

Long Hoang Vu Vietnam's Revolutionary
Trajectory: Between
Leninist Aspirations and
Apocalyptic Realities

Abstract: This article examines Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory as an attempt to follow Lenin's concept of the 'transitional period' to achieve a distinctive vision of the 'end of history.' Drawing on case studies of Phạm Tuân's 1980 space mission and Trần Đức Thiệp's 1992 nuclear accident, I analyze how Vietnam's revolutionary ambitions produced unexpected apocalyptic risks. For Vietnamese thinkers and statesmen, the apocalyptic threat was twofold: dependence on foreign powers at the superstructural level and technological backwardness at the infrastructural level. Yet, paradoxically, it was their commitment to avoiding these threats that created genuine apocalyptic risks through teleological thinking and ideological dogmatism. As they simultaneously attempted to maintain a communist political superstructure while accelerating technological development, a dangerous disconnect emerged between advanced theoretical knowledge and underdeveloped material infrastructure. This contradiction was vividly demonstrated in both Vietnam's celebrated space achievement and its lesser-known nuclear accident. Rather than treating Vietnamese revolutionary thought as derivative of European Marxism, I illuminate how revolutionaries transformed abstract ideology into lived experience, creating distinctive forms of temporal consciousness that evolved from dogmatic teleology toward a more nuanced engagement with historical contingency as Vietnam navigated between ideological aspirations and material realities.

Keywords: Vietnamese revolution, Leninist transitional period, apocalyptic risk, technological acceleration, ideological dogmatism

The ‘End of History’: A Rhetorical Frame

An attack on a Việt Cộng squad consisting of 11 soldiers occurred in February 1966 in Sông Bé, South Vietnam. Eight people were killed and three were severely wounded when the US Air Force carpet bombed said squad. The three injured survivors, Lê Hoàng Vũ, Nguyễn Chí, and Trần Viết Dũng, were unable to maintain a straight path due to malfunctioning contact devices. The trio decided to stop after trudging through an old-growth forest for days on end without any supplies of food or drink. As they lay in wait for death beneath a weathered tree, they penned their final words. The three young soldiers detailed their deaths and expressed their wish for a future when the war would be over, or at the very least, a very distant future, in a letter they wrote:

Or if it is not until 50–100 years later that this letter reaches those who, perhaps the next generation, allow us to send our greetings to socialism¹, allow us to express our wonderful joy at the happiness and peace that permeate our planet, that we become useful dust particles—and more, if possible, let us send our warmest greetings to people in distant stars, new friends between planets (Trần et al. 1966/2005, last paragraph).

The letter to a distant future demonstrates strong optimism in both socialist ideals and scientific progress, intertwining them into two visions of the utopian future. The first vision, the inevitable triumph of socialism, was the common belief among Vietnamese communist soldiers who devoted their lives to the war against the oppression of the US, a capitalist empire. The Việt Cộng’s view towards the Second Indochina War during the 1960s and 1970s was shaped by the odd combination between Confucian patriotism, rooted in the feudalist era, and current Marxist-Leninist thoughts, whose goals were to defeat both the domestic feudalist social order and the international bourgeois structure and to actualize Lenin’s vision of the end of history: communism.

In the second vision, the soldiers depicted an optimistic post-ideology future of scientific and technological advancement. Their imagination of sending greetings to ‘people in distant stars’ and forging friendships ‘between planets’ suggests a vision that human progress will extend far beyond Earth. This technocratic optimism had dual origins in Vietnam’s history. First, the French brought Western concepts of social evolutionism to Vietnam during the colonial era, using developmental hierarchies to justify their rule by positioning themselves as ‘civilized’ administrators of

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¹ In this context, ‘socialism’ is used in a Marxist-Leninist sense; it is the first phase of communism. Lenin (1999) wrote: “[I]n the first phase of communist society (usually called socialism) ‘bourgeois law’ is not abolished in its entirety, but only in part, only in proportion to the economic revolution so far attained, i.e., only in respect of the means of production. ‘Bourgeois law’ recognizes them as the private property of individuals. Socialism converts them into common property. To that extent—and to that extent alone—‘bourgeois law’ disappears” (472). In this paper, I will use ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ interchangeably, which all refer to this definition by Lenin.

a 'backward' territory. After the revolution, Vietnamese leaders inverted this logic, believing they could accelerate their development to match or even surpass capitalist societies through revolutionary will. Second, Vietnam adopted Lenin's approach to socialist development, which advocated industrializing and modernizing the economic infrastructure while establishing a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' at the political level. Lenin termed this the 'transitional period,' during which revolutionary states would harness technological advancement to build the material foundations for 'true socialism.' Vietnam's pursuit of scientific development thus followed this Leninist model of development, merging revolutionary politics with technological aspiration.

The three trajectories of thought that helped the three soldiers imagine the country's possible futures long after their deaths—local patriotic cosmologies, historical materialism, and social evolutionism—all envision a predetermined historical chronology of the future.

The end of history bears a complex intellectual genealogy that illuminates Vietnam's revolutionary vision. Much later, at the end of the 20th century, Fukuyama (1992) popularized this term to suggest that liberal democracy represented humanity's final political form, drawing on Hegel's concept of a universal history driven by the 'struggle for recognition.' As Fukuyama writes, this struggle represents humanity's fundamental desire to "be recognized as a being with a certain worth or dignity" (xvi), claiming that the American and French revolutions satisfied this longing through "universal and reciprocal recognition" (xviii). According to Fukuyama, universal history reveals a coherent, directional pattern in human development, driven by consciousness and freedom. This isn't merely chronicling events but uncovering principles that shape societies. He argues that the Cold War's end suggests history moves toward liberal democracy as humanity's final governmental form, representing the culmination of political evolution.

