

## (U) Prelude: Indochina Before 1950

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### (U) Background

(U) The Indochina peninsula extends south from the Chinese landmass like a pendulous bulge. The coastline of Vietnam twists in a great S-curve extending south from the Tonkin region along the coastal areas of Annam and Cochin before it heads west to Cambodia. Indochina is divided by two great riverine systems. To the north is the Red River, which begins in southern China and then runs straight like a spear southeast through the dolomite ranges and green, damp forests of the upper Tonkin (or *Haute Tonkin* in French) before it runs into the Gulf of Tonkin. Also originating in southern China, from a point not too far from that of the Red River, is the Mekong, one of the most impressive rivers of the world. Like the mythical Anaconda, which aboriginal legend claimed the river was, the Mekong snakes its way south through the highlands and mist-filled valleys of present-day Myanmar (Burma) and Laos before hooking east below the Plain Des Jarres and the Plateau des Bolovens forming the boundary between Laos and Thailand. Then it dips south through the land of the Khmer, Cambodia, joining with the Cambodian rivers that drain the great wetland and lake district of its interior. Finally, the Mekong empties out on the alluvial delta of Cochin China in southern Vietnam before rolling into the South China Sea. Although these two delta systems account for only 25 percent of the Vietnam's area, over five-sixths of the ethnic Vietnamese people live on them.

(U) The region is further divided by mountain and plateau ranges which rise rapidly from the coastal areas. So dense and inaccessible are these upland regions that after 1975, three previously

unknown species of the family Cervidae (deer and elk) have been discovered there. The mountains and plateaus are home to Indochina's multitude of tribal groups such as the Tai, Muong, Meo, and others, often grouped under the general heading the French used to categorize them, Montagnards. Resistant to central authority, whether it be Chinese, French, Japanese, or Vietnamese governments in Hanoi or Saigon, these groups would become useful allies to various warring factions. In 1941, the first military units of the Viet Minh were almost exclusively drawn from the Nung tribe of northern Tonkin. Later, during the French phase of the war, some divisions of the Viet Minh, notably the 316th and 335th, were made up almost wholly of Montagnard tribes including the Jarai and Hre.<sup>1</sup> The French would use Tai and Meo tribesmen to form anti-Viet Minh guerrilla units in Laos. During the 1960s, American Special Forces and CIA advisors would rely almost entirely on Meo, Hmong, and other Laotian tribesmen to battle Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese units in the disputed Plain des Jarres region of central Laos.

(U) Often history is written in terms of geography. Many small countries have their destinies defined by the proximate large country. So it was for Vietnam (and the rest of Indochina to a lesser degree); its fate lay with the encroachments, both politically and culturally, across its northern border by an expansionist China.

(U) Following the arrival of Chinese troops, who set up garrisons in the Red River valley around 221 B.C.E., a Sino-Vietnamese state existed until about 11 B.C.E. when it was absorbed by the Chinese. For almost the next thousand years, until 939 C.E., the Chinese held suzerainty over

the region of northern Vietnam, the Tonkin region. Chinese influence was felt in many areas of culture and political organization. The social and political principles of Confucian thought were absorbed, as were Chinese language and writing. The Vietnamese also adopted the hierarchical system of mandarin bureaucracy, including the civil service examination program and the rigorous study (and near slavish imitation) of Chinese literary classics. Suitable for a stable society, which China and Vietnam seldom were, the mandarin system proved ill-matched to rapid change.

(U) However, this cultural adoption did not translate to assimilation into the Chinese empire. The Vietnamese rejected any Chinese identity, and their history was punctuated by revolts and resistance that provided the Vietnamese with a pantheon of national heroes which would inspire later generations against the French and Americans: the Trung sisters, who led a revolt in 40 C.E.; Trieu Au, the Vietnamese Joan of Arc; and Ngo Quyen, the leader of Vietnam's successful revolt in 938 C.E. Even after throwing out the Chinese, the Vietnamese had to fend off more excursions from the north. In the 13th century, the Yuan (Mongol-dominated) dynasty invaded Tonkin twice and were driven out. In the early 15th century, a brief period of Chinese domination was overthrown after a twenty-year campaign.

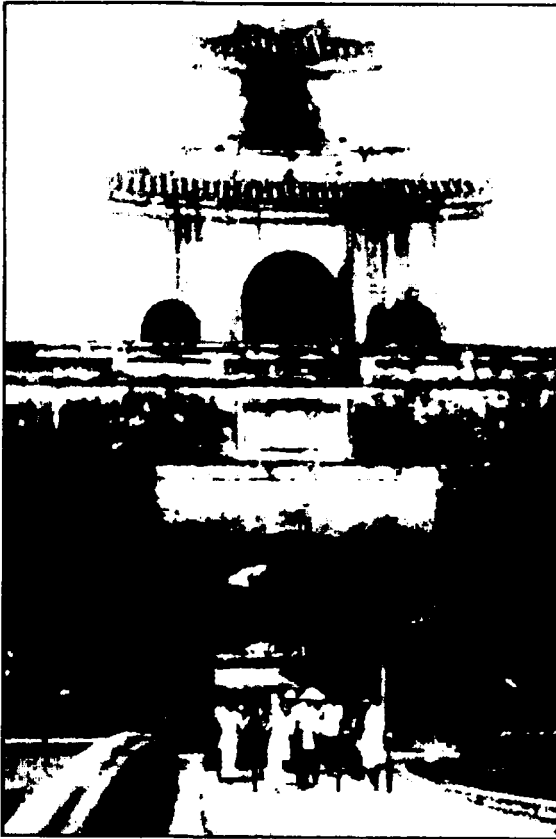
(U) The thousand-year struggle revealed that the Vietnamese would endure in their struggle with foreign invaders, no matter how long it took or how many losses they suffered. This endurance was based on the conviction that the Vietnamese ultimately would prevail. There is really little in the Western experience to match the Vietnamese millennium-long struggle. The closest is the 500-year epic Spanish *reconquista*, the campaign of reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors under the leadership of Aragon and Castile which culminated in the fall of Granada in 1492.

