White Blood on Rue Hue:
The Murder of "le négrier" Bazin

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On 9 February 1929, at eight in the evening, Alfred François Bazin left the home of his congâi métisse (mixed-race mistress) on the route de Hue. Bazin was the director of the Office générale de main d'œuvre indochinoise, an official sounding name for a privately run organization specializing in "recruiting" labor for Michelin plantations. His business engaged in exploiting what was becoming Tonkin's most lucrative commodity: low-cost manual labor. Working as a middleman, Bazin played an instrumental role in dispatching thousands of impoverished peasants to isolated locations in Cochinchine's Red Earth region. Some workers were sent to far-flung destinations in the Pacific such as New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, and Tahiti. These desperate souls were willing to leave their ancestral villages for the promise of a good wage and guaranteed work. After the long and difficult journeys during which they were treated like chattel cargo, they found poor conditions, abusive managers, and hardships that they did not expect. 1 Undernourishment and disease were common and ended many lives. Without undue hyperbole, the fate of these indentured laborers has been compared to a twentieth-century version of the slave trade; Bazin, then was a négrier, a slave-trader. 2

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2 The Communist daily in Paris reported Bazin's murder as the death of a slave-trader: "Le ‘négrier' Bazin, grand recruteur d'Annamites, a été abattu d'un coup de revolver," Humanité, 14 Apr. 1929. See also David Northrup,
office used the increasing rural misery to their own advantage, making a tidy profit on the desperation of poor peasants and the plantations' voracious appetite for labor. His profitable enterprise allowed him to enjoy the finer aspects of life in Hanoi – including a mistress whom he kept on the edge of town.

Considering that the night was the eve of Têt, the Vietnamese lunar new year and that he was leaving the bed of his mistress, M Bazin was probably not thinking about the moral implications of his work. However, someone else was. According to police reports, two Vietnamese men dressed in western clothing approached Bazin. The neighborhood was strangely quiet because the normally bustling route de Hue was deserted for the Têt holiday as were the rest of the native portions of the city. In the street, they "accosted" him and forced him to read a six-page letter. Before he could finish the document, a political diatribe condemning the recruitment of manual labor for the rubber plantations, one of the two men produced a revolver and shot the Frenchman three times at point-blank range. The gunfire attracted little attention as the pops and bangs of fireworks were common in the streets of Hanoi during Têt. Under cover of darkness, the assassins fled, leaving no witnesses to the event.  

Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Aside from this academic text, we should also note the grim portraits of the labor market, the plantations, and the colonial railway construction sites in Régis Wargnier's film Indochine, an aspect of the film curiously ignored by Panivong Norindr in his staunch attack on colonial nostalgia in French cinema: Panivong Norindr, Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 131-54.

3 Centre des Archives Section d'Outre-Mer [hereafter CAOM], Fonds de Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires de la France d'Outre-Mer, III, dossier 39, sous-dossier 7: "Assassinat à Hanoi le 9 février, par Léon Van Sanh, de M. Bazin, directeur de l'Office général de recrutement de main d'oeuvre indo-chinoise" (1929); "Assassinat de M. Bazin", a copied document with no information as to authorship or date; and "Dépêche Télégraphique Chiffrée: Pasquier, Hanoi au Ministre des Colonies, Paris" (10 Feb. 1929). See also Louis Roubaud, Viet-Nam: la tragédie indo-chinoise (Paris: Librairie Valois, 1931), 23.
The significance of Bazin's murder far exceeds the loss of this one man's life. This act of violence, followed by political polemic and further violence, is an ideal case study to view the political, economic, and racial power structures and struggles of the French colonial context. Following Edward Berenson's model of *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*, this article uses the murder of Bazin as a step toward a history of imperial France in which the colonial is integrated into the national narrative. I also draw upon the recent examples from the literature of race and empire. Jonathan G. Katz has studied the murder of a French doctor in pre-colonial Morocco. He uses the mob killing of Émile Mauchamp to describe the ways in which colonialism crept into the independent monarchy, illustrating how one violent death became the rationale for formal conquest. Elsewhere, David Stannard explored the histories of several Hawai'ian and Asian men falsely accused of rape and subsequently kidnapped and murdered by the deranged accuser's wealthy mother. Both of these narratives illustrate the importance of racial violence in maintaining or contesting empire.