Yet, Marx's conception of universal history, which influenced Vietnam's revolutionaries, was more nuanced. As Duy Lap Nguyen (2020) argues, Marx's elaboration wasn't an attempt to provide an objective account of all human development. He acknowledged that we can only understand history from the vantage point of capitalism, a position unique because capitalism represents a singular rupture in human history that breaks all previous social patterns through its universal commodification of human relations. Nguyen demonstrates that Marx's critique reveals capitalism's internal contradictions not to predict its inevitable collapse, but to accelerate its self-transformation. By showing how capitalism's 'decoding' of traditional social relations creates both unprecedented alienation and

unprecedented possibilities for new forms of social organization, Marx aimed to intensify these contradictions rather than simply describe them. Most significantly, Nguyen suggests that the resolution of this conflict wouldn't result in a final stable state or end of history, but would break humanity out of both pre-capitalist forms of social coding and capitalist forms of abstract exchange; opening entirely new possibilities for social organization that we can barely imagine from our current position.

Lenin's adaptation of Marx, which Vietnamese revolutionaries later embraced, transformed this theoretical critique into a state-building program that positioned communism as the literal end of history—a dream-world at the heart of revolutionary promise. While critics have dismissed this as 'vulgar Marxism,' I argue that Lenin's interpretation, though fraught with risks, was strategically necessary in the revolutionary contexts of Russia and Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communist Party deployed the concept at both rhetorical and theoretical levels—mobilizing the masses during decades of revolutionary struggle while simultaneously envisioning a post-war society that would transcend capitalist relations.

In this paper, I undertake neither a critique of Hegel, Marx, or Fukuyama's conceptions of the end of history, nor do I deploy this concept as a theoretical framework to analyze Việt Cộng politics from an external perspective. Instead, I pursue what Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020) term an 'anthropology of revolution'—an ethnographic approach that examines revolutionary experience from within its own ontological premises. This methodology reframes revolution not merely as a political event to be explained through external theoretical models, but as a transformative process that generates distinct ways of being and knowing. By exploring how Vietnamese revolutionaries adapted and localized Marxism-Leninism within their cultural context, I illuminate how they navigated between universal revolutionary principles and particular historical conditions, creating what Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi might call a 'revolutionary situation' with its own emergent logic and temporality.

Through this lens, I investigate how Vietnamese revolutionaries articulated their own version of the end of history that served a dual purpose: justifying the moral and historical necessity of revolution while simultaneously addressing the apocalyptic question of what might happen should the revolution fail. This approach reveals how revolutionary thinking in Vietnam encompassed not only utopian visions of communism but also confronted the possibility of catastrophic outcomes, a productive tension that shaped scientific and technological pursuits throughout the revolutionary period. Rather than treating Vietnamese revolutionary thought as derivative of European Marxism, this anthropological perspective illumi-

nates how revolutionaries transformed abstract ideology into lived experience, creating new forms of political subjectivity and temporal consciousness specific to Vietnam's historical trajectory.

The concept of the end of history parallels apocalyptic narratives in Vietnamese revolutionary thought, though with distinctive local contours. For Vietnamese thinkers and statesmen, the apocalyptic threat was twofold: dependence on foreign powers at the superstructural level and technological backwardness at the infrastructural level. Yet paradoxically, it was their commitment to avoiding these threats that created genuine apocalyptic risks through teleological thinking and ideological dogmatism. As they simultaneously attempted to maintain a communist superstructure while accelerating technological development, a dangerous disconnect emerged between advanced theoretical knowledge and underdeveloped material infrastructure. This dogmatism, which I examine through two case studies—Phạm Tuân's 1980 space mission and Trần Đức Thiệp's 1992 nuclear accident—reveals how revolutionary aspirations divorced from material realities produced precisely the catastrophic scenarios that the revolution sought to prevent.

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Vietnamese Specificity: Blending Marxism-Leninism and Local Cosmologies

I aim to explore the idea that permanent sets of revolutionary events, stages of development, and tendencies, inherent in the three intellectual trajectories I have mentioned, determine humanity's historical chronology. These intellectual trajectories, which view history as following an objective orientation, also presume the end of history. I want to examine the emergence and effects of this idea in reorganizing social, political, and onto-epistemological orders in Vietnam following the victory of the communist revolution in 1945. I agree with Spencer (2022) that the concept of progress has become entangled with the concept of endings. As the author suggests, after the Chernobyl disaster, the understanding of progress shifted from continuous advancement in human society through industrialization to a continuous state of ending, defined by its relationship to various forms of finitude. In the case of the Vietnamese revolution, however, the notion of the end of history has been there since the local revolutionaries adopted and modified Marxism-Leninism in the early twentieth century. The difference between the notions of the end after the Vietnamese revolution and after the Chernobyl disaster is that the former is optimistic and the latter is pessimistic.

Vietnam's philosophy of revolution was built based on the mutual obsession of the human actor in locating oneself in the course of history, found in both local views of history, the emerging Westernized *épistème*, and Marxism-Leninism.

One defined oneself in pre-colonial Confucian society as a descendant of Thần Nông and carried the same blood ancestry as the Hán people. This concept evolved from a political model seen as a family structure, grounded in an intellectual basis of Confucian orthodoxy and blood lineage. To establish historical continuity and shared lineage among the Vietnamese people, they drew on legends and myths such as the stories of Kinh Dương Vương and Hùng Vương. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the colonial era, the concept of fictive kinship continued to evolve. Vietnamese literati mixed modern theories such as social Darwinism, Marxism, and nationalism with a Confucian worldview. Promoting the idea of a united Vietnamese people based on common ancestry and blood ties, this mix functioned as a tool for anti-colonial and anti-feudal movements (Trần 2020). During her trip to Hanoi in May 1968, American left-wing social critic Susan Sontag (1969) wrote: "They [North Vietnamese] live exclusively in *the world of history*" (emphasis added). The term 'the world of history' was posed to point out how Vietnamese linked their identities not to personal lives but to the nation's historical chronology of fighting against invaders. A list of historical precedents backed up the people's belief in their inevitable victory: they had defeated the Chinese, Mongols, French, and Japanese before. In this context, people viewed the law of history as intrinsically moral, believing that the weak consistently prevailed. The patriots expected this ethical law to repeat in future history.