(U) Also, it is most difficult to underestimate the effect on Vietnamese culture of national resistance which grew out of that epic struggle against the Chinese occupation. The nearly millennium-long resistance against the Chinese bred a hero cult that elevated martial qualities to the status of virtue: it emblazoned in Vietnamese folklore a roll call of national heroes. This martial spirit formed part of the Vietnamese self-identity.<sup>2</sup>

(U) Both of these characteristics – a willingness to fight seemingly forever and to endure enormous losses – would be evident during the French and American phases of the Indochina War. And both France and the United States remained ignorant of, or else deliberately ignored, warnings from the Vietnamese or their own experts on the region. In September 1946, Ho Chi Minh had told the French prime minister, Georges Bidault, that "If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours. Yet, in the end, it is you who will tire."<sup>3</sup>

(U) Another theme in Vietnamese history is its expansion south through the central coastal plains of Annam to the Mekong delta and rice growing regions of Cochin. This was another national epic marked by the conquest and assimilation of various indigenous peoples, as well as the defeat of competing expansionist kingdoms. In the late 15th century, the Indonesian Champa kingdom was defeated. From there, the Vietnamese drove a similarly expansionist Khmer (Cambodian) kingdom out of the lower Mekong delta.

(U) The Vietnamese expansion brought internal stresses to its political situation. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was competition between the Vietnamese emperor, representing the ruling Trinh family dynasty in Hanoi, and the upstart Nguyen family, which exploded in the Tay Son rebellion. In 1802, the Nguyens established a new imperial seat in Hue. Slowly, the Hue gov-



(U) Gate to the Imperial City of Hue, constructed by the Vietnamese emperor Gia Long

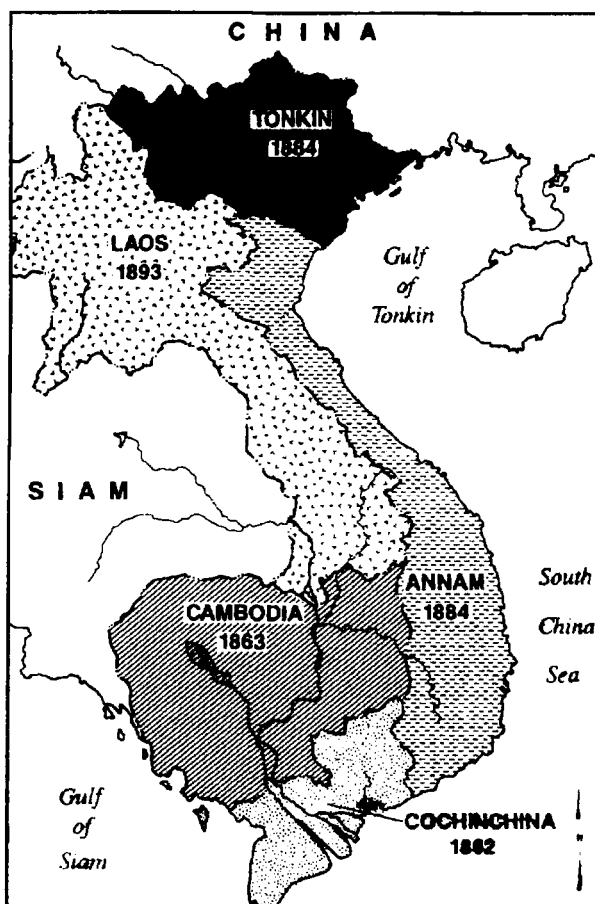
ernment exerted control over the southern regions. But barely had they accomplished this when a new threat arrived from the west – the French.

### **(U) The French Arrive**

(U) The first French foothold came in the early 17th century, when various French missionaries converted thousands of Vietnamese to Catholicism. Within twenty years, many of the Catholic missionaries were expelled by the Vietnamese leaders who, not unlike other Asian kingdoms, such as Japan, feared the growing influence of the Western clerics over their populations.

(U) The French returned in the mid-19th century to attempt to establish a permanent possession, when the French emperor, Napoleon III, authorized an expedition which seized Tourane (Danang) in 1858. However, after two years of Vietnamese assaults and tropical diseases, the French abandoned their position, the French commander discouragingly observing that "Everything here tends towards ruin."<sup>4</sup> In 1861, the French sent an even larger invasion force which, this time, captured and held Saigon. Slowly, the French worked their way throughout Indochina. In 1863, they established a protectorate over Cambodia. In 1883, a French fleet sailed up the Perfume River and shelled Hue, forcing the emperor to allow the French to make Annam and Tonkin protectorates.<sup>5</sup> The four regions – Cambodia, Annam, Cochin China, and Tonkin – were incorporated into the French Union in 1883. After signing a treaty with Siam (Thailand) in 1893, Laos, which was several small kingdoms and principalities dominated by the city of Luang Prabang, was added to the French Indochinese holdings.

