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Vietnam: From Colony to Communist

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Vietnam: From Colony to Communist

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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.

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Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction **1**

Chapter One: *The French Colonial Establishment* **7**

The French Colonial Reality 12
The Political Structure 13
The Financial Structure 16
The Economic System 18
Industry and Commerce 19
Education 22

Chapter Two: *The Demise of the Old Order* **26**

Tru'u'ong Dinh and the Restoration Movement 27
Revolution and Reformation 29
Revolution 30
Reformation 32
The Education Movement 33
Why did the scholar-gentry fail? 34
A Changing Vietnam 36
The Proletariat 36
The Educated Elite 37
A Time of Transition 40
Thai Nguyen Prison Rebellion 41

Chapter Three: *The Rise of Political Parties* **44**

The Collaborators and the Constitutionalists 45
The Tan Viet 49
The VNQDD 50
The Failures of the Early, Non-Communist Nationalist Parties 52
Ho Chi Minh and the Communists 53
The League 57
Fragmentation and Unification 61
The ICP 62
Ideology 63
Organization 64
Program 66

Chapter Four: *The Struggle for Independence* **69**

The Nghe Tinh Soviet Movement 69
The Influence of Moscow 73
The Popular Front Period 75
The Specter of War 78
Occupation and Collaboration 79
The ICP and the 1940s 82
The Coup D'état of the Japanese 89
The August Revolution 92

Chapter Five: *Le rôle du mythe colonial français dans la guerre en Indochine* **95**

Le mythe colonial 96
L'argument 99
De Gaulle et le mythe colonial 102
L'acroissement des tensions 108
L'impact du mythe colonial sur la guerre en Indochine 117

Summary of Chapter Five: *The Role of the French Colonial Myth in the Indochinese War* 120

Conclusion **129**

Appendix I: *La constitution de la quatrième république* 139

Appendix II: *Map of Colonial Vietnam* 143

Bibliography 144

Abstract

Vietnam has a long and complicated history. It has been a nation of tribes, a Chinese colony, a monarchical state, a French colony, and today is one of the few nations left that calls itself Communist. This senior project will examine how and why the Vietnamese Communists of the Indochinese Communist Party, led by the notorious Ho Chi Minh, were able to take control of the country in 1945. The French colonial system was harsh, repressive, and designed to favor the French while exploiting the Vietnamese. From the time of the French conquest to the end of World War I in 1918, the Vietnamese nationalist movement was limited to the literati class of mandarins, the traditional leadership of Vietnam. However, these men were unable to expand their appeals and their movements to the larger, mainly peasant society. Their movements were limited in scope, appeal, and organization. This first major stage of nationalism was followed by the rise of more traditional political parties. Vietnamese society was in the middle of a great transition as a middle class emerged and began to feel ostracized from the higher echelons of society they felt their education entitled them to. During this period, such men formed political parties like the VNQDD and the Constitutionalists, whose programs ranged from the reformative to the revolutionary. Again, however, they were unable to arrive at coherent, defined ideologies that could inspire the masses. Many were hindered by internal disunity, French repression, and scattered organization. When the third phase began in the 1930's, it was clear that only the Communists possessed the organization, ideology, and propaganda that could allow them to transcend regional and particularistic support, but it was not until Ho Chi Minh returned to lead the Indochinese Communist Party on the eve of World War II that the Communists gained their last real advantage: a leader who could steer them through the difficult political waters of the war, the Japanese occupation, and the political vacuum that followed. In August, 1945, the ICP's patient preparation, propaganda, ideology, and organization allowed them to ride the wave of nationalism to power while the other nationalist groups floundered in their own unimportance.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 2, 1945, Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi was filled with eager, smiling Vietnamese faces, waving red flags, and patriotic banners. It is estimated that several tens of thousands of people were gathered on this day in front of a small podium built hastily for the occasion. World War II had just ended; the Japanese occupiers had driven out the French only to surrender to the Allies in the same year. After almost 100 years of French colonial rule, five years of harsh Japanese exploitation, and a month of almost bloodless revolution, popular uprisings, and rallies, the people were finally gathered to hear the official Declaration of Independence from the new, shadowy president of the now Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Few knew what to expect on this historic day. Soon, a black car carrying a small group of men, the new Provisional Government of Vietnam, entered the square. These men were all known as important revolutionaries and nationalists, and not all were from the Vietminh. However, they all paled in comparison to the now famous Vo Nguyen Giap, the leader of the Vietnamese Liberation Army, the armed force of Vietnam. Few knew to look at the small, unprepossessing man who came behind. This small, older man, dressed in a simple, borrowed khaki suit and sandals, did not look any different from the thousands gathered in the square. His weathered skin, long mustache, and thin face signaled to the crowd that this man had not lived a privileged life but one of hardship and struggle, just like the rest of them. However, this man slowly climbed up the podium and took his place in front of the microphone, accompanied by a band that played simple marches as Vietminh guards stood ready, several American OSS officers watched, and two American P-38 Lightning fighters flew overhead as if on purpose.

This was Ho Chi Minh, a man steeped in mystery, enigma, and controversy. However, on this day, in this place, he was the father of a nation. Ho Chi Minh, on the 2nd of September, at around 2:00 in the afternoon, announced the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the world. He opened the speech with an obvious attempt to gain the sympathies of the United States and the French progressives. The speech began with the timeless words, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness", the same words used in the opening of the American Declaration of Independence from 1776. He followed this great statement about the equality of man with words taken from the Declaration of the French Revolution of 1791, which states, "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights." In asserting the equality of man, and then detailing the abuses of the French that so blatantly went against this basic principle, Ho Chi Minh was declaring to the world that Vietnam was now to govern her own destiny, that "the whole of Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, [were] determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country". (Ho Chi Minh 145). With these famous words, Vietnam was now free and under the rule of the Vietminh-dominated Provisional Government, headed by Ho Chi Minh.

To many Americans, Communism is a dirty word, one that sparks thoughts of evil dictators, oppressive regimes, and exploited peoples. In the US, Communism is seen as an impediment to progress, a failed system with failed ideologies; it is a system imposed from the outside or by a small group of ideologues who do not actually represent the will of the people. However, to the Vietnamese, the communist Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh represented freedom, independence, and patriotism. This man and his followers were able to maintain power

through thirty years of bloody war and sacrifice, a fact that many French and Americans alike still struggle to explain. How could so many people so ardently follow an evil ideology? The Communists, under Ho Chi Minh, were not only poised to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them at the end of World War II, but were the only ones able to do so. By August, 1945, the Communists had taken control of the nationalist movement, seamlessly blending the calls for national liberation with their slogans for social revolution. This project will explore how and why the Communists were able to manage this dazzling feat in the midst of colonialism, war, and repression.

The first chapter constitutes a brief overview of the French colonial rule in Vietnam, beginning with their conquest of the country in 1858. The purpose of this chapter is to provide background and context for the nationalist movement. It will be important for the following chapters to have a context for the system against which the nationalists were rebelling, as well as the policies and conditions that made the Vietnamese people so anxious for revolt. It is also important to note the educational and economic system that bred the men who would someday lead the nationalist movement.