The story of Vietnam's long struggle for independence has been told many times and in great detail elsewhere. For our purposes we can limit the discussion to the impact of nationalist and communist activities on the French population of Hanoi. As historians of the Vietnamese revolution such as Patrice Morlat have noted, the year of Bazin's murder, 1929, marked a notable turning point in the struggle against the French. "Gone were the

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days of patriots in exile, of moderates, and of student strikes! Instead, professional revolutionaries took center stage. Following the example of Chinese revolutionaries and assisted by allies such as the Comintern and the Goumindang, Vietnamese anti-colonial forces created tightly organized mass parties. Of these, the Indochinese Communist Party (Parti Communist Indochinois or PCI) and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang or VNQDD) stood out as the most effective responses to French rule. While the revolution was made and won in the countryside, events in the cities, especially Hanoi, frequently dominated the attention of the white colonials.

1929 also marked a resurgence of anti-colonial violence. While armed resistance and individual instances of rebellion occurred during every year of French rule in Asia, the mid-1920s saw a period of relative calm. Starting in February 1929, however, Bazin's murder threw French Indochina into a cycle of revolt and repression. Despite the intensity of the colonial state's violent repression, both nationalist and communist anti-colonial movements grew and continued to present serious problems for the colonial administration. In Hanoi, the spilling of white blood deeply troubled the European community. As severe repression followed each revolt, producing a cycle of escalating tension that hung heavy upon the French population of Hanoi, the 1930s became a period of prolonged crisis in this colonial city. Anxiety, insecurity, and fear, generally forgotten since the pre-war period, returned to French Hanoi.

Violence was central to the colonial encounter. For three generations from the French conquest to the Vietminh liberation, racialized physical violence saturated every aspect of life in colonial Hanoi. Capital of France's Southeast Asian possessions,
this colonial city was born, nurtured, came of age, and died in violence. Violence was so omnipresent that it became a central feature of white identity. Colonial whiteness' relationship with violence was paradoxical, demonstrating a combination of power and vulnerability. On the one hand, white privilege was built upon the bloodshed of conquest, brutal crushing of revolts, and quotidian repression of daily life. White violence constituted the colonial situation. On the other hand, as a tiny minority surrounded by a hostile majority, whites were in constant danger. The threat of native violence under the guise of rebellion, political struggle, or criminality weighed heavy on the settlers' minds. The contradiction between white power and white vulnerability elevated cases of violence to a frequently irrational level of importance and symbolism. Racial violence thus became a central feature of life in French Hanoi.

Colonial ideology encouraged violence. The colonial context gave individual whites tremendous power over non-whites. These power relationships included the political, economic, and physical control of the native population. Granting such power to the settlers without a meaningful system of restraint encouraged the physical abuse of the colonized. The racial inequality of colonialism lifted the social constraints that kept violence in check in the home country, allowing the colonial white to strike, lash out, or shoot with relative impunity. In other words, the natives were beaten because they could be beaten. Colonial racism dehumanized and otherized non-European peoples, assigning them the generic label of indigène and ensuring that violent acts against non-whites were less significant, even inconsequential, in the eyes of colonial whites. As violence is an act of physical domination with powerful psychological implications, the beating of a native humiliated and degraded the victim. To both parties involved, this debasement signaled the

10 The horrors of the Belgian Congo are the quintessential illustration of the unleashing of social restraints on violence; see Adam Hochschild, King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
colonized's inferiority and the colonizer's superiority.\textsuperscript{11} The ideology of empire also helped to place the blame for white on non-white violence upon the native victim. Pointing to the psychology of the indigène, which included lower intelligence, moral flaws, and dishonesty, the colonial mind saw the native and his insolent behavior as provoking harsh response from the colonial white.\textsuperscript{12} From the settler's perspective, colonial violence was the ordinary result of the common frustrations of dealing with problematic natives.\textsuperscript{13}