(U) The French administration of Indochina for the next sixty years was notable for two tendencies: decentralization of the Vietnamese state structure and an inability to completely quell local uprisings. The French administration of Indochina was headed by a governor-general directly responsible to the Colonial Ministry in Paris. French rule was authoritarian and utilized far more French administrative and security personnel than similar systems such as the British used in India. Cochin China (*Cochinchine*), which the French considered the richest part of their holdings, was administered directly by the French to the lowest district and village levels. The other regions were handled less directly, usually managed by *resident-superiors* who handled all important matters behind the facade of the local, native rulers such as the emperor in Hue or the kings in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Luang Prabang (Laos).



(U) French acquisitions in Indochina

(U) French economic policy in Indochina remained essentially mercantilist, that is, favoring the home country which controlled all colonial financial, industrial, and agricultural activities. As elsewhere in Asia, the primary economic activity was agriculture and was maintained by the native population, which was predominantly peasant. In Vietnam in particular, peasant plots were small, but they could sustain the existing population. But, as the population grew, thanks in part to French public health services and flood control, the system of traditional peasant holdings became inadequate, especially in the limited rice-growing regions of Tonkin and Annam. In Cochin China, there was much more arable land, but it remained in the hands of a few wealthy French and Vietnamese landholders – 45 percent of land was owned by two percent of the popula-

tion.<sup>6</sup> A heavy tax burden, which imposed a crippling per capita taxation, rather than taxing on the basis of income, resources, or output, was exacerbated by the French *corvée* system (forced labor on public projects), and led to widespread indebtedness, forcing many peasants off their holdings and into seasonal migrant work.<sup>7</sup> The French established monopolies on certain staple or widely used items, such as salt, alcohol, and opium, designed to generate revenue for the colonial rulers. French-developed coal mining operations in Tonkin, and rubber plantations and processing plants in Cochin China, remained in the hands of a few French investors usually living in France, where most of the profits went as well.

(U) The Vietnamese never submitted easily to French rule. Even after the apparent consolidation of the French position in the 1890s, sporadic rebellions, usually led by former mandarins and administrators loyal to the puppet Vietnamese emperor, kept sprouting up. The successes of the Japanese against the Russians in 1905 and the Chinese Revolution of 1911 by Sun Yat-Sen inspired Vietnamese nationalists to seek help and support in those two countries. Even during World War I, there were revolts by Vietnamese troops in Tonkin against the French, all of which were put down effectively by the local colonial military and security (*surêté*) forces of the governor-general. Labor strife also grew in the nascent urban factories of Hanoi and Haiphong, the workers being receptive to early socialist and communist agitation.

### (U) Threats to the French: Nationalists and Ho Chi Minh

(U) During the 1920s the two political organizations were formed which would pose the greatest threat to French rule. The first, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (*Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* or *VNQDD*), was based on the organization and principles of the Chinese Gou Mindang (Koumintang) Party. The VNQDD was composed of rich peasants, native Vietnamese



(U) French colonial troops in Saigon during the 1930s

soldiers, government employees, and disaffected and unemployed intellectuals and teachers. Its platform contained demands for the establishment of a republican form of government (modeled in the Chinese Qou Mindang version) and the overthrow of the French colonial administration. In February 1930, the VNQDD organized a revolt of Vietnamese troops at Yen Bai, a garrison located about sixty miles northwest of Hanoi, and other military outposts. The revolt failed, and the French moved with speed to run down the conspirators. A handful of the nationalists fled to China where they entered into an exile that effectively excluded them from any future influence inside Indochina. Their absence left the field completely open to the other major source of resistance to French colonial rule – the communists.

(U) The other opposition party was the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). This was the brainchild of Ho Chi Minh, who, for better or worse, was the major influence in Indochinese

history in the mid-twentieth century. Ho had been sent to Indochina by the Communist International (COMINTERN), the organization controlled by Moscow for the promotion of world



(U) Ho Chi Minh

Marxist revolution, to reorganize the fractionalized communist parties inside Indochina. Born Nguyen Sinh Cung in the rebellion-prone Nghe An province in May 1890, Ho was the son of a scholar who himself had been born to a peasant family. Ho was trained in the classic Confucian tradition when he attended school in Hue. In 1911, he joined a crew of a French steamship where he traveled to North America (which included stops at various American ports), Africa, and Europe. In 1919, he changed his name to Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot) and immersed himself in the leftist politics of postwar Paris.<sup>8</sup> A year later, influenced by the writings of V.I. Lenin on the colonial problem, Ho split from the French socialists, whom he viewed as conservative on the issue of colonial independence, and helped founded the new French Communist Party. In 1923, he moved to Moscow and joined the COMINTERN. In late 1924, Ho arrived in China and helped train exiled Vietnamese cadre living in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Canton in revolutionary techniques. To oversee this training, Ho founded the Revolutionary Youth League, which was the predecessor to the ICP. In 1927, he fled China following Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai Shek) bloody suppression of the Chinese Communist Party.