The next three chapters outline the three major stages of Vietnamese nationalism. Chapter Two outlines the first of these stages in which the mandarins, or literati elite of traditional Confucian Vietnam, led armed uprisings using mainly guerilla tactics against the invading French. These men eventually lost legitimacy in the face of French reprisals and repression while their calls for the restoration of the traditional monarchy suffered from the weakness of the emperors who had failed to protect their people. This movement was replaced by one led by the educated elite who called for revolution or reformation, but these movements also failed when they proved either ineffectual or unattractive to the populace at large. Finally,

the chapter covers the economic and social changes that occurred during and immediately following the First World War, including the emergence of new classes, the deterioration of traditional social structures, and the rise of larger, more popular based rebellions such as the Thai Nguyen Prison Rebellion. It is important to note why this early stage of nationalism failed to inspire successful, popular movements so as to better understand the successes of the Communists in later years.

The third chapter discusses the next major stage of Vietnamese nationalism of the 1920s in which formal political parties began to develop. While these political parties had some major faults that also hindered their abilities to lead popular uprisings against the French regime, their failures and infrequent successes had much to teach the Communists who were also developing at this time under the leadership of Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh). The collaborators and the Constitutionalists proved that the French were not going to legally allow any changes in Vietnam that would lead to increased autonomy, while parties like the Tan Viet and the VNQDD taught the Communists the necessity of organization and preparation. This chapter will also discuss the formation of the League and its fragmentation and transformation into the Indochinese Communist Party under Ho Chi Minh. The ideology, organization, and program of this new party will be examined in order to give a clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the early ICP.

Chapter Four focuses on the period from 1930 to the August Revolution of 1945, a time of change and transition. It will outline the struggles of the ICP during the 1930s as it attempted to mediate the demands of the Comintern under the direction of Stalin and the USSR and the nature of the situation inside Vietnam. It will be important to note in this chapter how the ICP manages to rebuild and adapt during this trying time after French repression, the outbreak of

WWII, and the arrival of the Japanese. One must also pay close attention to the role of Ho Chi Minh, who returns to Vietnam on the eve of war after spending most of the 1930's in exile in Russia. The chapter will conclude with the August Revolution and how the Communists ultimately came to power.

The study of the three phases of Vietnamese nationalism will conclude with an analysis of the reasons for the ICP's success in 1945 in taking over the Vietnamese nationalist movement. The main reasons cited in this conclusion will be: a strong leadership; a coherent ideology; a tailored propaganda; a structured organization, and patient preparation. The historical and political overview provided by the chapters will lay out the proof and the timeline of events that demonstrate how these strengths combined with the unique circumstances of the time period to catapult the Communists to victory. The conclusion will also examine the broader consequences of these strengths for the United States as it prepared for its own war which began in 1959, and how the myths believed by American leaders at the time could have been better explained by a closer examination of these same details.

Also included in this project is a fifth French chapter that studies the impact of the French colonial myth on the relations between the French and the Vietnamese after 1945 as the French prepared to retake their colony. This chapter defines the colonial myth as the belief that the colonies and mainland France formed a single, inseparable entity connected by a shared culture, language, and patriotism. This myth blinded the French to the realities of Vietnam after 1945 and ultimately doomed their re-colonization effort in the country. This chapter is followed by a shorter English summary.

It is important to include a note about sources and language at this time. When possible, first-hand sources and documents have been used, including those in French. However, most

Vietnamese sources are quoted from translated works or compilations. The language barrier proved the biggest obstacle in their use, but many documents, especially those relating to the specific activities of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh, remain guarded by the Vietnamese government. Despite these obstacles, a variety of first-hand sources, documents, and scholarly works have been included in order to allow the project to be a more well-rounded overview of the events leading to the August Revolution of 1945.

Chapter One:

The French Colonial Establishment

The conquest of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (collectively called Indochina) was carried out over a period of some thirty years from 1858 to 1893. The conquest was not, however, part of any coherent policy emanating from Paris, but one driven by men in the field: adventurers, soldiers, merchants, and missionaries. The French and Vietnamese first encountered each other in the 1600's as Christian missionaries swept the globe. Relations between the two nations began fairly cordially, as the French missionaries were first and foremost acting in the interests of the Catholic Church, and only then their king. In 1627, Alexandre de Rhodes established the first French Jesuit mission in Vietnam, and besides proselytizing with more success than any before him, he is best known for creating *quoc ngu*, the Latinized script form of Vietnamese. He also created the first Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary in 1651. Rhodes had such success in Vietnam that in the 1660's, the *Société des Missions étrangères* began sending missionaries to the country in larger numbers.

However, it was not long before religion and politics began to merge. In the late 1700's, civil war broke out between the two ruling families of Vietnam, the Tay Son dynasty in the North, and the Nguyen dynasty in the South. In this war, the Lay Son dynasty defeated the Nguyens and the family would have been wiped out if not for the intervention of the French Bishop of Adran, Pingneau de Béhaine, who supported, tutored, and protected the last Nguyen prince. Mgr. de Béhaine sensed political opportunity for France in the prince's misfortune. The Bishop proved to have a shrewd political mind, and in a bid to gain French military support for

restoration of the Nguyen dynasty in Vietnam, he brought the young Prince to Paris, where his exotic dress and looks made him the toast of the court of Louis XVI. The King was persuaded by the Bishop to sign a treaty that promised the islands of Puolo Condore and Noinan to the French in return for their military assistance. This meant that the French would have exclusive trading rights in Vietnam, as no other European country had managed to establish a base there. Yet, the troops never arrived, as Louis became involved in his own troubles in the Americas. The Bishop then decided to take matters into his own hands and recruited his own personal army of adventurers and sailors. He purchased arms with funds obtained from French traders anxious for the exotic markets Vietnam could provide, and in 1789, he began the military campaign that eventually restored the Nguyen Dynasty in 1799 under the new emperor Gia Long.

At this point, attention in France was further directed away from the South Pacific by the French Revolution, and as the emperor Minh Mang ascended the Vietnamese throne in 1825, the efforts of the Bishop of Adran and the merchants who funded him were undermined by religious persecution. The Confucian bureaucratic elite in Vietnam began to feel threatened by Christian doctrine which was slowly gaining more and more traction among the people. The King also began to resent the interference of the missionaries in his kingdom, and he periodically sentenced a few of the most outspoken to death. The missionaries in Vietnam wrote frantically to the French mainland, yet while the French were growing increasingly sympathetic to the priests' plight, few advocated strong action. It was not until the British gained Hong Kong in 1842 that the French began to fear for their own economic, political, and military interests in the Pacific. The period of colonial expansion was putting immense pressure on the French to join the British, Spanish, and other European nations in their colonizing efforts. No country could be considered great during this time without colonies that could provide trade, labor, and political prestige.

British gains during the Opium Wars in China from 1856 to 1860 made the French doubly anxious to check the growing power of their greatest rival in the Pacific. The persecution of missionaries gave the French the perfect cover for their economic and political motivations in Vietnam.