The colony's political context cast all aspects of violence in a dramatically different light than violence in the home country. Prior to the First World War and the arrival of significant numbers of non-whites in Europe, cases of interracial violence were practically unheard of in France.\textsuperscript{14} Inter-ethnic violence between French and immigrant workers – most notably Italian, Polish, and Spanish – was common but did not entail the same racial dynamics as violence between white colonizers and

\textsuperscript{11} On debasement as a process of colonization, see David Spurr, \textit{The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration} (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 76-91. Frederick Douglass witnessed the corrupting and debasing effects of racial violence. He records how one of his owners, a woman living in Baltimore who had never had a slave before, lost her good qualities when introduced to the cruel realities of slave owning. Frederick Douglass, \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself} (New York: Signet, 1968), 52-3.


colonized Asians, Africans, Arabs, or Polynesians. Because it is part of a larger political conflict, interracial violence in either the colonial or post-colonial context is invested with much greater meaning than intra-racial violence. As Hannah Arendt observed, "[v]iolence in interracial struggle is always murderous, but it is not ‘irrational’; it is the logical and rational consequence of racism." As every white man or woman was a representative of a ruling racial elite and every non-white man or woman was a member of the conquered race, any act of physical interracial violence was part of the larger political conflict. Every time a white man beat a servant, he was reinforcing white supremacy. Any time a non-white committed a crime against a white, the colonial community saw it as an affront to the colonial order of things. This political constellation of powers was unimaginable in France and dramatically different from the situation in pre-French Vietnam; colonial violence was a unique phenomenon.

The spectacle of violence in Hanoi was unlike violence in the rest of French Indochina. In the colonial imagination Hanoi was different. With its stately streets and impressive beaux-arts buildings embodying the power, order, and stability of French colonial rule, Hanoi was more than a political capital; it was an imperial symbol that conveyed the idea that the French intervention was a crusade for civilization. Hanoi’s legal status as French territory, not a protectorate like the rest of Tonkin, reinforced the idea that Hanoi was an entity distinct from the rest


of Indochina and implied that it was under higher surveillance, better policed, and therefore more orderly and safe. Unfortunately for the colonials, the idea that Hanoi was a world apart was an illusion. With Vietnamese and Chinese composing over ninety percent of the population, the white minority was too small to assure the calm and tranquility it so desired. Nonetheless, the official and popular minds of French colonialism believed Hanoi uniquely impervious to regional chaos. When disorder reared its ugly head, both the civilian community and the state reacted with anger, quickly seeking to reestablish order. Interpreting native violence in the capital as a mockery of all that the French civilizing mission stood for, colonial whites responded with harsh, brutal, and often excessive revenge to transgressions of the colonial order of things.

As they retreated into the cold and dark Tonkin night, the two assassins must have thought they had committed the perfect crime. Unfortunately, but in classic film-noir style, the killers left behind a crucial piece of evidence. When the police arrived upon the scene, they found the six-page handwritten document. At the office of the Sûreté, an agent claimed to recognize the penmanship. According to the investigators, a certain Léon Van Sanh, graduate of the prestigious Lycée Albert-Sarraut, had written the note. After this astounding bit of police work, the French authorities hauled in the unfortunate Léon Van Sanh. This was not difficult as the police had an active file on him since his arrest for distributing tracts opposed to the recruitment and use of "coolie labor." In fact, he had received a six-month suspended sentence only one month prior to Bazin's untimely demise.

Things grew worse for the plotters when the police escorted Léon Van Sanh down to the central police station. Under interrogation, he confessed to having written the note for his father-in-law, Nguyen Tan Long, as well as having assisted Nguyen in the crime. He refused to admit to firing the shots, however, and also refused to give Nguyen's location. When the Sûreté agents searched his clothing, they found several incriminating items sewn into the lining. The first was a
document listing the names of numerous members of the VNQDD, thus implicating him in a larger conspiracy and linking the Nationalist Party to the Bazin murder. The second was a collection of revolutionary tracts and pamphlets. Taking this evidence as probable cause, the Sûreté promptly rounded up the usual suspects. The courts tried some eighty-three anti-colonial activists and gave two of them suspended death sentences.17 Curiously, Léon Van Sanh received a relatively light punishment: another suspended, six-month jail term. Despite being the key to solving the case, his role seems to have been somewhat marginal. Perhaps he struck a bargain with the French. Some observers believed that he was not part of a larger conspiracy but merely acting out of family obligation to Nguyen Tan Long. Nguyen may have called upon his nephew as a literate francophone and a graduate of the colony's most prestigious school.