(U) Ho's ICP, which was really a coalition of three regional communist groups, stood for a Leninist program of two-step revolution. The first stage was a national rebellion, and the second was a socialist revolution. He viewed labor as the basis for wealth in Vietnam. Wealth created inequalities and anarchy. For Ho, the target of the Vietnamese struggle was defined by Lenin's dictum for colonial peoples: strike at the source of their oppression, which, in this case, included the colonial powers and native reactionaries who supported them.

(U) Throughout 1930, a series of peasant rebellions erupted in Ho's home province of Nghe An. Peasant soviets were formed under the leadership of a group of revolutionaries who would

later be Ho's main lieutenants – Pham Van Dong, Troung Chinh, Le Duan, and Vo Nguyen Giap. The Nghe An revolt was brutally suppressed by the French – villages were subjected to indiscriminate bombings by French military aircraft and burning by Foreign Legion troops. Over a thousand communists were arrested and sent to the island prison of Poulo Condore. However, the communist groups were not wiped out, and by the mid-1930s, most of the revolutionaries were released under an amnesty program established during Leon Blum's Popular Front government.



(U) Vietnamese rebel seized by colonial forces, 1940

### **(U) Japanese Expansion**

(U) Events to the north, however, soon intruded into Indochina's fate. Since 1931, Japan had been carrying a brazen expansion throughout northern and eastern China. First, there was the absorption of Manchuria in 1931. This was followed by a series of incidents that led to a military campaign, started in 1937, designed to take China's most important regions. After two years, Japan had gobbled up almost 700,000 square

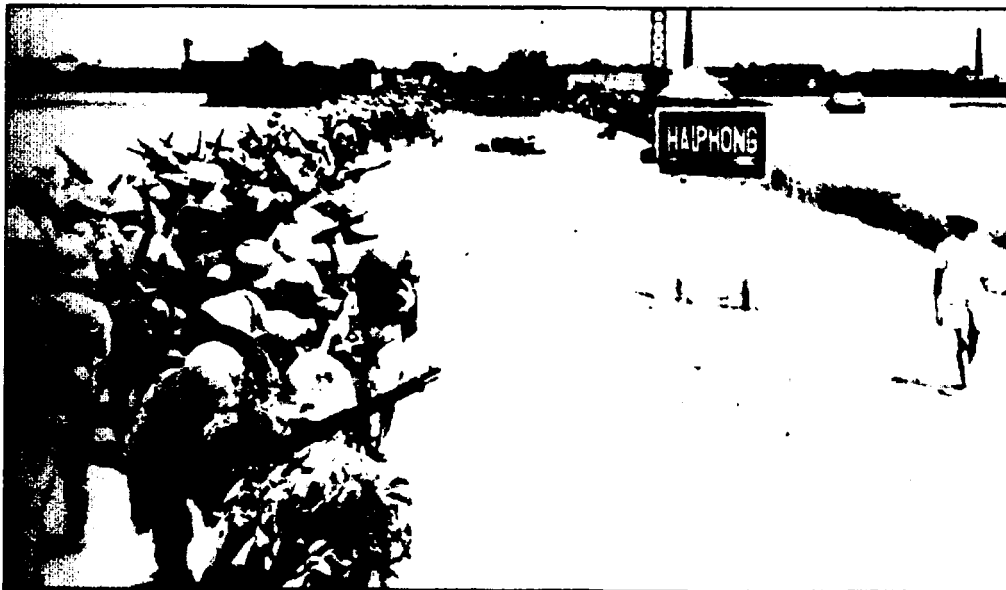
miles of Chinese territory. Yet, by 1939, one and one-half million Japanese troops were mired in China, and no end to the fighting was in sight. Jiang Jieshi refused to surrender, and the war was bleeding Japan dry financially.

(U) Desperate to achieve a military solution in the Chinese mainland, Japan looked southward to implement effective indirect measures. The Japanese believed they needed to isolate China from outside support and one of the major supply lines for Jiang's forces was through French Indochina, specifically the Haiphong to Yunnan railway. Although the Japanese had been complaining to Paris about the route as far back as 1937, beginning in 1939 the Japanese began to apply direct political and diplomatic pressure on France to close the supply line.<sup>9</sup> Almost as if to emphasize its determination to threaten Indochina, in February 1939 Japan occupied Hainan Island. In December, Japanese troops were stationing themselves across the border in Guangxi (Kwangsi) Province.

(U) With France's surrender in July 1940 and the subsequent formation of the Vichy collaborationist regime, Indochina was now militarily isolated and a target for further Japanese expansion.

In September 1940, the Japanese, using the pretext of assuring a complete shutdown of the Indochinese avenues of war supply to Jiang, occupied Tonkin, establishing a military regime. Japanese forces landed in Haiphong harbor and crossed the Tonkinese border and overran the French border forts, even massacring some of the French defenders who had resisted at one of them. The French colonial administration, under Governor-General Admiral Jean Decoux, was allowed to maintain internal order, but the Japanese had, for practical purposes, usurped the French position. In June 1941, the Japanese occupied the remainder of southern Indochina, partly as a security measure, but also to establish bases for the planned military attacks into British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>10</sup> The United States responded to the southern occupation by cutting off oil exports to Tokyo and thereby setting in motion the events leading to 7 December 1941.

