink, *Ethnography*, 211–56. For accounts of the common and arbitrary nature of violence, see Michael D. Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York, 2006); Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York, 2013).

42 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 132–230.

factions of Highlanders within the RVN. After the coup against Sihanouk in 1970, Les Kosem, who was close to the new president Lon Nol and his brother Lon Non, became the champion of the "Khmers Muslims" – ethnic Cham – while simultaneously commanding a fierce battalion against the emerging Khmer Rouge, and eventually leaving Cambodia before it was completely taken over by the latter.[43]

With their charismatic leader Y Bham Enuol across the border in Cambodia under the control of Les Kosem, and with Sihanouk, Lon Nol, the CIA, the NLF, the DRVN, and the French and Chinese secret services operating at greater distance, between 1965 and 1975 FULRO became a pawn in the various power games on the fringes of the Vietnam War. At the same time, the fragmented FULRO movement was unsuccessful in keeping the war away from the Highlands or in securing Highlander autonomy. On the contrary: Operation Switchback effectively created fragmented groups of professional Highlander troops and various armed Highlander groups that continued to operate in the Central Highlands with some connection to FULRO until 1975. The CIDG and related programs (such as the Mobile Strike Force, Mountain Scouts, Trương Sơn Force, and the Regional Forces and Popular Forces – these last were nicknamed "ruffpuff" by American soldiers) trained and armed Highlanders mostly at the initiative of non-Việt foreigners, cutting these fighters loose from their village environments and ritualized agricultural lifestyles, and simultaneously making them partially dependent on outsider support rather than securing autonomy. However, after Operation Switchback these Highlander fighters were detached from their foreign mentors by officially turning them over to a Vietnamese command structure, thereby alienating the Highlander militia and inadvertently turning them into the armed wing of the Highlander autonomy movement – or, to put it better, of the various factions using the name of FULRO. When in late 1968 Y Bham Enuol, still the titular head of FULRO, was placed under house arrest in Phnom Penh, the FULRO military headquarters in Mondulkiri province disintegrated, and the remainder of FULRO in Vietnam fragmented or rallied to the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu government in 1969.[44]

43 For the leadership role of Les Kosem, see his *Martyrdom of Khmers Muslims*; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*; Po Dharma, "FULRO. Biến cố nhất thời trong lịch sử hay truyền thống đấu tranh của dân tộc Champa" [Key Events in the Historical Struggle of the Cham People], in *Deuxième symposium franco-soviétique sur l'Asie du Sud-Est* (Moscow, 1993), 263–77; Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 92.

44 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 257–92; Salemink, *Ethnography*, 247–55.

But fueled by growing discontent among young Rhadé and Jarai about the uncompromising attitude, the corruption, and the continued land grabs of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime, in 1973 a number of FULRO units reconstituted themselves around Ban Mê Thuột under the leadership of the Jarai FULRO leader Kpă Koi. Kpă Koi was supported by a number of senior Highlanders with (previous) ties to FULRO, who took a dim view of the US capability to protect the Highlanders after the Paris Peace Accords of January 27, 1973, against the backdrop of the gradual implosion of the Lon Nol regime and the resultant presence of Khmer Rouge across the border in Cambodia. Claiming to act on behalf of Y Bham, Kpă Koi entered into negotiations with the PLAF, whose regiments in that region consisted partly of Highlanders, represented by their Rhadé vice president Y Bih Aleo.[45] Throughout 1974, this revived FULRO movement appealed to former FULRO fighters who had rallied to the RVN in 1969 and expanded its control in the villages around Ban Mê Thuột.

In March 1975, it was the silent complicity of these FULRO units, and the Rhadé villages around Ban Mê Thuột under their influence, that ensured the surprise element in the attack by regular North Vietnamese cavalry. Their tanks were reportedly painted with "Highlander Autonomy Movement of the NLF" on the sides, and Hickey reports that some FULRO units even participated in the surprise attack on Ban Mê Thuột. The subsequent history is well known. The rapid takeover of Ban Mê Thuột prompted Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to withdraw his armed forces from the largest part of the Central Highlands – most notably Kontum, Pleiku, and Cheo Reo (now Ayun Pa) – along the only road that was not blocked, Route 7B, a barely passable forest track. In the words of Hickey, the rout of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians along this road "may have been the worst bloodbath of the