Regardless of Sanh's actual role in the affair, his name soon became a tool in a Parisian polemic. The migration of the crime from the streets of Hanoi to the pages of Paris' dailies demonstrates the increasingly important role of the colonies in the metropole. Indeed, this is a clear example of the intertwined nature of colonized and colonizer in imperial France. Humanité, the French Communist Party daily, had initially cheered the death of the "slave-trader" Bazin but cautioned against such individual acts:

The action of the young student Léon Sanh can be explained by his exasperation at seeing his countrymen bullied, robbed, and ferociously massacred. But it is not through a terrorist act that one will be able to put an end to the thousands of miseries caused by this regime: it is through the mass action of the entire Indochinese population that the twenty million Annamites can liberate themselves from their oppressors.18

18 "Le ‘négrier’ Bazin, grand recruteur d'Annamites."
For years, the French Communist Party (PCF) condemned terrorism, perhaps fearing random acts of terror outside of its control. It may have also had ambiguous feelings about the possible connection between this assassination and the VNQDD, a nationalist party outside of the Comintern's control. As this was prior to Stalin's endorsement of the Popular Front, a period when German Communist Party cadres jeered German Social Democrats as "Social Fascists" and Chiang Kai Shek slaughtered his Communist allies in the streets of Shanghai, the PCF's failure to support immediately any and all anti-colonial activities is understandable. To complicate issues further, the PCF also had to pay attention to its domestic political concerns, and rank and file French Communists were not immune to racism.  

Despite these complications, the Bazin Affair soon threatened to become the Sanh Affair, at least in the pages of the Parisian dailies. Seizing upon the events and using them for their own purposes, Humanité reported only a few weeks after the story broke that the "student Sahn" had been transferred from the Hanoi central prison to a special cell in the offices of the Sûreté. Once there, the agents allegedly inflicted "the most horrible tortures," including burning him with molten lead and rubbing salt into his burnt mouth. Pushed beyond the point of madness but refusing to confess to having murdered Bazin himself, the poor soul finally died and became a martyr to the cause of independence. The paper closed the article by calling upon the French proletariat to unite with the colonized Annamites and liberate the oppressed of the earth. Yet Sanh was no guileless youth, as Humanité claimed, nor was he a political innocent.


20 "L'étudiant Sahn a été torturé et assassiné par la Sûreté générale d'Hanoï," Humanité, 20 Apr. 1929.
Moreover, he did not die in a dark basement cell at the hands of sadistic agents of the colonial secret police. As *Le Matin* revealed a few days later, the story was a fabrication. According to the chief doctor at the prison, Sanh was in decent shape and very much alive. *Le Matin* then accused *Humanité* of having lied to incite anti-French sentiment in the colony.\(^1\)

Clearly, Hanoi and the colony as a whole were taking on a new role in the theater of French politics. Rising out of the obscurity of the French empire, the Bazin Affair reinvented Hanoi as a stage for French national dramas. Each side in the Parisian polemic found the material to cast the event as a colonial version of conflicts that threatened France. For the French Communist Party, Sanh's actions were the natural outcome of international capitalism's criminal activity. Michelin's use of quasi-slave labor on its rubber plantations to produce the raw materials for its factories in France linked the struggle of French workers in the metropole with the struggle of France's colonial subjects. Such a perspective rejected racial differences and stressed the international solidarity of the workers of the world. Sanh's deeds, even if only the product of family loyalty, business rivalries, or VNQDD activity, became one act in the fight for social justice. Partisans on the opposite side of the political spectrum used the affair as a red scare. Similarly ignoring certain inconvenient facts and erasing all nuances, *Le Matin* directly tied Bazin's murder to Communist activity. In an article entitled "A Communist Plot is Discovered in Indochina," the paper proclaimed that the individuals listed in Sanh's documents were organizers of a "communist style political group." Yet no one produced evidence to link the murder to the PCI. Furthermore, the paper did not mention that the people named on the list were members of a nationalist, not Marxist, organization.\(^2\)