(U) Thanks to small, but effective, cryptologic organizations in the army and navy, the United States was able to monitor the diplomatic and military maneuvers between the French and Japanese. By the mid-1930s, the cryptologists in the army's Signals Intelligence Service (SIS) and



(U) Japanese occupation troops arriving at Haiphong, 1940

the navy's OP-20-G, were exploiting the Japanese diplomatic cipher machine, known as RED. When the new machine, popularly referred to as PURPLE, came on line in 1939, the SIS cryptanalysts were, by late summer 1940, able to decipher those messages just as the Japanese and French officials were negotiating Indochina's fate.

(U) Throughout the war, American COMINT organizations targeted Japanese communications out of Indochina, primarily interested in diplomatic and commercial (specifically shipping) messages from Hanoi and Saigon. Eventually, the communications of the French colonial administration to diplomatic posts in Asia, as well as to the Vichy administration back in France, were added to the lists of terminals monitored by the Allied listening posts. From these intercepts, the Allies were able to monitor events within Indochina which included French-Japanese relations and the growing threat to the occupiers by native resistance groups, especially the Viet Minh.

(U) Indochina, though, remained a theater of minor military interest to the Allies. Eventually, responsibility for the region was assigned to the British Southeast Asia Command under Lord Louis Mountbatten. Military operations were restricted mostly to an air campaign, mainly carried out by the U.S. 14th Air Force, which was designed to cripple the transportation infrastructure. Allied submarine operations off the coast of Indochina reaped a rich bounty in Japanese merchant ships. However, ground operations, aside from occasional forays by Allied commando groups, were never seriously considered for the region.

### (U) U.S. Policy

(U) American policy towards Indochina was a confused affair. At the highest level, that is, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Indochina was emblematic of everything that was wrong with France. FDR viewed France as a source of political and social decay which had surrendered too easily to Hitler and had submitted to the



(U) Ships on Saigon's waterfront under attack by American carrier aircraft, 12 January 1945



Japanese without any struggle.<sup>11</sup> As for Indochina itself, Roosevelt, ever suspicious of European colonialism, dismissed the French presence as having done little towards "improving the conditions of the natives."<sup>12</sup>

(U) At first, FDR had proposed that Indochina be placed under a trusteeship with China ruling until the region was ready for independence. But the Chinese refused the offer. The trusteeship issue drifted through the war and was eventually dropped. Although Roosevelt continued to dislike the idea of a French return to Indochina, there was little support from the British or his own State Department, which had argued the necessity of a France restored to its global position.<sup>13</sup> After Roosevelt's death, much of the opposition to the French return to Indochina dissipated. By late May 1945, the French Foreign Ministry would triumphantly inform its embassy in Chungking that the American State Department "never doubted" that France would automatically reestablish its sovereignty over Indochina.<sup>14</sup>

### **(U) Resistance to Japanese Occupation**

(U) For Ho and the ICP, the Japanese occupation provided another enemy for the Vietnamese. Unlike other captured colonial holdings, notably those of the Dutch, American, and British, where the Japanese tried to set up puppet, native regimes, they left the French to maintain Indochina. The ICP attempted two revolts in 1940, in Tonkin and Cochin China, but both failed. In the north, the remnants of the defeated communists escaped across the border into China. There they re-formed into the Viet Minh (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*). For the next three years, the Viet Minh organized regions of northern Tonkin, collectively called the Viet Bac, into a base of operations. Supported by the Chinese, the Viet Minh slowly built up a political and military organization, mostly in the Thai Nguyen region of Tonkin. Meanwhile, other

Vietnamese communist resistance groups throughout the urban centers and provinces of Indochina loosely associated themselves with the Viet Minh.<sup>15</sup>

(U) In March 1945, the Japanese, tired of years of French noncooperation in Indochinese defense issues, and aware, through their own COMINT, of a possible, clandestine French military uprising, staged a putsch overthrowing the colonial administration throughout Indochina.<sup>16</sup> Within forty-eight hours, the entire French civilian and military administration was captured; a remnant force of about 4,000 French and native colonial troops and civilians managed to elude the Japanese and escaped north across the Chinese border. The Japanese established a new native government, calling in the deposed Annamese emperor Bao Dai to assume the Vietnamese throne. The Japanese also installed Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia and Sisavong Vong in Luang Prabang, Laos. The native Japanese-backed government in Hanoi was never able to assume any real political control. The net result of the Japanese coup, and subsequent establishment of native regimes in the Indochinese states, was to remove the last vestiges of the French colonial regime. In the period between the coup and the return of the French in late 1945, local native governments would begin to assert control and nationalism would flower. The French would have to fight their way back in.

(U) The Viet Minh, recognizing an opportunity, stepped up activities in Tonkin: isolated Japanese units were attacked and political agitation against the puppet regime increased. Aided by an OSS team with arms and training, the Viet Minh moved out of its mountain retreat and quickly seized power in Hanoi on the heels of the Japanese surrender. On 2 September 1945 Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

(U) However, Allied occupation authorities refused to sanction the Viet Minh government.



(U) OSS personnel supervise arms training of Viet Minh soldiers.