Minh Mang's reign ended in 1840, but the new emperor Tu Duc shared his predecessors' fears and resentments. In 1855, he issued a new edict calling for the persecution of French missionaries, and in response, Napoleon III sent Admiral Montigny to Tourane in order to negotiate for the release of some of the missionaries. His mission ended in complete failure. Napoleon thus decided to conquer Cochinchina in the South, ostensibly to establish religious freedom from a tyrannical king. It was believed, thanks to the many letters from the French missionaries in Vietnam, that the Vietnamese Catholics would rise up and support the French upon their arrival. In 1858, Admiral Rigault de Genouilly arrived in Tourane with 2300 men, with few concrete instructions. The port was taken without much difficulty as the Vietnamese were no match for the trained, well-equipped French soldiers with modern weapons and tactics. However, no Vietnamese Catholics arose from the countryside, and the French soon fell prey to starvation, disease, and disillusionment. The original intent had been to press on to the capital at Hué from Tourane, but lacking the man power and supplies, the Admiral decided to attack the port of Saigon in the south instead. This port seemed more promising. The south was the rice producing capital of the country, connected to the rest of Vietnam through a series of rivers. One of these rivers was the Mekong, thought to have potential as a trading river with China. Here, it may be more possible for the French Navy to receive supplies and rations. The city was taken in February 1859 with little difficulty.

However, the French soon began a war with China, and it was decided to abandon Tourane on favor of Saigon, which was held with only a few men until the conquest was renewed by Admiral Charner in 1860. He was instructed to gain as much territory as he could before proposing terms to the court at Hué, and it was under these instructions that he pressed toward My Tho and Bien Hoa, expanding outward from the city of Saigon. Charner was replaced by Admiral Bonard, who continued the outward push by taking Baria, Vinh Long, and the island of Puolo Condore. The timing was fortuitous for the French. Tu Duc was facing Chinese-backed rebellions in the North and could ill afford a war on two fronts. In 1862, he signed a peace treaty ceding the provinces of Gia Dinh, Bien Hoa, and My Tho, along with Puolo Condore, to the French. It also opened three ports, including Tourane, to the westerners, and granted religious freedom throughout the country. The French continued to pacify their new territories, and even expanded their control to the areas of Chau Doc and Ha Tien, completing the conquest of the colony that came to be called Cochinchina. In 1863, the French also took control of Cambodia, thus consolidating their position in the South.

During this period, Indochina was seen as an exotic trading ground with possible ties to the greatest market of all, China. Fierce competition with the other empires, most notably the British, made France all the more desperate to discover the secrets of her new territory. However, they soon determined that all was not as perfect as it seemed. The Mekong was un-navigable, and this left the French without a direct trade route to China. In 1872, an expedition headed by Jean Dupuis, a French trader based in China, found that the Red River in the North was navigable and led to the south of China, ripe for trade. Despite direct orders from Paris not to interfere in the North, Dupuis seized the port of Hanoi when he was denied the ability to trade salt from China in Vietnam. The Governor General, Admiral Dupré, sent Garnier, a famous

French explorer, to the city in order to help, hoping to extend French power to the North and the valuable Red River. Dupré seized Hanoi in 1873, but was killed in action by pirates fighting for the Vietnamese. The French withdrew in defeat and left the North, but French traders were still anxious to gain control of the river and its trade potential.

After the disastrous and humiliating defeat of the French in what came to be known as "the Tonkin Affair," France decided to focus on the increasingly tumultuous situation in Europe. It was not until 1880 that the debate about colonial expansion in Vietnam again took center stage. France was in dire need of the prestige and wealth that colonies could give her, and when Commandant Rivière decided to take advantage of Tu Duc's increasingly difficult northern pirate rebellions by again invading the North, the French government took notice. It seemed that the defeat of 1873 was going to be repeated when Rivière was also killed in action, but the French under Jules Ferry instead decided to send more troops instead of withdrawing. Tu Duc was thus intimidated into signing a treaty of protectorate in 1884, which placed Tonkin and Annam (northern and central Vietnam respectively) under French control. In so doing, they scared the Chinese across the border who were far from anxious to have a colonizing European power on their southern flank. They joined the Vietnamese in their assault on the French fort of Lang Son, and in a panic, the French electorate ousted Ferry in March 1885.

Few Frenchmen within Vietnam were concerned, however, as they saw their power growing. China soon relented and informally renounced its claim to Vietnam. By late 1885, the French public was again supportive of the colonial idea. In a speech before the Chamber on July 28, 1885, Ferry asserted that the conquest of Vietnam had been a cohesive adventure that was "born of religious evangelism and pursued through a combination of international imperial and maritime rivalry" (Cooper 17). He emphasized the prestige and grandeur of the colonial process,

which in reality had been led by enterprising men acting without any clear direction from Paris, and sometimes against its direct orders. There was little defined vision or purpose behind the conquest of Vietnam, and this set the precedent for the administration of their new colony in the years to come.

The French Colonial Reality

France may have conquered Indochina for economic, political, and religious reasons, but the French people needed another justification for their presence in Vietnam, one complementing their Republican, democratic, and humanitarian traditions. The colonizing myth, the *mission civilisatrice*, served as a smokescreen behind which French political and economic ambitions could hide. This myth claimed that France had a duty to bring culture, civilization, and advancement to the Vietnamese people, to teach them how not only to live but also how to govern. Nicola Cooper, in her book French Indochina: Colonial Encounters, quotes E. Lavisse, from his work Histoire de la France, who clearly presents the dichotomy between the initial ambitions of the French and the rhetoric of the "white man's burden":

> "What use do the colonies have? The colonies are very useful to the commerce and industry of France. We sell many of our products there, which augments the national wealth. We buy many products that we need there. But a noble country like France does not think to only gain monetary profit. In Indochina, France put an end to the ravages of Chinese bandits. Above all she taught the populations to work. She created roads, railroads, and telegraph lines" (33) [1].

[1] « A quoi servent les colonies? Les colonies sont très utiles au commerce et à l'industrie de la France. Nous y vendons beaucoup de nos produits, ce qui augmente la richesse nationale. Nous y achetons les produits dont nous avons besoin. Mais un noble pays comme la France ne pense pas qu'à gagner de l'argent. En Indochine, la France a mis fin aux ravages de bandits venus de Chine. Partout elle enseigne aux populations le travail. Elle crée des routes, des chemins de fer, des lignes télégraphiques ».

But history proves that such a mission was harder to achieve than to say. Despite Lavisse's rather lofty claim that France was not in Vietnam for monetary gain alone, the reality proved quite different. Often, this civilizing mission was overwhelmed by or even openly conflicted with the economic priorities of the French in Indochina. The rhetoric called for a concerted effort at "helping the natives without hurting the prosperous colonials, and to increase native rights without diminishing French power" (Buttinger 86). In many cases, those in charge seemed either unable or unwilling to fulfill the obligations toward the natives set down by the mission. The proceeding sections shall seek to illustrate the method and madness of the French colonial establishment and how the civilizing mission's ambitions failed to be realized.