Indeed, as Hue-Tam Ho Tai has noted,

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\(^2\) "Un complot communiste est découvert en Indochine."
the VNQDD had previously denounced class struggle. Following Humanité's publication of the false report of Sanh's death, Le Matin accused the Communist Party of lying to provoke an anti-French rebellion in Indochina. According to Le Matin's portrait of the affair, Communists attacked French social order both in the home country and the colony. Thus, both sides exploited Bazin's murder for their own purposes, transforming the event into a morality tale that had more to do with French domestic politics than with conditions in Indochina itself. Here we see the beginning of Hanoi's new role as a theater for Parisian politics.

Bazin's death did not occur in a vacuum. An upsurge in the violence and intensity of anti-colonial activity coincided with his death. Unlike the previous elite-based resistance movements, modern mass parties led this new wave of activism. Both the nature and method of operations of these anti-colonial parties linked them to large and discontented urban populations of Hanoi and Saigon. The appeal of these organizations was a direct consequence of the socio-economic disruptions caused by French rule in Asia. By shattering the importance of the village, imposing foreign taxes, and proletarianizing the Vietnamese peasantry, colonizers dismantled the existing social order. French colonial policy sought to modernize the Vietnamese by urbanizing them, making them pay taxes, and destroying their collective identity. The new colonial order was to create a Vietnamese modernity among the lines of the western bourgeois model. But before one could build the modern, traditions had to be destroyed first. Unfortunately for the French, an inherent political illegitimacy mortally wounded the new colonial order.

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24 "Une provocation à la révolte des Annamites" and "Comment l'Humanité bourre les crânes."

25 For a study of interwar France's obsession with spies and intrigue in exotic locales, see Michael B. Miller, Shanghai on the Metro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
that was to fill the social vacuum of destroyed traditions. Furthermore, French reliance upon supposedly traditional Vietnamese elites delegitimized these mandarin collaborators. Even Bao-Dai, the boy emperor, was discredited by his dependence upon the colonial overlords. In the name of modernism and universalism, French intervention and social engineering attempted to overthrow the traditional system of Confucian ethics. Contact with the West did result in socio-political modernization but to the dismay of the conservative colonial rulers, Marxist-Leninist theory and trade union activism made the greatest impact in Vietnam. By the early 1930's nationalist, communist, and trade union organizations presented serious challenges to French rule.

If the Bazin murder, itself a bold and violent act of racialized political violence, startled the white residents of Hanoi, the events of the following year provoked absolute terror, a terror unknown since the years prior to the First World War. On the night of 9 February 1930, a year after the murder of Bazin, some forty native soldiers staged a revolt in their camp at Yen Bey, killing a number of white officers. Meanwhile, around sixty civilians attacked a nearby police outpost. The attacks at Yen Bey were supposed to occur in the context of a series of simultaneous uprisings, but at the last minute nationalist rebel leadership had called off the coordinated attacks. Unfortunately for the Yen Bey rebels, a communications breakdown kept them from learning of the attack's postponement. Partly due to this logistical error, the rebellion was violently suppressed within a few days; within a few months, the French had rounded up the organizers, most of them ranking VNQDD members. While from a military standpoint, the counter-insurgency operation was a success for the French, from a political perspective the doomed Yen Bey rebels had scored a symbolic victory. As the colonial administration noted in its internal communications, the specter of such anti-colonial violence sent fear through the white
residents of Hanoi. Indeed, there was reason to be concerned as several bombs exploded in the city, and the authorities discovered more weapons in clandestine stockpiles. Faced with a potential revolt in Hanoi, the colonial government assigned a large military contingent to the city. With troops stationed throughout the city and a curfew in effect for nearly two weeks, Hanoi was suddenly militarized, transformed into a vast guarded compound. Both the municipal and secret police forces were placed on a state of alert and conducted around the clock surveillance of the non-white population. Outside of Hanoi, insurrections broke out in several provinces in Tonkin. The colonial state threw its full weight against these disturbances, including the first major use of aerial bombardment in Vietnam. Within a few weeks, the VNQDD movement appeared to be crushed and the situation in Hanoi normalized.