The Potsdam conference had divided the region at the eighteenth parallel, giving the British occupation duties to the south and the Nationalist Chinese north of the line. In Saigon, in late September, the British occupation forces, allied with newly freed French units and aided by Japanese troops, drove out the Viet Minh elements in Saigon. Within a month, regular French combat units arrived from France under the command of the war hero, General Philippe LeClerc, and attacked Viet Minh units in Cochin and southern Annam. To the North, Chinese forces, moving south to the demarcation line, settled in and indulged in an orgy of looting of the Vietnamese in their occupation zone.

### **(U) The French Counter Ho**

(U) In March 1946, anxious to eject the Chinese, Ho cut a deal with the French which allowed their units into Tonkin supplanting the Chinese troops. As part of the agreement, the French promised to adhere to a five-year timetable of withdrawal leading to eventual independence in return for Ho allowing their forces back to Haiphong and Hanoi. Yet the French almost immediately reneged on the deal. During

further negotiations between the Vietnamese and French at Fontainebleau, outside of Paris, in June 1946, the French high commissioner for Indochina, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, unilaterally announced the formation of the Republic of Cochin China, subverting Ho's position as leader of all Vietnam.

(U) After d'Argenlieu's announcement, talks in Paris proved fruitless, and Ho returned to Hanoi. Skirmishes and "incidents" between French and Viet Minh units continued into the fall. On 20 November 1946, a French patrol boat was fired on by Viet Minh troops after it had stopped a Chinese junk from southern China smuggling ammunition to the Vietnamese. Fighting spread to other parts of the city.<sup>17</sup> Two days later, in retaliation, French warships shelled the Vietnamese sections of Haiphong. As many as 6,000 Vietnamese were killed or injured as French shells fell indiscriminately on Vietnamese residential districts. French forces began to reinforce garrisons throughout Annam and eastern Tonkin. The Viet Minh high command prepared for full hostilities. On December 19, Giap and Ho ordered general attacks in Hanoi, Haiphong, and a number of other cities and towns, designed to



(U) French and Vietnamese delegations at the negotiations at Fountainebleu outside of Paris, France, 1946

drive out the French. The attacks, however, failed to dislodge the French forces. French forces spent weeks clearing the Viet Minh out of Hanoi. The Viet Minh leadership took to the hills, returning to World War II strongholds they had left, but had not neglected, to begin an expected long campaign of guerrilla warfare. It would be almost eight years before Ho Chi Minh would return to Hanoi.

(U) In the beginning, both sides were hampered by the lack of military resources. The Viet Minh, numbering about 60,000 lightly armed troops and another 100,000 support cadre, controlled the countryside; their major strongholds were located in the Thai Nguyen region of northern Tonkin, which they had established back during the Japanese occupation of 1940-1945, the coastal plain of Annam, and redoubts along the border with Cambodia. The Viet Minh had also developed and assisted native resistance movements in Laos and Cambodia, exploiting splits among the royal families of both countries whose

dissident relatives commanded communist and nationalist resistance groups.

(U) The French, numbering almost 100,000 troops from France and her colonies (notably native Vietnamese, Moroccan, and Algerian colonial units), occupied the cities and a series of fortified positions on the Chinese border. The French had been fighting in Cochin China and Annam since late 1945 and still had not completely pacified the regions. As their military formations spread out from the cities into the countryside, they continued to meet resistance, which either could be driven away or would fade at their approach. Vietnam could not be pacified.

(U) At the beginning of the fighting, both sides also were lacking outside sources of substantial political and military aid. The Viet Minh were receiving some propaganda support from Moscow, but actual recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by the USSR and the PRC would not be forthcoming until 1950. For the first



(U) Moroccan soldiers from the French Union Forces burn out a suspected Viet Minh camp

few years of the war, the Viet Minh relied on traditional sources of guerrilla supply: captured equipments, homemade weapons, and purchases from black market or foreign sources. In the latter case, Thailand proved to be a lucrative source for weapons.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Chinese sources, in this case individual leaders from Jiang's Nationalist regime, interested in seeing the French ejected from Indochina, supplied the Viet Minh from ports in the south of China, and from across the mostly uncontrollable Tonkin border with Guangxi (Kwangsi) and Yunnan provinces.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the French went at it virtually alone. Struggling to hold on to its recalcitrant colonies, France found some sympathy, but little else, from other embattled European colonial powers such as England and the Netherlands.

### (U) The American View

~~(TS//SI)~~ The United States stayed mostly neutral during this period. American policy makers, wary of Ho's historic communist connections, were not enthusiastic about arranging any talks

between him and the French. It may have been futile to try to negotiate a solution; after 1947, the French simply refused to deal with him at all. The French played the card of Ho's communist past well: when Washington suggested negotiations in Indochina, the French merely pointed at Ho's communist connections

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At the same time, the Viet Minh were asking American diplomats on the scene to act as intermediaries between Ho and the French.