The Political Structure

Indochina consisted of three formerly independent countries: Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Yet, the French firmly believed in the concept of "divide and rule". To this end, they further divided Vietnam into three sections: the colony of Cochinchina in the South, and the two protectorates of Annam (the Center), and Tonkin (the North). Administratively, however, this required the French to be more creative in their governing style. While they allowed the emperor and the court at Hué to symbolically retain their control over Annam and Tonkin, they eventually stripped away all real vestiges of the court's power, leaving it as little more than a relic of a past age. Even the mandarins were paid by the French for their services as local administrators and tax collectors. The French actively sought to block or hinder Vietnamese participation in the governing of their own country, while seeming to apply their civilizing rhetoric. They thus created a complex system which did its best to favor the French and hinder the Vietnamese.

The Governor General was the "chief representative of the French Republic in the colony, and, conversely, the spokesman for the colony in its relations with the mother country" (Lam 9). It was his job to direct the country and its separate pieces in a coordinated effort to enrich the homeland, enhance the national security, and generate prestige for Greater France. He had the power to issue decrees and laws for all the people of Indochina, to direct the federal budget, and oversee the administration. He also appointed the regional administrators, the lieutenant-governor in Cochinchina, and the *résidents supérieurs* in the protectorates. Yet, for all the power vested in his hands, the Governor General was at the mercy of two main institutions: the colonials (or *colons*), and the whim of Paris.

The colons represented the most powerful check on the Governor General within the colony. These colons were business men, traders, and financiers who allied themselves with the French functionaries, creating a powerful lobby of very wealthy men. Buttinger clearly describes these men:

> For the colons, there was money to be made, and the reckless and clever made it, more often than not at the expense of the public treasury, with a bonus for the administrator who facilitated a profitable deal. For the administrators, many of whom were in Cochinchina because of political patronage extended to people not qualified for office at home, the new colony was a haven of sinecures made doubly attractive by personal power, which the poor in talent are always the first to enjoy and to abuse (18)

These colonials were often frightened[2], a tiny but self-righteous minority that did not fully understand the "undeserved" hatred of the millions of miserable natives around them, and this

[2] Many of these colons were frightened by the climate which bred diseases like malaria among the European populations, the masses of Vietnamese who periodically revolted and struck out at the nearest French representative available, and the sheer distance from Paris that left them isolated in a foreign country so unlike their own. This fear combined with absolute power and ideas of racial superiority often (though not always) bred brutality. Léon Werth, a French writer cites in his work *La Cochinchine* an instance of a missionary beating a rickshaw coolie without provocation, and a priest striking native Catholics to remove them from places reserved for Europeans in Hanoi Cathedral (Buttinger 73). Often, these random acts of brutality were left unpunished, which only fueled native resentment. This paranoia also tended to make the French colonists more extreme politically. They often preferred to take preemptive action or retaliate with ultimate force against protests and rebellions, and they also favored policies that restricted Vietnamese chances for advancement or modernization, particularly in the area of education.

often made them paranoid, which led them to seek either revenge or preemptive cruelty toward the masses. They believed themselves to be the most deserving, enlightened, and experienced rulers of Indochina, and they often complained about “interference” from Paris, which they believed had little or no knowledge of their affairs or their country. Again, Buttinger well describes the mentality of these colonials when he says: “what they wanted was full freedom to exploit the natives for excessive and untaxed profits; and if they suffered losses, they demanded that the tax payers of France rush to their aid” (71). This powerful, paranoid, wealthy lobby was represented by the Colonial Council, created in 1867. This elected body was made up of the elite from Cochinchina. Of the twenty-four full and eleven substitute members, only ten full and five substitute indigenous members were elected by a restricted electorate of landowners, industrialists, or businessmen. This council was an advisory council on budgetary matters, yet they were dominated by the colons and French civil servants who routinely voted only for their own pay raises or interests. The Colonial Council in Cochinchina was the only regional advisory council with any real power. This council was to be a thorn in the side of every governor general as the colonists often opposed any reform, especially those restricting their power or favoring the natives.

Yet, it was ultimately the whim of Paris that spelled the doom of many a governor general. Between 1886 and 1926, the head of the colonial establishment in Indochina changed fifty-two times. Sometimes the colonials got them recalled, but mostly they were replaced by someone favoring the ever-changing government in Paris’ own policy at the time. This led to a lack of consistent policy in the colony. Governors often vacillated between progressive and repressive, swinging like a pendulum between the two extremes. Throughout the history of French Indochina, only two governors truly stand out: Paul Doumer (1897-1902), who brought

stability and profitability to the colony, and Albert Sarraut (1911-13 and 1917-19) who excelled at the policy of saying much and doing little. Others were either too weak to stand up to the colonials, little interested in their post, or recalled before they could make any lasting impression.

It is important to note that while Paris had control over the Governor General through its power to appoint and recall him, they did not have much control over the policy taken by him once he arrived. The colony was so far away that orders came slowly, if at all, and the Governor was given much latitude in his rule. In addition to distance, interest separated the mainland from Vietnam. Paris and the French people had little interest in the colony as long as they were receiving their goods and the colony was profitable. They seldom took any interest in day-to-day affairs in the colony, insulating themselves from the often open cruelty toward the Vietnamese with the *mission civilisatrice*.

The Financial Structure

The federal budget of Indochina was created under Paul Doumer. It was funded by indirect taxes, while each region had its own separate budget financed by direct taxes. The direct taxes covered mainly taxes on land, income, and the “head” taxes, which each citizen had to pay. Indirect taxes were composed mainly of customs and monopoly revenues. These taxes and monopolies were some of the most hated signs of French rule as they made the rich richer and the poor even poorer. Each Vietnamese was doomed to a cycle of poverty that ensured their indebtedness and that of their children.

The monopolies on opium, alcohol, and salt were major sources of income for the colonial administration, accounting for about 70 per cent of the general budget revenues[3] (Buttinger 60). Doumer did not create the monopolies, but he did centralize the system and made the monopoly uniform across each of the territories. The government had the sole right to produce and distribute these commodities, and later, the people were given quotas for their consumption to ensure that, no matter how poor the people became, there would always be a market for these goods. The French even opened official opium dens, and made these the only legal places of opium consumption or purchase. This way, the sale and use was easy to track and regulate. Alcohol and salt were more difficult to regulate as they were traditionally made by individual Vietnamese for personal and religious use. In order to overcome this handicap, the government sold rights to certain French companies, making them the only legal producers, while claiming a portion of the profits. Also, the government employed mandarins and French civil servants to rotate throughout the villages, searching for illegal manufacture. These men could search without a warrant and offered bonuses for tips and denunciations. This led to many false accusations, and jails soon outnumbered schools three to one within Vietnam alone.

With the state taking all the indirect tax revenue, the regions were left with only one option for the raising of additional funds: the raising of a bevy of direct taxes. The sheer number of taxes levied on the Vietnamese was staggering. An anonymous poem from *The Asian Ballad*

[3] According to Buttinger, the alcohol and opium monopolies damaged the health and wealth of the people. Alcohol rose 40 cents from before the arrival of the French to 1906, and opium users numbered around 85,000 people. However, he cites the salt monopoly as the most damaging, as the tax accounted for eight tenths of the price. Salt was indispensible to a society that lived mainly off of fish and rice, and when it became unaffordable, many were forced to do without. Buttinger quotes French writer Louis Rouband, who observed: "If the fisherman lacks salt, all he can do is to throw away his fish, which the sun is quick to spoil…It is not rare to see a fisherman, with tears in his eyes, abandon the product of a day's work at the shore because he had failed to save enough money to purchase, at its exorbitant price, the condiment he needs, and which he can see in abundance a few hundred meters from his junk, in the forbidden marsh zone" (Buttinger 60).