Just as the French were recovering from the Nationalist revolt, the Indochinese Communist Party stepped into the ring. While the most successful PCI protests happened outside of Hanoi, the city played an important role for agents involved in many of the party’s conspiracies. Due to the city’s position as a central hub in the colonial rail and road network, traveling agents frequently passed through Hanoi or organized meetings in Old Quarter hotels and restaurants. Even though the Communist path to victory in Vietnam led through the countryside rather than through the city streets, the size of Hanoi’s native quarter

26 Hanoi National Archives [hereafter HNA], Fonds de Mairie de Hanoi [hereafter MdH], dossier 44: "Rapport annuel du 1er Juillet 1930 au 30 Juin 1931" (1931).
28 Morlat, 121.
provided a degree of anonymity for clandestine planning. The
general white civilian community remained oblivious to the
underground activities in the native quarter. Ignorant of these
goings-on but well aware of the cases of provincial revolt such
as Yen Bey and the Nghe An Soviet, the white community
firmly held to the idea that Hanoi was an island of safety for
whites in a hostile sea of revolutionary natives. Rural Tonkin
might erupt in the flames of revolt, but Hanoi was secure. Hanoi
was policed. Hanoi was French.\(^{31}\)

This white faith in the safety of their city was an illusion.
Despite the suppression of the VNQDD and the PCT's focus on
the countryside, throughout the 1930s sporadic cases of anti-
colonial violence called white Hanoi's sense of security into
question. For example, in June of 1932, a man named Cung-Ngo
informed the police of a plot to assassinate the
president of the
Hanoi court of appeals.
The informant claimed that a secret
society, curiously composed of Annamites dressed as Chinese,
was going to kill the jurist in his home on rue Beauchamp. The
conspirators' willingness to carry out the act in the supposedly
secure neighborhood of the European quarter compounded the
audacity of murdering such a high-ranking official.\(^{32}\) If the
French authorities had not foiled this crime, it would seriously
have demoralized the white community.

Other anti-colonial actions were less deadly but of equally
powerful symbolic value. To welcome Governor Jonkheer de
Graf, the chief of the Dutch East Indies, the colonial
administration erected two triumphal arches near the train
station. To the embarrassment of the French authorities activists
burned down the grand structures the night before the Dutch
visitor arrived. This act of pan-Asian anti-colonial solidarity was
a serious blow to white prestige in colonized Southeast Asia. A
more serious blaze occurred when two young communists set
fire to the Commissariat on rue Borgnis-Desbordes. The police station survived without serious damage, but during the apprehension of the two arsonists, gunfire lightly wounded a European. These crimes, which were much more important as symbolic than practical gestures of resistance, point toward the tenuous control that the French actually exerted over Hanoi. French policing was completely ineffective in predicting and stopping many such instances of propaganda of the deed.

The murder of Alfred François Bazin has multiple layers of significance. First, it shows the abuses of the colonial labor system and the popular resentment of the actual implementation of France’s mission to civilize. Second, the murder was the first in a series of escalating violent acts throughout colonial Indochina and should thus be included in the overall narrative of the Vietnamese revolution along with Yen Bey, August 1945, Dien Bien Phu, the Tết Offensive, and the Fall/Liberation of Saigon in 1975. Third, the subsequent Parisian press polemic demonstrates how colonial issues were used in French national political struggles; this journalistic back and forth reveals the workings of imperial France. Finally, the Bazin murder cuts to the heart of the paradoxical nature of French colonial whiteness in which white political, material, and cultural supremacy could never create the sense of safety and security colonizers so desired.