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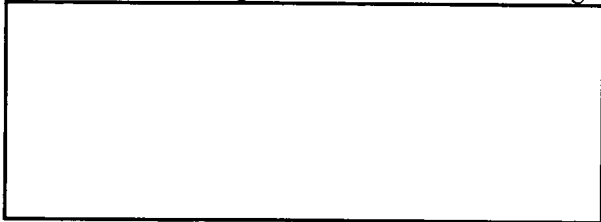
~~(TS//SI)~~ It was this "communist" label that would prove, in the end, to be critical in the American perception of the struggle; it turned Washington's interpretation of the conflict from an anticolonial war into another battle in the growing ideological struggle waged between Washington and Moscow. There was never any doubt of Ho's communist credentials; they were as historically extensive and public as could be. No, the real problem was Ho's relationship with Moscow. From 1946 onwards, the French maintained that Ho was receiving orders and support directly from Moscow, often claiming to hold direct evidence; though when pressed by the Americans to produce it, the French could not.<sup>22</sup> In a 1947 report, the State Department's Special Projects Staff, which evaluated intelligence information, including COMINT, could find no evidence of any control of the Vietnamese Communist movement by Moscow.<sup>23</sup> A similar report in 1948 by the State Department reiterated this stand and still could find no direct evidence, and that, if there was any, a Moscow-directed conspiracy was "an anomaly."<sup>24</sup>

### (U) Bao Dai Returns

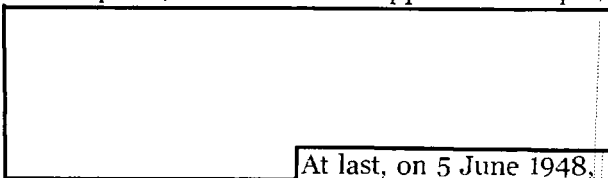
~~(TS//SI)~~ The French were hard pressed to find a politically acceptable alternative to Ho. He eclipsed all other Vietnamese nationalist leaders in terms of popular support and stature. The only figure the French could hope to displace Ho with was the deposed Annamese emperor Bao Dai. Ever since he had surrendered his throne to the Viet Minh in September 1945, Bao Dai had become a kind of nomadic playboy. He could be found at various resorts and fleshpots with his entourage of syncophants and "imperial advisors." On the surface, Bao Dai may have appeared to be merely a rake, but he was more nationalist and anti-French than was popularly known. At the end of the Second World War, he had sent messages to General Charles De Gaulle and President Harry Truman warning that a French return would be greeted by resistance from all Vietnamese:

Our people, in particular, do not regard the French as their enemies . . . but they will resist with every ounce of their strength the re-establishment of French domination in any form whatsoever . . . the people of Viet-Nam . . . can no longer be placed under the guardianship of another people.<sup>25</sup>

~~(TS//SI)~~ In early 1947, the French had begun secret negotiations with Bao Dai for his return to Indochina. He demurred at first, demanding some sort of independence for the three colonies that made up Vietnam. Bao Dai was in Hong Kong at the time while French and nationalist Vietnamese negotiators shuttled in and out for most of 1947 trying to talk him into returning.



~~(TS//SI)~~ In December 1947, Bao Dai met with French officials aboard a French ship in Along Bay northeast of Haiphong. Supposedly, Bao again had held off the French, but he actually had signed an agreement of sorts which allowed for limited independence within the French Union. Anxious to avoid seeming to be a French "nominal Emperor," Bao Dai then skipped for Europe.



At last, on 5 June 1948, the first agreement was signed which established a Provisional Central Vietnam government. However, Bao Dai never succumbed to the illusion regarding his real position and role within the national Vietnamese government, as well as the true regard that Paris held for him. Later, when asked about a striking French blonde courtesan who was part of his court as a "member of the imperial film unit," he remarked: "She is only plying her trade. I'm the real whore."<sup>29</sup>

EO 1.4.(c)

(U) As a viable alternative to Ho's DRV, the United States was less than satisfied with the French-supported, national Vietnamese regime of Nguyen Van Xuan under the Head of State Bao Dai.<sup>30</sup> In 1949, the French and Bao Dai signed the Elysee Agreements, which offered the Vietnamese a unified country and the beginnings of a national military, though based on the French model. However, the foreign policy and military affairs were controlled by Paris. Plans, and even discussions, for a future independent Vietnam were put off by the French. The U.S. State Department was split over whether to approve the agreements. However, political and military events on mainland Asia were out of Washington's control and would further paint the Indochina conflict in the hues of the worldwide Cold War confrontation. In 1949, Mao Zedong's forces had driven Jiang's Nationalists out of



(U) Bao Dai and French commissioner Emile Bollaert sign first agreement for the newly organized Vietnam, 1948.

China proper onto the island of Taiwan. As other defeated Nationalist troops staggered southward across the Tonkin border in retreat, the French and the Americans could only imagine the worst consequences of an aggressive Communist China bordering Indochina.

### **(U) Operation Lea**

(U) Fighting between the French Union forces and the Viet Minh during this period consisted of mostly small-scale actions. A rare, major French mobile operation in the fall of 1947 came close to capturing the Viet Minh leadership. During Operation Lea in the Thai Nguyen region, the traditional Viet Minh stronghold in central Tonkin, north of Hanoi, French paratroops came within a few feet, quite literally, of capturing Ho Chi Minh and other senior Viet Minh leaders. But they missed. Instead, Operation Lea was symptomatic of future French military operations: initial surprise and success which turned into a nightmarish saga of ambush and isolation as trapped units would have to fight their way out or perish. Concurrent military expeditions to clear lines of communications among forts along the Tonkin-China border failed. The French tried publicly to minimize the scope and range of Lea, telling overseas diplomatic posts that the operations were

mostly "mopping-up" and that Viet Minh resistance was sporadic.<sup>31</sup> The truth was that the French suffered over 4,000 casualties from Lea; it had taken almost all of its military resources in the region to stage the operation. The French military, suffering low morale and dwindling personnel, fell into a strategy of conducting small-scale operations while building up forces in the urban areas. French casualties continued to mount: by 1949, over 45,000 French troops had been killed, wounded, captured, or missing (many hundreds of French and colonial troops would defect to the Viet Minh during the course of the Indochina War).