(The Chant to the Rise of the Consciousness of the People) from 1905, perhaps put most succinctly the variety of taxes with which every Vietnamese had to contend:

> All the varieties of taxes
> They increase them endlessly
> The land tax is hardly paid
> When the tax on buffaloes and cows is due,
> Tax on dogs, tax on pigs
> Tax on matches, tax on alcohol, tax on ferries, tax on cars
> Tax on markets, tax on tea, tax on tobacco
> Tax on licenses, tax on water, tax on lamps,
> Tax on houses, tax on pagodas and temples
> Tax on timber from forests, tax on commercial junks
> Tax even on cosmetic products and on city streets
> Tax on emaciated people addicted to drugs
> Tax on hillocks, tax on beaches, tax on dunes…
> Nobody can enumerate all the various kinds of taxes
> The most stunning tax is on defecation
> It is too painful to talk about these things

With so many taxes, it was often difficult for the people to find enough money to feed themselves and their families. One of the most insulting and clumsy taxes was called the head tax, which taxed the person's very existence, as if they were no more than cattle to be counted. If caught without proof of payment, even for a baby, penalties and fines could be severe. This system not only fueled rage against the French, but also against the mandarins who had become the French tax-collectors. Corruption, cruelty, and greed ran rampant among the mandarins, and these offenses were not something the Vietnamese people were quick to forgive.

The Economic system

The goal of French economic policy was to exploit the natural resources of the territory and to open up new markets for the manufactured goods of France. In the political system, the civilizing mission of bringing democracy and freedom to the Vietnamese was subordinated to the

need to protect French power, and in the economic system, the need to bring technological advancement, education, and prosperity to the Vietnamese was subordinated to the dual need of bringing profit to the colonials and to France. Yet, this is not to say that the Vietnamese did not in some ways benefit from French economic policy, especially the "collaborators" who supported the French in both the political sphere and the business sphere (although they did not benefit as much as the French, to be sure). While some may have benefited from French colonial rule, most Vietnamese were strictly repressed, abused, and in some cases, enslaved.

Industry and Commerce

The French set out to create in Vietnam a modernized commercial and manufacturing sector, improve transport and communication, and improve the standard of living. The caveat was implicitly added that such benefits would be for the French first, and the Vietnamese second (if they ever benefited at all). In actuality, the French did manage to create a thriving light industry sector, mostly of textiles, paper, sugar, and food processing, which were mainly for colonial consumption. The only real heavy industry in Vietnam was the coal mines in the northern Hongay province. These industries were owned mainly by the French and a few Vietnamese collaborators, while indigenous institutions were actively discouraged as it was believed that they should not compete with finished goods from the mother land.

The real industry of Vietnam was in agriculture, mainly rice and rubber. Rice was the traditional crop of the country, which was grown by the peasants on small plots of familial land. The French changed this system in many ways. They wanted the colony to become the main supplier for mainland France, as the main value of a colony was the provision of goods for cheap

prices. This meant that the French colons and businessmen wanted to export more and more rice for greater profit, buying it from the Vietnamese growers for lower prices. This meant that more rice had to be grown. The Mekong Delta in the south and the Red River Delta in the north were the main growing centers, but they were already fairly heavily populated and under cultivation. Instead of teaching the Vietnamese better growing methods, the French instead opened millions of hectares of land to cultivation by draining marshland and creating canals. But, they did not sell this land to the Vietnamese. Instead, they sold it to rich men from the cities, both Vietnamese and French, who had two options. First, they could rent the land at high prices to tenants who came from the villages, creating a system of absentee landlordism and tenancy. Under this system, fewer and fewer Vietnamese owned their own land, and some landlords did not cultivate their lands at all, leaving valuable acres unused[4]. The second option was to create a plantation, usually of rubber. The rubber plantations were centered mainly in the south, where the land was better suited. These plantations very closely resembled those of the American South, where the landlord and his Vietnamese foremen held the power of life and death over their Vietnamese workers who lived in very harsh conditions with little food and even less pay. If a worker managed to live long enough to return home to his family, he would have had little to take back. It was almost impossible for a worker to accumulate savings large enough to support himself and a family. One popular song sings: “How healthy and beautiful are the rubber trees! Under each one of them, a corpse is buried” (Lam 43). It would seem that under such conditions, few would consent to work on the plantations. Some were forced from starvation or poverty to seek

[4] Between 1880 and 1937, the French public works program of drainage and irrigation canals opened 4 ½ million acres of cultivable land, which could have been distributed among the peasants which composed 95.4 per cent of the population of Tonkin, 96.5 per cent of the population in Annam, and 86 per cent of the population of Cochinchina. However, of 4,000,000 people in southern Vietnam in 1930, 2,400,000 were tenants or landless agricultural laborer, meaning that about 14 per cent of the total population of Vietnam belonged to the tenant class. Most of the landlords were located in the south, where 2 per cent of the population controlled 45 per cent of all the cultivable land in the Mekong Delta. (McAlister 70). This is due mainly to the presence of the large plantations in the south.

employment there, but most were recruited from the villages. These recruiters would lie or physically intimidate people into signing contracts that put them completely at the mercy of the plantation owner. Violent encounters became more frequent as resentment grew against these "collaborators" who were willing to sell their fellow countrymen to what amounted to little more than slavery.

However, some had little choice. The businesses and French government were relentless in their demands for rice and profit. Those who did own their own land were often haunted by the specter of starvation. In years where the rivers overflowed, poor yields would spell death for many in the countryside, but the system was designed so that the mother country and the pockets of the French colons would never suffer. The poorer the harvest, the more the government was forced to tax, and this meant that there was less for the farmer to buy the other supplies and food that he needed, let alone to pay rent. Eventually, if things became dire enough, he would be forced to sell his land or his harvest for whatever price was offered, leaving him homeless or without food. In this way, more land came under the control of the wealthy landlords, and less in the hands of the masses. While Vietnamese peasants were starving on the side of the road by the thousands, or even turning to cannibalism in some cases, the French and the wealthy in the towns were comfortable and secure.

In an attempt to break the system, some Vietnamese sought employment in factories or mines. The mines were little better than the plantations, and the industries paid little. Some Vietnamese stayed there only to work in the off season, returning home to plant. This system would eventually have consequences for the Communists as they sought a traditional proletariat and found only peasants, yet for most the cities offered better security, while the village offered the most tradition. This meant that "many Vietnamese were caught between the deterioration of

old commitments- to the village and the clan- and the lack or uncertainty of new commitments to factory, foreman, teachers, work group, classmates, and the like" (McAlister 46).