During the colonial era, beyond the patriotic sentiment of *mất nước* (losing one's country), Vietnamese intellectuals experienced profound anxiety about their perceived 'backwardness' compared to the West. This anxiety exemplifies what Chakrabarty describes as "the waiting room of history" where non-Western societies are positioned as "not yet" modern (2000, 8). This consciousness was shaped by multiple Western intellectual currents, with Marxism being one influential framework alongside French positivism, social Darwinism, and liberal developmentalism. French colonial ethnographers methodically classified Vietnamese culture as 'primitive,' creating what Chakrabarty calls a 'figure of lack' where "the 'Indian' was always a figure of lack," (32) a pattern replicated for Vietnamese subjects. Vietnamese intellectuals educated in French institutions internalized these classifications while simultaneously believing in Vietnam's capacity to achieve modernity through Westernization. Historical consciousness

underwent radical transformation. Rather than viewing Vietnamese history as merely cyclical defense against invasions, intellectuals reimagined it as a developmental narrative emphasizing economic growth, scientific understanding, and individual enlightenment. The Westernized intelligentsia—spanning political divides from Confucian reformers to Marxist revolutionaries—worked to align Vietnam’s historical trajectory with what they perceived as universal modernity. This project involved extensive intellectual labor: Western-trained Vietnamese scholars translated scientific terminology from multiple European languages, while historians and anthropologists secularized Vietnam’s origin myths to position them within universal human history. These intellectuals, whether liberal nationalists, socialist revolutionaries, or Confucian modernizers, collectively established modernization as Vietnam’s historical imperative—though they fiercely debated which Western model offered the most promising path forward, disagreements that ultimately exploded into bloody ideological conflicts during the twentieth century.

Marxism-Leninism, popularized among Vietnamese revolutionaries in the 1930s and 1940s, provided the framework for envisioning what Lenin believed to be the last stage of human civilization. While the positivist human sciences brought to Vietnam during the colonial era revealed Vietnamese as belonging to a broader category of identity called homo sapiens, they also justified Western rules towards the Oriental Other. The “people-eating system” (*chế độ thực dân*) (Ho Tai 1992, 2), referring to French colonialism in Vietnam, through the lens of social Darwinism—a variant of social evolutionism—was seen as the result of nations’ different speeds of progress. Lenin’s interpretation of Marx’s historical materialism sheds light on this subject matter in a different way. This theory views history as a dialectical evolution propelled by internal contradictions within each mode of production, moving through increasingly complex economic formations—from feudalism through capitalism toward communism—where each new stage emerges from the unresolved tensions of its predecessor. The theory fuels historical progress not by the evolution of idealist qualities such as races, ethnicities, and nations, but by the inherent contradictions and resolutions between the infrastructure and the superstructure within each dominant mode of production. Revolutionaries were inspired by Marx and Engels’ 1848 writing in *The Communist Manifesto*, which stated that the progression of human society from capitalism to communism was marked by the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie: “we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the

bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.” (2010, 38) Marx and Engels’s most significant thesis, which served as the foundation for the later Soviet project, asserted that the infrastructure dictated the superstructure. When class antagonism reached a point that created new communistic relations of production and, in general, revolutionized the infrastructure, or society’s economic base, the political and ideological superstructure would shift to communism. Marx and Engels proposed a resolution to actualize communism, which was later reflected in the creation of world socialist states in the first half of the twentieth century:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible (57, emphasis added).

This resolution would come after the proletariat won the battle of democracy in some of the most advanced Western European capitalist states. However, this was not the case in Soviet Russia and Vietnam. At revolutionary moments, these societies had not yet undergone the capitalist stage of development. After overthrowing the Tsar regime, Lenin (2002a) came up with the idea that instead of building a full communistic society immediately, the revolutionaries would establish a communist political superstructure while adopting the capitalist sciences to leverage the feudalist infrastructure to a modern stage, equal to that of the capitalist countries.² The Leninist regime called this ‘transitional period,’ inherent in which was the sacred mission of “constructing socialism” (Buck-Morss 2000, 58). Influenced directly by Lenin’s formula of revolution, in Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh and other party elites prepared for a two-step revolution. Step one: gaining independence from the French and Japanese and overthrowing the feudalist regime through a bourgeois-democratic revolution. This required a temporary national unity (*khối đại đoàn kết dân tộc*), or a unity between the nationalist bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Step two: nationalizing wealth to eliminate feudalist landlords and bourgeoisie power. Industrial modernization, similar to what occurred in Soviet Russia, would follow the two-step revolution.

The rationale behind the two revolutions is that a society must be modern before it becomes communist. Here, we can understand modern, or more accurately, modernity, as a periodic label that signifies ‘the present,’ where a (capitalist) infrastructure and a (capitalist) superstructure align with each other. This present, however, wasn’t the present of Lenin’s

² Lenin (2002a) wrote: “We must take the entire culture that capitalism left behind and build socialism with it. We must take all its science, technology, knowledge and art. Without these we shall be unable to build communist society. But this science, technology and art are in the hands and in the heads of the experts” (70).

Russia and Hồ's Vietnam. During revolutionary moments, the two states found themselves enmeshed in the past. While Lenin constructed his dreamworld upon a materially³ and culturally⁴ backward feudalist country, Hồ struggled to deal with both a feudalist regime and two colonial powers, exploiting the country to the bone. The goal of the two newly formed communist regimes was to catch up with the West's stage of infrastructural development, located in the present.