### **(U) The Beginning of the End for the French**

(U) By 1950, the French may have felt that they had stabilized the war. However, their position was already undercut by the strategic situation. Mao's communist Chinese forces on the Tonkin border began providing the Viet Minh with an abundance of military equipment and supplies (mostly American equipment captured from the defeated Nationalists), and assistance in the form of military advisors and logistics experts who organized their supply effort. Politically, Communist China and the Soviet Union at last

officially recognized Ho's Democratic Republic of Vietnam, settling, once and for all, the issue of which side Washington would support. On 7 February 1950, Washington recognized Bao Dai's government of Vietnam. Nine days later, the French requested military aid from the Americans.

(S//SI)

~~XX~~ Meanwhile, the Viet Minh military commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, had husbanded his main front combat units until he had over a hundred battalions ready for the next phase of the struggle against the French. The year 1950 would be the beginning of the end for the French Empire in the Indochina peninsula.

**(U) Notes**

1. (U) Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 39.
2. (U) James S. Olson, and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam 1945 to 1990* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991), 2.
3. (U) *Ibid.*, 26.
4. (U) Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam[:] A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 76.
5. (U) Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin are Western terms applied to the standard territorial division in Vietnam under the French. The Vietnamese objected to the word "Annam," a Chinese word meaning "pacified south." They refer traditionally, to the three regions as Nam Viet, Trung Viet, and Bac Viet. or South Vietnam, Central Vietnam, and North Vietnam, respectively.
6. (U) Ronald Spector, *United States Army in Vietnam. Advice and Support: the Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 11.
7. (U) H.P. Wilmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 15.
8. (U) Ho Chi Minh would eventually adopt as many as twenty cryptonyms during his career before finally settling on Ho Chi Minh. Many of these aliases, which include Chinese and Russian names, reflected

his extensive (and apparently highly successful) work as a COMINTERN agent in France, Russia, China, Thailand, Malaya, and the British crown colony of Hong Kong. The American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) knew Ho as "Agent 19," a.k.a. "Lucius." For a summary of Ho Ch Minh's Comintern career, see Sophie Quinn Judge "Ho Chi Min: New Perspectives From the Comintern Files." unpublished manuscript, December 1993.

9. (U) Tokyo to Washington, 13 February 1939; see also Paris to Tokyo, #677, 13 November 1937. and Tokyo to Paris, 783-B 9 September 1937, inter alia. NARA RG 457. Multinational Diplomatic Translations, boxes CBKH34 and CBKL37.

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10. (U) David Marr, *Vietnam, 1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 25.

11. (U) Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy During the Second World War, 1941-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1965), 12.

12. (U) Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

13. (U) *Ibid.*, 17.

14. (U) Paris to Chungking, 24 May 1945. H-186840 RG 457.

15. (U) For a more detailed history of the Viet Minh's activities during World War II, see this author's "Guerrillas in the Mist" in the *Cryptologic Quarterly* Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1996, 95-114.

16. (U) Tokyo to Saigon, 9 November 1944, # H-150249; Tokyo to Circular, 17 February 1945, # H-167814; Saigon to Tokyo, 10 March 1945, # H-171978; and Tokyo to Circular, 10 March 1945, # H-174043. inter alia, Multinational Diplomatic Translations, RG 457.

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17. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Saigon to Paris,  21 November 1946. NSA/CSS Archives (NCA). Box CBLJ52; LA657.

18. ~~(TS//SI)~~ No. 174, 12 May 1947 and No. 183, 21 May 1947, inter alia. NCA, ACC# 5289, WDGS G-2

19. ~~(TS//SI)~~ *Ibid.* Summary No. 298, 3 November 1947 and No. 109, 6 February 1947, inter alia.

20. ~~(TS//SI)~~ *Ibid.* Summary No. 370, 17 February 1948.

21. ~~(TS//SI)~~ *Ibid.* Summary No. 407, 9 April 1948

22. (U) U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) Volume VIII The Far East*. Hanoi to Washington, 3 December 1946, 64-5; 851G/12-346; 131.

23. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Department of State Special Projects Staff (SPS) Memorandum, "Alleged Soviet Direction of Vietnamese Government," 12 June 1947, CCH Series XII.NN.II.B.6.

24. (U) Office of the Secretary of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office). *Book I: Vietnam and the United States, 1940-1950*, A-6; For an abbreviated version of the twelve volume OSD study, see the *New York Times* single volume, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 9.

25. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Hanoi to Tokyo, 20 August 1945, H-202731; also Hanoi to Saigon, 20 August 1945, H-202960, NARA, RG 457. Multinational Diplomatic Translations and, Hanoi to Tokyo, 17 September 1945, H-207162, NCA Accession# 2022C.

26. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Summary No. 178, 14 May 1947, NCA ACC#5289.

27. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid. Summary No. 155, 11 April 1947.

28. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Ibid. Summary No. 407, 9 April 1948.

29. (U) Karnow, 181.

30. (U) Schulzinger, 36.

31. ~~(TS//SI)~~ Summary No. 297, 31 Oct 1947, NCA ACC# 5289.