The final option left for many Vietnamese was to become a government coolie. These coolies would be employed in the creation of one of the many public works projects. The French believed that the civilizing mission could best be represented by tangible improvements to the country, improvements like roads, bridges, and railroads. Doumer, the father of the public works program, began building many of these throughout the country, setting into motion a policy that would be followed until WWII, despite signs that. such projects benefitted only the rich or were massive drains on the federal budget, the economy, and the populace. Again, these coolies lived and worked under difficult, harsh conditions, and many were drafted, not employed. They would earn enough for themselves, receive some food, but not enough to support anyone else. While many roads, bridges, and even two railway lines were built, few coolies saw any benefit to themselves or their compatriots. A popular saying was that "automobiles belong to the French and the mandarins while bullock carts are for the Vietnamese". Roads cut through rice fields and burial grounds, while only the French found any use for them as they drove from town to town. Even commercial and agricultural transport over the rail lines did not pay for their construction as many bridges were needed to cut across the numerous canals, rivers, and streams of the Vietnamese countryside.

Education

It seemed to many Vietnamese that only a few real options offered any sort of reward or happiness under the colonial system. One could become a collaborator or a rebel. Education was

required to become a serious member of either party. Yet again, the French seemed to go out of their way to block off the only serious avenue to success for the Vietnamese, to dilute it so that it had little worth and even less meaning.

The education system under the French was centralized under the Consultative Council of Public Instruction, created in 1889, whose members were again appointed by the Governor General from among high government officials or scholars. The system was modeled on the one created for Cochinchina at the time of its annexation. The goal of the French education system was again two-fold: to teach the natives the values and institutions of the modern West while limiting them to careers in civil service or translation. In order to accomplish this task, the French needed to teach them the moral foundation of the West without giving away of its scientific or specialized knowledge that would allow the Vietnamese any other career option. They began by emphasizing the teaching of *quoc ngu*, the national Romanized writing system. This language was easy to learn, weaned them away from Chinese influence, and differentiated the masses from the mandarins at court who clung to the use of Chinese characters. If the people could not read the writings of the higher classes, they could not very easily be led to revolt by them as they were during the French conquest. French was also being taught during primary school.

While Governor General Paul Beau did create the University of Hanoi in 1918, the university was soon closed. Many colonials believed higher education to be a breeding ground for radicals, and so they closed the school, imprisoned many of its teachers, and highly restricted advanced education, making certain that only those bound for government service made it through. Eventually, the system became one in which only the children of the rich could afford to continue their studies, while the students of poor families were forced to leave school to work in

the fields. Sarraut reformed this system, creating two separate programs for French and Vietnamese students. In the Vietnamese schools, one had to pass an exam to continue to the next level, which prevented many students from advancing. Those holding diplomas became an elite class among the Vietnamese, though they were still paid vastly lower salaries than their French counterparts, and were not allowed to hold the highest positions[5]. Some ventured out of government service to become foremen, specialists, or part of the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie if they were lucky enough to find a wealthy patron. These men and women almost always worked in the interests of the French who had raised them and they came to be known as the "collaborators". They worked hard to adopt French customs in an effort to fit in with their French counterparts, though they were always considered of a lower status than any natural French citizen.

Some Vietnamese rejected this system, though in a variety of different ways. The next chapter will examine the ways in which some Vietnamese took military action against the French, but there were some who preferred a less violent approach. Some diploma-holding Vietnamese elite chose instead to seek further education in France or, after the rise of Phan Boi Chau's "Go East" movement, in Japan or China. There, they were allowed access to more books, fields, and even some political thought. Others sought employment outside the traditional bonds of government service or business patronage to become part of the growing urban middle class as journalists, shop clerks, school teachers, etc. This middle class was not content with the opportunities denied to them, and they began to express themselves first in print, and then in political action. A circular from the Ministry of the Colonies, published in 1919 showed the

[5] The educated elite remained relatively small throughout the colonial period. In 1931, out of a population of around 14,000,000, only 39,223 received a certificate after completing five years of primary education, 4,146 received a diploma after nine years of primary education, 305 received the *baccalauréat* after graduating from one of the four lycées (highschools), and 1,200 were eligible for continued education at the University of Hanoi (McAlister 80).

growing French paranoia regarding education of the Vietnamese: “It is precisely the natives instructed in our methods and our ideas who are the most dangerous enemies of our authority and the most resolute partisans of “home rule” in which we have no place.” (Cooper 39) [6]. It was from among these French-educated Vietnamese that the nationalists, revolutionaries, and Communists sprang, so perhaps the French were right to fear education.

[6] « Ce sont précisément les natifs instruits dans nos méthodes et dans nos idées qui sont les ennemis les plus dangereux de notre autorité et les partisans les plus résolus d’un *home rule*, où nous n’aurions plus aucune place »

Chapter Two:

The Demise of the Old Order

Vietnamese nationalism and resistance to French rule date back to the conquest of Vietnam. In the very beginning, this movement was confined to local uprisings, uncoordinated bandit attacks, and roving guerilla bands. Yet, this period did have one defining characteristic: the leadership of the traditional mandarin class, or the scholar-gentry. In a Confucian society, the bureaucracy of the mandarins was the true governing body. These men were chosen through a test system that venerated the study of Confucian classics and ideals, and this system allowed (at least theoretically) men from all classes to aspire to high positions within the government and society. These men advised the emperor, governed regions, and were generally in charge of the day-to-day welfare of the villages under their care. These men could be of varying degrees of education and ability, but their offices were respected throughout the whole of society as the link between the villages and the court at Hué.

The entrance of the West into Vietnam began to weaken the traditional hold of the mandarins over the people. Catholics, especially, were viewed as threats to the old order, one based on Confucian ideals of respect, authority, and filial piety. The Confucian bureaucratic elite were thus some of the West's biggest opponents at the time of French intervention. When the French began to conquer Vietnam, the mandarins were at the vanguard of the resistance. The mandarins feared that "the colonial regime intervened in their exclusive domain, that of high politics. It took away from their interests and prestige. It brought with it a civilization that excluded them, a conception of government that menaced the traditional social order" (Gras

XII)[7] This in many ways explains why the mandarins took the lead in resisting the French until the emergence of nationalist political parties.

As the French began to gain ground, the court at Hué became divided between the hawks (*chu chein*) and the doves (*chu hoa*). The hawks believed the French meant to conquer and rule permanently and advocated immediate resistance, while the doves believed that it was wiser to make deals with the French who possessed superior arms, technology, and strategy, which would render any resistance futile. The emperor Tu Duc initially favored the strategy of the doves, but the French were not in the mood for compromise. They claimed that the court supported the *Can Vuong* or "Aid the King" rebels in the South, led by the mandarin Phan Dinh Phung, who were independently resisting French conquest as they continued expanding north-ward. Before the 1862 Treaty of Saigon, such rebellion was indeed legally sanctioned, but after the treaty was signed, the Vietnamese government pulled its support and ordered rebels to disband in fear of French retribution.