This developmental framework epitomizes the inherent Eurocentrism in Marxist historical thought. Marx's proclamation in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that capitalist society "constitutes, therefore, the closing chapter of the prehistoric stage of human society" (Marx 1907, 13), and, as such, reveals how his vision of historical progress was conceived from the vantage point of Western experience rather than a truly universal history. As Chakrabarty (1993) argues, the idea of historicizing carries a chronological, developmental, and progressive assumption that renders non-Western experiences as merely 'pre-' or 'not yet' sufficiently developed, as he writes: "[Historicist thoughts] all share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time" (1094). Lenin's adaptation of Marxism maintained this directional thinking while attempting to accelerate it through revolutionary means. When applied to Vietnam, this framework simultaneously enabled anti-colonial mobilization and generated devastating consequences when local realities failed to conform to theoretical expectations. As Chakrabarty (2000) observes, such revolutionary projects marginalized Indigenous historical experiences as mere "History 2s" that needed to be subordinated to capital's universal historical logic (63), leading to violent attempts to force society into predetermined developmental stages regardless of catastrophic human costs.

Vietnam's vision of the end of history shared similar characteristics with communism, a classless society where people have economic equality, and, as a result, also have political freedom. State theoreticians recognized the future abolishment of the state, as Lenin predicted in his vision of a higher phase of communist society, however, they didn't consider it to be something viable at the moment of revolution. They focused on building a new top-down mode of governance which Kevin Pham (2024) calls 'paternalistic democracy,' which entails that before being allowed to exercise democracy, the people must be guided, politically and morally, until they reach their maturity.

As De Tréglodé (2012) notes, Vietnam's philosophy of revolution was a fusion between cultural conservatism and progressivism. This fusion is

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³ Lenin (2002a) wrote: "The real test to which our revolution is being subjected is that we, in a backward country, succeeded in capturing power before the others, succeeded in establishing the Soviet form of government, the power of the working and exploited people" (68).

⁴ Lenin (2002b) wrote: "Owing to our cultural backwardness we cannot crush capitalism by a frontal attack. Had we been on a different cultural level we could have approached the problem more directly; perhaps other countries will do it in this way when their turn comes to build their communist republics. But we cannot do it in the direct way" (72).

particularly evident in Hồ Chí Minh's vision of Vietnamese society organized into five castes: intellectual, farmer, worker, merchant, soldier. While maintaining a structure reminiscent of feudalist hierarchy, Hồ reinterpreted these castes as equal under the guidance of the communist party, embodying both traditional social organization and revolutionary egalitarianism.

Hồ Chí Minh believed the people were like little children, requiring guidance and education before they could participate in democratic governance. This paternalistic view stemmed from two key historical factors drawn directly from Vietnam's colonial experience. First, the feudalist education system was considered old-fashioned and inadequate, having failed to provide the Vietnamese people with the knowledge needed for modern citizenship. The traditional Confucian curriculum had not prepared the masses for scientific thought or revolutionary consciousness. Second, colonial exploitation had deliberately stunted Vietnam's infrastructural development, preventing the material conditions necessary for political maturity.

Vietnam's motto of the end of history, according to Trường Chinh (2000), was "nationalistic, scientific, populist" (366). This means, in this end point, that Vietnam should be an independent state, not ruled by foreign power. It should prioritize scientific achievement because the version of Leninism Vietnam followed was technologically deterministic. And the achievement of scientific development should be for everyone, following Lenin's rule of transitional period: the infrastructure must be controlled so that its achievements are for the development of the communist future, a world for the popular masses. Of course, by interpreting communism as a fixed stage, the revolution betrayed Marx's dialectical view that no system is final or immune to change. It created a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' to stop the dialectic of history, making communism the end point. This teleological thinking and ideological dogmatism led to the new regime's simultaneous dreamworld and catastrophe.

Locating oneself in the course of history has remained Vietnam's greatest obsession for nearly eight decades following the Vietnamese revolution. The goal that different factions of the party—the orthodox Marxists, the technocrats, and the nationalists—all agree on is modernization. The question is, which modernity should Vietnam head to, while, after the Chernobyl disaster, all states in the Soviet bloc have come to the conclusion that Western modernity is the end of history in a pessimistic way? The following sections of my article will look into how the party elites put three different ideological trajectories on the table while trying

to answer this question during significant events in Vietnam's two most futuristic fields, space travel and nuclear physics.

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Communism in Space, Nationalism on the Ground

In 1984, the remains of three soldiers were found, nine years after the end of the Vietnam War and three years after the communist-led unified country sent its first man into space, General Phạm Tuân (born 1947). This temporal juxtaposition—between the discovery of war casualties and Vietnam's space achievement—reflects the tension between apocalyptic realities and utopian aspirations that characterized Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory. Like the three young soldiers who wrote their final letter beneath a weathered tree in 1966, envisioning 'greetings to people in distant stars,' Vietnam's space program represented both an ideological commitment to the end of history and a technological attempt to accelerate historical development beyond its material conditions.

Before being selected as one of the two Interkosmos research astronauts, alongside Viktor Gorbatko (1934–2017) as the commander, embarking on the Soyuz 37 mission on July 23, 1980, and becoming the first Vietnamese and the first Asian individual to go into space, Phạm Tuân already had a career in the People's Army of Vietnam. His trajectory from fighter pilot to astronaut embodied Hồ Chí Minh's vision of paternalistic democracy, where the people as 'little children' grew up thanks to the ideological guidance of the Party. Tuân's space mission also symbolized Vietnam's attempt to 'leapfrog' historical stages, aligning with the Marxist-Leninist end of history that had been localized within Vietnamese revolutionary thought. Yet, paradoxically, this technological leap depended entirely on Soviet infrastructure, revealing the precarious disconnect between Vietnam's ideological aspirations and material realities; precisely the contradiction that would later produce catastrophic outcomes.