45 This coalition between the "new" FULRO and the NLF's Highlands Autonomy Movement was reportedly largely inspired by expectations of monetary gain from (illegal) logging and – ironically – from the premiums paid by the United States for successful searches for those missing in action. See Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 266–74; Po Dharma, "Từ FLM đến FULRO. Cuộc đấu tranh của dân tộc thiểu số miền nam Đông Dương (1955–1975)" [From FLM to FULRO: The Struggle of Ethnic Minorities in Southern Indochina (1955–1975)], *Champaka* 7 (2007), 139–44, www.champaka.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=223:champaka7&catid=55:tp-san; Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN, 2001), 900–1; FULRO activities outside Darlac province, AmEmbassy Saigon to SecState WashDC, CINCPAC, COMIPAC, COMUFSAG, November 8, 1974 (see www.wikileaks.org/plusd/pdf/?df=59444). On Kpă Koi's appointment as vice-president of the Front de Libération des Hauts-Plateaux Montagnard (FLHPM) on October 20, 1973, by Y Bham Enuol, see Obituary of Y Ghok Nie Krieng, http://weblog.viet.net/article.php/20110314125904792.

Vietnam War."[46] The rout effectively cut the Northern cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng off from the South and eventually forced President Thiệu to evacuate the coastal parts of central Vietnam, triggering the collapse of the RVN as a separate state.[47] In other words, the ethnic unraveling of the RVN as brought out in the fragmented and partially reconstituted Highlander autonomy movement FULRO was instrumental in bringing about the surprise collapse of the RVN in spring 1975.

Epilogue

The Central Highlands and its indigenous populations played a pivotal role during the Vietnam War. The communist insurgency in the RVN started with the Trà Bồng uprising and other revolts in the Highlands in 1959 and 1960; the direct intervention of the US Army in 1965 followed a PLAF attack on a US Army camp near Pleiku; and the collapse of the RVN started with the communist surprise conquest of Ban Mê Thuột. In all these pivotal events, Highlanders played an important role. An early American success story of mobilizing Highlanders for the Village Defense Program was undermined in 1963 as Highlander troops were separated from their home villages under the umbrella of Operation Switchback, while simultaneously militarizing Highlander youth. Eventually, this resulted in a situation where such Highlander units, without clear leadership and in a situation of violence and deprivation, acted as loose cannons, allying themselves with any outside force that seemed to offer the best terms in the short run. The alliance of the Kpă Koi faction of FULRO with the NLF in 1974–5, running up to the conquest of Ban Mê Thuột and the consequent collapse of the RVN, shows the importance of such local deals not perhaps for the longer-term outcome of the war, but certainly for the speed of events.

But the reconciliation between Kpă Koi's FULRO faction with the new regime was short-lived. Already in the summer of 1975 the communist NLF leader Y Bih Aleo had become disenchanted when he realized that the autonomy promised by the northern regime would not materialize, and in 1977 his Highlands Autonomy Movement was disbanded along with the NLF. In 1976 Kpă Koi and other FULRO leaders went underground when they learned

46 Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 281; see also Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 899–905.

47 See Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 266–74; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 900–26; Po Dharma, *Du FLM au FULRO*; Tom Polgar Remembers, January 27, 2013, http://lde421.blogspot.com/2013/01/tom-polgar-remembers.html.

about the New Economic Zones program that would relocate many Kinh lowlanders into the Highlands.[48] Considering FULRO members CIA tools, the new communist regime cracked down on them; they responded by reviving their guerrilla war against the communists, which was doomed to failure.

From the late 1970s the Central Highlands were incrementally settled by millions of mostly Việt colonists who grew coffee and other cash crops, displacing Highlanders from their lands. The Central Highlands became one of the world's major coffee, tea, rubber, pepper, cashew, and cassava-growing and -exporting regions, massively transforming its landscape and ethnoscape,[49] as the Central Highlands' ethnodemography changed rapidly. Any protest against dispossession or any manifestation of cultural autonomy – for example, in the guise of a massive Highlander conversion to evangelical Christianity – is interpreted by the current Vietnamese regime in terms of a history of contested sovereignty as embodied by FULRO, and hence severely repressed.[50] Thus, the story after 1975 is equally as tragic for the Central Highlanders as the one before 1975, as the ethnic unraveling happening in the RVN has not healed with the reunification of the two Vietnams. The course of history gives Central Highlanders reason to feel betrayed by all sides (the French, the Americans, the Cambodians, the various Vietnamese parties) while at the same time harboring a profound sense of nostalgia for a (colonial) past imagined as free from outside interference.

48 Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 959–60.

49 The concept of ethnoscape was coined by Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture and Society* 7 (1990), 295–310.

50 For post-1975 overviews and analyses, see Salemink, *Ethnography*, 257–87; Oscar Salemink, "Changing Rights and Wrongs: The Transnational Construction of Indigenous and Human Rights among Vietnam's Central Highlanders," *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 47 (2006), 32–47; Oscar Salemink, "Revolutionary and Christian Ecumenes and Desire for Modernity in the Vietnamese Highlands," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16, 4 (2015), 388–409.