Tru'o'ng Dinh and the Restoration Movement

There were, however, many mandarins who continued to lead the people to rebel, in defiance of their emperor's orders. One of these mandarins was Tru'o'ng Dinh, a local notable of the South. He recruited men from the local area (around 1000) and launched attacks on French troops using guerilla style tactics. By 1861, his forces had grown to 6000 men and the Tu Duc emperor granted him the title of *lanh binh* (lieutenant colonel) for Gia-dinh. Later, he was given command over all the troops in the south. When the treaty was signed, Tru'o'ng Dinh did not

[7] « Le régime colonial intervenait dans leur domaine exclusive, celui de la haute politique. Il portait atteinte à leurs intérêts et à leur prestige. Il apportait avec lui une civilisation qui les excluait, une conception du gouvernement qui menaçait l'ordre social traditionnel ».

stop his resistance, but his appeal to the masses was weakened by the emperor's cooperation with the French and the withdrawal of regular Vietnamese troops. Also, some mandarins began to retreat from political life altogether, or worse, to cooperate with the French in the hopes of maintaining some power. Tru'o'ong Dinh was losing his most powerful weapon: support. His forces were betrayed by a collaborator and defeated at Go-cong in 1864. His troops demoralized, lacking supplies, and suffering from starvation, a wounded Tru'o'ng Dinh committed suicide in 1864.

While some mandarins continued to fight, they could no longer gain the support necessary for a protracted resistance. The people were disillusioned by the weakness of the Hué court in the face of the French, by the cooperation of the Tu Duc emperor, and by the reaction of the mandarins who either fled or collaborated with the French. The mandarins like Tru'o'ng Dinh had been fighting under the slogan of the restoration of the monarchy and traditional Confucian system of government, but both had been discredited by the French in the eyes of the Vietnamese themselves. The old system had lost the Mandate of Heaven and could not protect the people, and as such did not deserve power. As the French began to consolidate their rule, they began to further erode the authority of the traditional ruling class, turning both the monarchy and the mandarins into their own puppets, all the while promoting the *mission civilisatrice* that promised the benefits of modernization that the old order had so vigorously denied the Vietnamese people. The abolishment of the civil service examinations, a new education system based on a new written form of the Vietnamese language, and the placing of emphasis on the value of Western ideas and institutions all served to undermine further the rule

of the traditional elites as the "protector of political, social, and ethical values of Vietnamese society" (Duiker 8). The prestige and respect they had previously so enjoyed, that had allowed them the authority to lead the nationalist movement, was in decline, especially in the cities and provincial towns.

One last attempt to restore the monarchy and traditional culture of Vietnam was made by the young emperor Ham Nghi in 1885. His powerful mandarin advisors convinced the young man to stage a surprise coup, and for a short while, his revolt did attract many from among the educated elite. However, it was poorly organized and composed mainly of poorly trained peasants. The French did not have a very difficult time suppressing the rebellion, executing the offenders, and exiling the young emperor to Africa in 1888. Such a defeat forever ruined the image of the divine, invincible monarch.

Revolution v. Reformation

By the turn of the century, the Vietnamese educated elite no longer advocated the restoration of traditional Vietnam[8]. Instead, some looked to modernize along uniquely Eastern lines, using the powerful models of Japan and China as their examples. Others were persuaded to believe that France would indeed live up to her *mission civilisatrice* and provide the best role

[8] Some began to do more than lose faith in the ancient system of government led by the mandarins, citing them as the true reason for Vietnam's failures. The document *A New Method to Study Civilization*, written by an anonymous Vietnamese author in 1907 for the Free School of Tonkin, states that it was the mandarins and their "tendency of highly valuing [their] own achievements while denigrating as barbarian everything that comes from the outside…revering the mandarins while slighting the peoples" that condemned Vietnam to its current state by making it incapable of resisting a foreign, modern power (Lam 145). It is clear to see here that the intellectuals of the day were beginning to consider modernization, not restoration, as the only way forward.

model for the modernization of Vietnam. Two of the most famous nationalist leaders among the literati elite of this time period, Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh, represent these two currents of nationalist thought at the turn of the century.

Revolution

Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) represented those who advocated the restoration of the Vietnamese monarchy under the Prince Cuong De[9], and “the eviction of the French by revolutionary action in search of exterior support” (Gras XIII)[10] For Phan Boi Chau, Vietnam needed to modernize and replace the backward institutions of the past with modern ideals and learning. In his essay *The New Vietnam*, published in 1907, he describes the perfect post-colonial Vietnam, and he describes the "civilizing process" as one dependent upon foreign tutelage, especially that of Japan: "At first we will learn from them. After that they will learn from us. The Japan of today is similar to the Vietnam of tomorrow" (Lam 121). Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 proved that “the European nations were not invulnerable, that their domination was not definitive, and the independence was not a vain hope” (Anh-Van 35). He therefore advocated that young Vietnamese stifled by the restrictive education system at home “Go East” to Japan or China for their learning. There, they could study French political philosophy, science and

[9] Prince Cuong De (born 1882, died 1951) was a legitimate descendant of the emperor Gia Long, but was excluded by the French from the succession because of his links with nationalists. He spent most of his years in Japan or China, and was believed by many to be a possible leader for a free Vietnam.

[10] « L’éviction de la France par l’action révolutionnaire en cherchant des appuis extérieurs ».

technology, medicine, and war[11]. Between 1906 and 1909, he was able to send more than a hundred students to Japan for education (McAlister 60).

He counted heavily, not only on the education Japan could provide to young Vietnamese revolutionaries, but also the aid it could provide his revolutionary agenda. He believed that the Japanese would rise up to help their "fellow Asians," but such hopes were dashed when Japan signed a treaty in 1910 recognizing French rights in Vietnam in exchange for a sizable loan. Phan Boi Chau and his followers were evicted and forced to reside in Canton, China. There, they founded the first nationalist league, the *Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi* (The Association for the Restoration of Viet Nam), which advocated the formation of a republican government instead of the restoration of the monarchy[12]. This league orchestrated a variety of terrorist attacks ranging from the attempted poisoning of a French garrison at Hanoi in 1908 to the physical attack against the Hanoi garrison in 1917.

However, such attacks were ill-coordinated and ill-conceived. They often failed and served only to deprive the movement of its most capable and courageous men. The strength of the movement resided in its ability to gain mass support with its anti-imperialist slogans and propaganda, but it lacked a defined program and ideology beyond exterior aid. Such a program was ultimately unable to gain mass support because it represented the submission of Vietnam to Japan, and Phan Boi Chau's lack of confidence in the ability of his people to resist on their own.

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[11] Many of these works were outlawed within Vietnam. Some believed the works on politics and revolution, written for the French Revolution, to at best too intellectual for the common Vietnamese who would never rise very high within the system anyway, and at worst possible sources for rebellious thought. Vietnamese students had to leave the country and go to places like Japan and China in order to find translations of these works.

[12] Chau still wanted Prince Cong De as the head of this republican government as he remained a powerful symbol and national figure.