In 1965, Tuân enrolled in the military and got drafted into the People's Air Force. After two years, he completed his studies at the Military Pilot School in the Soviet Union and became a fighter-flying officer. He dedicated himself to defending the airspace of North Vietnam during the American War in the country. In 1968, he officially joined the Workers' Party of Vietnam. By mid-1972, he was chosen as one of the twelve pilots for night fighter training, which equipped him with the necessary skills to detect and shoot down B-52 aircraft. During Operation Linebacker II, an American air force strategic bombing effort against targets in North Vietnam from December 18 to December 29, 1972, Tuân was alleged to have

shot down an American B-52 aircraft. Despite the Americans disputing Tuân's accomplishment and claiming that the B-52 was hit by a surface-to-air missile, he was awarded the title of Hero of the People's Armed Forces in 1973 for his dedication in what the Hanoi side referred to as the 'Điện Biên Phủ in the air.'

In addition to his wartime experience, Phạm Tuân's personal background had a significant role in his selection as one of the crew members for the Soyuz 37 mission. Like the three soldiers whose final letter envisioned technological and political utopias, Tuân represented the ideal synthesis of Vietnamese revolutionary qualities. He was born into a family of farmers in Thái Bình, a poor area in northern Vietnam. "No one lifted Phạm Tuân to the sun when he was born, as some imaginative journalist wrote," stated a renowned Vietnamese writer in the official biography published in a state newspaper: "During his childhood, it is possible that nothing extraordinary occurred" (Hồng 2008). As per the biographer, during Tuân's time studying at the Military Pilot School in the Soviet Union, a doctor discovered his open-heart valve disease. Therefore, the school initially trained him as a mechanic. Through his personal training, he significantly improved his health, to the point where Soviet doctors recommended Tuân as the next candidate for airplane pilot training, citing his up-to-date health.

This narrative of personal transformation through revolutionary will parallels the larger Vietnamese aspiration to transform its historical trajectory through ideological commitment. Just as Tuân overcame biological limitations through discipline and determination, Vietnamese revolutionaries believed they could overcome historical 'backwardness' through ideological conviction and technological advancement. This reflects what Buck-Morss (2000) identifies as the 'dreamworld' of revolution: the belief that revolutionary will could accelerate or even transcend the material conditions of historical development.

Tuân was not revered as a deity but rather perceived as an average individual, like any other member of the proletarian masses, as stated in multiple biographies. It was the will of the little men that shaped their destiny, not the laws of nature, as Alexei Yurchak (2019), the anthropologist of the Soviet system, might, in a sarcastic manner, say. The revolutionary art of constructing the model citizen was designed to promote the communist system by suggesting that it enabled even ordinary individuals to find their rightful place within the system. However, the only requirement was that one's political will had to align with the party's agenda, rather than granting individuals the extraordinary power to control their own lives. In the communist utopia, individuals were rewarded for their contributions

to the system, which symbolized the common good, rather than for personal gain.

However, unlike the Soviet dreamworld, which needed to completely reject the past, the Vietnamese dreamworld both simultaneously rejected and built upon the past, as seen in Phạm Tuân's construction of identity. He possessed the qualities of a war hero, following in the footsteps of traditional heroes like Lý Thường Kiệt (1019–1105) and Trần Hưng Đạo (1231–1300), who defended the feudalist state against the Chinese and the Mongolians. Furthermore, he was a scientist working for the current regime to fulfill their desire of surpassing the natural progression of history and rapidly building a utopia. This dual identity—revolutionary modernizer and traditional patriot—reflects what I earlier described as a synthesis between cultural conservatism and political progressivism. This synthesis represents Vietnam's distinctive approach to the end of history, one that simultaneously embraced universal revolutionary principles while adapting them to particular cultural contexts.

Space travel represented a material manifestation of the Soviet world's idealist pursuit of 'time travel,' which aimed at accelerating the natural pace of history by bypassing capitalism and transitioning directly from feudalism to communism. It represented the remarkable success of industrial modernization in the most backward European country that lacked a capitalist market, unlike the Western development model. According to Gerovitch (2007), the technical design of Soviet spacecrafts and the pilot's role in operating them represented the technocratic approach to human affairs in the communist world:

Soviet cosmonauts were 'designed' as part of a larger technological system; their height and weight were strictly regulated, and their actions were thoroughly programmed. Soviet space politics, one might say, was inscribed on the cosmonauts' bodies and minds, as they had to fit, both physically and mentally, into their spaceships (136).

This technocratic vision represents the Soviet's end of history—a perfectly engineered society where human beings functioned as components within a larger system. Yet this utopian aspiration also contained within it apocalyptic risks, as the subordination of human experience to ideological requirements created conditions for catastrophe.

This aspect exemplified the Soviet lifestyle: citizens were perceived as "the 'little cogs' of a grand state mechanism" (Gerovitch 2007, 139). The technical advancement of the egalitarian world was ahead of its time due to the collective efforts of both human actors and non-human mecha-

nisms, rather than being attributed to any individual. As the spaceship ventured deeper into space, the Soviet world progressed at a faster rate on its path to the end of history. Here, history was viewed as an objective and unchangeable progression towards a utopia. In this view, individuals were encouraged to identify their place in this historical narrative and take action to bring about the ultimate realization of the end of history, rather than questioning the objective nature of history itself.

In Vietnam, the ideology of scientific socialism regarded Lenin's interpretation of historical materialism as a theological belief. It aimed to use scientific progress to convince the masses that a communist triumph was certain, though the country's economic and political reality might tell a different story. As the astronaut was flying towards space on a spacecraft, all citizens were flying towards communism on a 'timecraft,' the country itself. This metaphor of temporal acceleration illuminates how Vietnam's space program was framed within revolutionary aspirations for the end of history—not merely as technological achievement but as evidence that revolutionary will could compress historical time, allowing Vietnam to catch up with and eventually surpass Western modernity.

Buck-Morss (2000) writes: "But the special position of the party as the vanguard of history meant that the possibilities, through an open temporality, of an ungoverned cultural revolution as the path to a new society became one of the dead ends of history" (49–51). While all possibilities for different futures were seen as dead ends, communism appeared to be an unattainable goal. During Phạm Tuân's time in orbit around the Earth, he likely saw that the timecraft was veering off course. The space hero's reflection prompted him to rediscover a communist, internationalist ideology that regarded humanity as a unified species, rendering other categorizations mostly irrelevant: "At that moment, home wasn't Vietnam, Russia, or any other country. It was Earth" (Manh Tung 2018).

This epiphany reveals the inherent contradiction within Vietnam's revolutionary conception of the end of history. On the one hand, the Marxist-Leninist framework promised universal human emancipation beyond national boundaries; on the other hand, Vietnam's revolutionary identity remained deeply rooted in nationalist resistance against foreign domination. This tension would become increasingly apparent as the global communist project began to fragment along national lines.

At the same time, although communism had not yet been wholly achieved anywhere, the socialist faction was on the brink of collapse. Tuân's commitment to internationalism was particularly vulnerable during the concurrent conflicts between socialist states, in which his country was involved: the Cambodian-Vietnamese War (1976–1991) and the Sino-Viet-

namese War (1979). The faction's inclination towards dissolution stemmed from the Sino-Soviet divide, which occurred in the late 1950s following the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. This resulted in a Marxist-Leninist ideological dispute between Mao and the Soviet authorities.

The division between the two communist empires gave rise to several confrontations that had the potential to result in catastrophic consequences. The most notable of these disputes was the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, which carried the risk of nuclear warfare. These inter-communist conflicts represented precisely the apocalyptic scenario that revolutionary theorists had failed to anticipate—rather than achieving the end of history through international proletarian solidarity, communist states found themselves locked in potentially catastrophic geopolitical struggles that mirrored the very capitalist power politics they had sought to transcend.

The consequence of this division was the rapprochement between China and the United States in 1973, which weakened the solidarity of the communist bloc and compelled the Soviet Union to reassess its foreign policy and strategic positioning, as it now confronted the possibility of a two-front strategic situation. Although the event was just one of several factors that indirectly contributed to the decline of global communism, the remainder of the twentieth century saw the East and West abandoning dreamworld construction. Peaceful reforms such as China's *gaige kai-fang* in 1978, Soviet Russia's *perestroika* in 1985, and Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* in 1986, took place after China-US rapprochement. Eastern Europe, on the other hand, faced decades of continuous violent revolutions. The continuity of Marx's timeline was challenged by the fragmentation of geography, as each country followed its own future. These futures were not necessarily communist, as Phạm Tuân imagined when he looked at the earth from outer space.

This geopolitical fragmentation reveals how Vietnam's revolutionary conception of the end of history gradually shifted from a universal teleology toward a more pragmatic nationalism. As the global communist project fractured, Vietnam adapted its revolutionary vision to prioritize national sovereignty and economic development over ideological purity. This shift reflected Vietnam's realization that dogmatic adherence to theoretical models—whether Marxist-Leninist or social evolutionist—could produce apocalyptic outcomes when divorced from material realities.

Phạm Tuân is the sole Vietnamese citizen to have gone into space thus far. Vietnam's limited progress in space exploration following its initial success implies that the country has never undergone significant technological growth during years of following a Soviet economic doctrine. On the

surface, Vietnam's reliance on the Soviet Union's infrastructural support is to blame for this lack of technological development. However, another reason for the divergence of Vietnam's technological development from the Soviet trajectory, evident from the fact that its philosophy of revolution is a combination of more than just Marxism-Leninism, is that its concept of the end of history has varied from that of the Soviet Union after its various encounters with catastrophes caused by ideological dogmatism.

The space mission itself captured this tension between revolutionary aspiration and apocalyptic possibility. While framed as a triumph of socialist science and evidence of Vietnam's accelerated historical development, it simultaneously revealed Vietnam's technological dependence and the fragility of its revolutionary vision. Rather than representing a genuine leap toward the end of history, Tuân's mission paradoxically highlighted the disconnect between Vietnam's ideological superstructure and its material infrastructure—precisely the contradiction that Lenin's theory of the transitional period sought to resolve.

In the Cold War context, the Soviet and Western utopian imaginaries were often associated with either the global dominance of communism or market democracy. The dystopian side of this competition was the threat of global nuclear devastation. The purpose of the Soyuz 37 mission was not merely scientific but also military and ideological. The space voyage represented Vietnam's commitment to the spread of Soviet modernity, even in space. Nonetheless, flying towards symbolic communism was not the country's only priority. The dreamworld for Vietnam was the independence from foreign powers, and the catastrophe was the loss of autonomy. A weak economy dependent on Soviet aid and hostile diplomatic relations with both China and the US could, thus, potentially lead to catastrophes.

In 1986, the Party changed its principles, leading the country via economic transformation towards a market economy. Rather than being replaced, the communist leadership chose to embrace a more nationalistic political agenda to stay relevant in a political landscape where its former friend, China, had become an enemy, and its former enemy, the US, had become an ally. Following a duration of 7 days, 20 hours, and 42 minutes in space as part of the Soyuz 37 mission, the astronaut hero came back to a world where communism had transitioned into a superficial concept. Following *Đổi Mới*, the end of history underwent revision. This revision reflected Vietnam's evolving understanding of revolutionary temporality. Rather than pursuing an abstract end of history defined by theoretical models, Vietnam increasingly adapted its revolutionary vision to accommodate material realities and particular historical circumstances.

Nuclear Risks and the Fragile End of History

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Long Hoang Vu:

Vietnam's Revolutionary

Trajectory

While Phạm Tuân's space mission is often celebrated as a milestone in Vietnam's scientific advancement, a tragic incident in nuclear physics casts a shadow over the country's revolutionary aspirations. Twelve years after Vietnam's first citizen was sent into space, on November 17, 1992, Trần Đức Thiệp (born 1949), a researcher at the Hanoi Institute of Nuclear Physics (HINP), suffered a severe radiation accident that would have far-reaching consequences (IAEA 1996). This incident, occurring just one year after the Soviet Union's collapse, emphasized the risks of pursuing an accelerated end of history through scientific advancement without adequate infrastructural foundations: a central tension in Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory that I have highlighted throughout this essay.

Thiệp was working with an electron accelerator, a gift from the Soviet Union in 1982. During a routine task, he inadvertently placed his hand over an electron beam while adjusting a sample of gold ore. This task was typically performed using compressed air, but Thiệp had chosen to do it manually. At the same time, his colleagues, believing he had left the room, switched on the machine. As a result, Thiệp's hands were exposed to a beam current of 6 μ A for two to four minutes. The consequences were devastating: after delayed diagnosis and treatment, doctors eventually amputated his entire right hand and two fingers on his left hand due to progressive necrosis and poor healing of the irradiated tissues. This accident reflected a dangerous disconnect between advanced theoretical knowledge and underdeveloped infrastructure. The catastrophe that befell Thiệp wasn't merely a personal tragedy but a manifestation of the contradictions inherent in Vietnam's revolutionary scientific aspirations—pursuing advanced theoretical knowledge while lacking the material infrastructure to implement it safely. The IAEA report on the incident highlighted precisely this contradiction:

Viet Nam, like other developing countries, has given first priority to meeting the immediate needs of its people for housing, education and economic development. HINP's limited budget made the purchase of scarce spare parts much more difficult and this contributed to the likelihood of an accident. Moreover, the HINP staff had the highest academic qualifications but they lacked sufficient training in radiation protection and failed to build an adequate safety infrastructure. These weaknesses were compounded by inadequacies, again for lack of resources, in regulatory oversight and expert radiation protection advice at the national levels (IAEA 1996, 20).

This assessment triggered post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnam's age-old anxiety that has haunted the country's industrial modernization effort since the revolution's inception: not merely an out-of-sync relationship with the West's technological advancement, but a fundamental lack of synchronization between the country's infrastructure and superstructure. While Thiệp and his Soviet-trained colleagues possessed advanced theoretical knowledge, HINP's 1992 infrastructure was inadequate for safely conducting experiments. As Thiệp himself later noted, before the Soviet Union gifted the electron accelerator to HINP in 1982, scientists at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR) in Dubna had already been using it for ten years (Nguyễn et al. 2019). The device itself was outdated, yet Vietnam's infrastructure couldn't even support its safe operation. The nuclear accident exposed the fragility of Vietnam's scientific ambitions in a post-Cold War world.

The origins of Vietnam's nuclear physics program reveal how the country's revolutionary scientific aspirations were shaped by both colonial legacies and Soviet influence. In the early twentieth century some of Vietnam's most influential physicists and mathematicians received their education in France and Germany before returning to contribute to revolutionary science after 1945. Hoàng Thị Nga (1903–1970), the first Vietnamese to earn a PhD in physics from the University of Paris in 1935, exemplifies this trajectory, though her brief tenure as principal of the communist-run College of Science in Hanoi ended with her migration to France in 1946 (Quý Hiên 2020). Those who remained in Vietnam primarily worked in educational institutions, with their contributions focused more on cultivating scientific thinking than on directly advancing the country's infrastructural development.

Nguy Như Kontum (1913–1991), who studied under particle physicist Frédéric Joliot-Curie's (1900–1958) supervision at the University of Paris before returning to Vietnam as a revolutionary act in 1939, played a crucial role in establishing communist Vietnam's physics education. Throughout his career, Kontum not only served as an educational administrator but also wrote and translated numerous physics textbooks, which became foundational in Vietnam's physics education. In 1964, he introduced a standardized Vietnamese vocabulary for physics studies, aiming to align Vietnam's scientific epistemology with that of the Western and Soviet worlds. Kontum's successors, including particle physicists like Nguyễn Đình Tứ (1932–1996), Dương Trọng Bái (1924–2011), and Nguyễn Văn Hiệu (1938–2022), continued this trajectory by pursuing doctoral studies at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR) in Dubna, Russia. These Soviet-trained scientists later occupied prominent positions in Vietnam's scientific insti-

tutions. The two accelerators that Thiệp worked with at HINP were gifts from JINR to Nguyễn Văn Hiệu personally. This revealed the fact that Vietnam's nuclear program depended on personal connections with Soviet institutions rather than systematic infrastructural development.

From 1945 to 1986 Vietnam's emphasis on physics education served dual purposes. Primarily, it aimed to cultivate future generations of scientists who would rebuild the country after years of war. Additionally, it played a crucial ideological role by promoting a vision of a peaceful, prosperous future, thereby bolstering public morale and faith in Vietnam's struggle against foreign invaders and the broader communist cause. Vietnam's focus on training high school students for international mathematics and physics Olympiads, with success in these competitions enhancing the country's standing in the global scientific community and showcasing the supposed superiority of the communist system, exemplified this ideological aspect.

However, this strategy created a significant disconnect: while Vietnam's academic achievements in theoretical physics were impressive, its technological infrastructure remained underdeveloped. This disparity between advanced scientific education and the country's actual technological capabilities became increasingly problematic as communism's influence waned globally. Although the emphasis on physics education initially helped the party leadership maintain ideological credibility, the growing gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application emerged as a major challenge in the post-1986 era. The IAEA report's classification of Vietnam as a 'developing country' marks a significant shift in how the country positioned itself within global hierarchies after the Cold War. Since the ideological war between capitalism and communism ended with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the classification of countries based on ideological orientation has been replaced with a universal hierarchy of economic advancement. According to Nielsen (2013), the terms 'developed' and 'developing' countries became more common in the 1960s, especially in policy discussions about transferring resources from richer to poorer countries. In this context, 'developing countries' served as an alternative label for 'poorer countries,' and implicitly, 'ex-communist countries.'

In 1992, Vietnam was labeled as a 'low-income country,' with a GNI per capita of \$130 (World Bank). Once proud to be one of the most revolutionary actors during the Cold War, communist Vietnam finally accepted playing by the rules of the capitalist world market, where they had nearly no advantage. Following the logic of historical materialism, they were temporarily going backward for the sake of leveraging their position in the new classification system, having abandoned the 'more advanced' socialist

economy. Though the political superstructure wasn't 'downgraded' to a liberal democracy, as many countries in Eastern Europe underwent after abolishing communism, it certainly changed to become more synchronized with the infrastructure. As Thiệp observed, during the 1980s, the state's budget for fundamental sciences decreased because the country's leaders wanted to meet the people's needs for economic development instead of investing in utopic visions. Rather than pursuing a predetermined end of history through ideological purity, Vietnamese leaders increasingly acknowledged the material constraints and historical contingencies that shaped their developmental trajectory.

In the decades following the 1992 Hanoi radiation accident, state-owned nuclear research institutions in Vietnam, such as the Department of Radiation and Nuclear Safety, have assumed the role of licensing and safety monitoring for radioactive sources used in healthcare, construction, and nuclear energy. However, as Vietnam's economy has become more dynamic since 1986, with nuclear technology increasingly intersecting with daily life, these institutions face new challenges related to radioactive leakage (Nguyễn 2015). These risks stem primarily from poor radiation management processes in both public and private sectors. A worrisome practice has emerged whereby radioactive sources, usually unwittingly, are taken and sold on the junk market. Unaware of the actual nature and worth of these materials, thieves sell them at shockingly cheap prices. Unbelievably, the state department regularly fails to locate these lost or stolen radioactive sources. This state of affairs, again, emphasizes the uneven development of Vietnam's technical infrastructures. While some industries have developed quickly, others—like radiation safety management—lag behind. This gap raises questions about when and whether Vietnam's infrastructure will ever catch up with Western standards.

These continuing nuclear risks emphasize the apocalyptic dimension of Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory: Weak management systems and the adoption of a market economy have created dangers outside of ideological concerns. Vietnam today could see environmental and medical crises similar to those detailed in Western narratives of the Anthropocene. Western-style modernity is seen by the party elites just as a transitional phase en route to their ultimate aim: a communist utopia. But this backward path towards capitalism takes time and has serious consequences which additionally raises a serious issue for the leaders: will they ever reach their communist end of history given these obstacles? Or will time run out before they can realize their dreamworld?

Trần Đức Thiệp's nuclear accident thus stands alongside Phạm Tuấn's space mission as an emblematic moment in Vietnam's revolutionary tra-

jectory. Where Tuân's mission represented the utopian aspiration to accelerate historical development through technological achievement, Thiệp's accident revealed the apocalyptic risks inherent in pursuing such acceleration without adequate material foundations. Together, these events illustrate the central argument I have developed throughout this essay: Vietnamese revolutionaries articulated their own version of the end of history that simultaneously justified revolutionary necessity while acknowledging the possibility of catastrophic outcomes. Rather than treating Vietnamese revolutionary thought as derivative of European Marxism, this analysis reveals how revolutionaries transformed abstract ideology into lived experience, creating distinct ways of being and knowing that continue to shape Vietnam's engagement with modernity.

Conclusion

Phạm Tuân's space mission and Trần Đức Thiệp's nuclear accident represent critical moments in Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory, illustrating the tension between ideological aspirations and material realities that has shaped the country's engagement with the concept of the end of history. These events reveal both the transformative potential and catastrophic risks inherent in Vietnam's distinctive blend of Marxism-Leninism and local cosmologies.

Critics of Leninist historical materialism have highlighted its deterministic perspective, which views history as following a linear path toward communism—overlooking the complexity of human development. By suggesting a predetermined endpoint, it reproduces religious teleologies. As Kilminster (1982) argues, the Marxist-Leninist notion of historical necessity essentially replays Christian theology in secular form, with socialism replacing heaven as the promised land.

Throughout four decades under Soviet-style communism, Vietnam has continuously revised its understanding of historical progress. The 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms signaled a crucial transition away from orthodox Marxist economics, demonstrating a willingness to adapt ideological principles to pragmatic needs. This evolution reflects Vietnam's movement beyond dogmatic teleology toward a more reflexive engagement with historical contingency.

The teleological conception of history, with communism as its inevitable culmination, proved inadequate both theoretically and practically. The attempt to accelerate historical development by bypassing capitalism—central to Lenin's theory of the transitional period—resulted in

a dangerous disconnect between advanced theoretical knowledge and underdeveloped infrastructure, as evidenced by Thiệp's nuclear accident. This disaster illustrates the apocalyptic risks inherent in dogmatic adherence to revolutionary teleology.

Yet, Vietnam's response doesn't simply reveal disillusionment but a transformation of revolutionary consciousness. Rather than abandoning the end of history entirely, Vietnamese leaders have reconfigured it along more provisional lines; maintaining socialism as an aspirational horizon while acknowledging the historical specificities and material constraints that shape their developmental path.

The three Việt Cộng soldiers who wrote their final letter in 1966, imagining a future of socialist triumph and interplanetary friendship, perhaps intuited what Vietnam's revolutionary trajectory would reveal; that the end of history might not be a predetermined endpoint, but an opening toward new forms of social organization beyond our current imagination. This perspective acknowledges the productive tension between revolutionary aspiration and apocalyptic awareness that continues to shape Vietnam's engagement with modernity.

Long Hoang Vu is a PhD student in interdisciplinary humanities at Brock University. Long investigates giftedness, gifted education, and human engineering projects during Vietnam's communist era. His PhD research looks into the intersection of Vietnam's gifted education curricula, Confucianism, Marxism, and scientific discourses in the twentieth century. Long is also a journalist who covers topics that concern Vietnam's education, politics, and arts.

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