Reformation

Phan Chau Trinh (1872-1926), on the other hand, did not advocate a violent resistance. This intellectual rose from the new petit-bourgeois and he advocated not revolution but renovation. He believed that the Vietnamese were not yet ready to govern themselves, and that the best course of action was to politically maneuver the French to live up to their high ideals and rhetoric of the *mission civilisatrice,* to force them to prepare the Vietnamese for independence. He was fervently anti-royalist and wanted instead to replace the old order with a democracy, one in which the representatives of the people would of course be the intellectuals, the only suitable leaders for Vietnam. He believed that such a dream could only be realized when the Vietnamese adopted French ideas, morals, and values, which, like any good Confucian, he believed could only be transmitted through education. He campaigned tirelessly for these ideals, as in the letter he wrote to Governor General Paul Beau in 1907, in which he advised the French government to revise its treatment of the Vietnamese, saying: "These comments concern the Protectorate's refusal to teach the people efficient ways to earn their living, to familiarize them with new methods to make profit, while taxes have all been increased and *corvées* required from the people in a hundred different schemes- so much so that now, out of ten poor people, five or six reach the stage of misery through the corruption of the mandarins, three or four through *corvées* or taxes" (Lam 134). In this letter, he attempts to soften his remarks by placing the bulk of the blame on corrupt mandarins, but it is clear that he is taking great pains to convince the French to live up to their civilizing rhetoric. But, while he gained followers among his fellow petit-

bourgeois and among the young, educated Vietnamese, the French did not respond.

Phan Chau Trinh inspired the reformists and those who wanted to work within the system to gain independence, but they were severely limited by that system, one which was designed to give them the least amount of voice possible. In 1908, he was arrested on suspicion of inciting the peasant tax revolts of the same year, but his life sentence was commuted to life imprisonment thanks to his progressive French friends. He was sent to Paulo Condore Island until he was pardoned in 1911 and sentenced to house arrest in France. In Paris, he met with other revolutionaries, including the young Ho Chi Minh, but only a year after he returned to Saigon, he died in 1926. Mass uprising and protests arose at his funeral, but they were strongly repressed. Many of his followers sought refuge with the Communists and other nationalist parties.

The Education Movement

The idea of education as a road to independence was a strong one, and with the French denying access or meaning to their education system, some Vietnamese rebelled in their own way: by creating their own school. Nguyen Hien, like Phan Chau Trinh, believed that the modern West should be the biggest role model for the future Vietnam. He believed that the Vietnamese needed to modernize in order to prove to the French that they were indeed ready for independence, but they were constantly denied in the French education system those skills which would prepare them to become anything besides an interpreter or government functionary. In 1907, Nguyen Hien founded the *Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc* or the Tonkin Free School to give free,

universal education in modern morality, science, and technology to the Vietnamese, by the Vietnamese. This school was a huge success. Because it was free, Vietnamese children from any social strata could afford to study there, and they learned skills that would lead them to modern careers outside of the traditional intellectual mandarin path. Other intellectuals were impressed by his success and they regularly gave donations in order to keep the school alive. The school could thus afford to keep its own printing shop where it could print its own school books and did not have to rely on those written by the French. However, it was this printing enterprise that would eventually spell their doom. Students and professors began printing revolutionary pamphlets and circulars. The Governor General Paul Doumer had wanted to educate the Vietnamese, but only so they could become servants or functionaries, not revolutionaries. The school was closed in 1908, some professors imprisoned, condemned to death, or sent to work camps, accused of inciting the tax revolts and of attempted poisoning of French soldiers. While some continued to advocate modernization and education as the path to independence, few were willing to risk such retribution again.

Why did the scholar-gentry fail?

There are a few key lessons that can be learned from this time period, lessons that Ho Chi Minh did not miss. The scholar-gentry movement was limited in scope, vision, and appeal. In the early days of post-conquest Indochina, the old political system built on the power of the mandarins was destroyed and devalued, and when the scholar gentry realized this, appeals of

restoration were quickly abandoned in favor of those for revolution or reform. Both options often relied on the assistance or training of an outside power. Such an ideology can hardly be expected to inspire patriotism, as it gives the impression that the scholar-gentry did not have faith in the power of the Vietnamese themselves. In fact, they did not. Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chau Trinh, and Nguyen Tien all believed that the masses had to be led by the educated elite. They assumed that this class knew what was best for Vietnam, and what the masses wanted, yet they knew little about the peasants, workers, and servants who lived around them but not among them. Their ideology was also limited by their visions for a post-French Vietnam. They advocated high political concepts like democracy or constitutional monarchies, which the regular, poorly educated people did not understand. All the peasants really knew was their homes and their land, both of which were often stolen, destroyed, or invaded by the French. This was the world they knew, one of taxes, landlords, and labor. High minded ideals and appeals for moral and political reform did not inspire them to action.

If a movement was successful in gaining some support, however, it could be sure of swift repression from the French *Surété*. This repression came with imprisonment in some of the harshest jails in the colonial world, exile to labor camps that may as well have been a death sentence, or execution. These movements did not have the organization or the support to evade the police or to rebuild after a round of such repression. It is perhaps one of the biggest ironies of French colonization in Indochina that the French did their best to block the Vietnamese from any legal outlet for their nationalism, thus forcing them down the path of armed revolt led by Ho Chi Minh.

A Changing Vietnam

The disintegration of the scholar-gentry phase of nationalism coincided with several important changes to Vietnamese social structure around the turn of the century and World War I, changes that were going to forever change the face of the country. John T. McAlister, Jr., in his book Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution, lists four main social changes: "1) the formation of an industrial labor force; 2) the emergence of an indigenous labor force; 3) the creation of an educated elite whose instruction had been exclusively in the French language and had included the assimilation of French cultural values as well as training in technical specialties, with the promise of employment in the French sector of the colonial society; and 4) the deterioration of cohesive social institutions in the rural areas" (66).

The Proletariat

The first two of these changes, the formation of an industrial and common labor force (most often referred to as the proletariat in Western political theory), created a society with more mobility than ever before. Men and women left the villages and traditional village life with its all-important family structure and Confucian values in order to work in the factories, plantations, mines, and docks owned by the French. This new class numbered about 100,000 in 1918 (Duiker 9), but by 1933, this number had grown to only 223,000 in industries and plantations (Anh-Van 71). 39.2 per cent of these men were employed in commerce and industry, 36.8 per cent at the

plantations, and 24 per cent at the mines (McAlister 68). However, it is important to note that the Vietnamese proletariat differed substantially from the traditional Western ideal in that most of the workers from the factories, plantations, and mines, were merely seasonal, returning home to work the fields during planting and harvest. Also, most of those men employed in the proletariat were from the north and had gone to work in the southern plantations due to the overpopulation of this area. This is significant because it "delayed the formation of a distinct self conscious working class and it postponed the establishment of a strict line of demarcation between the wage earner and the peasant. On the other hand, it extended the effects of this new way of life to a rather large portion of the population" (McAlister 69).

The Educated Elite

The third social change was the creation of the educated elite, or the middle class. The middle class consisted of two groups: the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. The bourgeoisie was composed mainly of bankers, landlords, merchants, and professionals. These men and women owed most of their status and wealth to the French, and thus became some of their biggest supporters. They even came to adopt Western customs, dress, and speech in an attempt to become more like their colonizers, and the French came to see them as the markers of success for their *mission civilisatrice*. These families sent their children to French schools, or to France itself, and most owned property both in Saigon and in the countryside. Below the bourgeoisie was the intelligentsia, mainly teachers, journalists, functionaries, and students. Most of these

men and women came from the traditional mandarin class where education and service were still considered the highest moral virtues, and where the accumulation of wealth was considered the highest greed. Many of them came from families of mandarins who had refused to cooperate with the French and thus inherited a strong, anti-colonial nationalist sentiment. It was from this class that many of the future nationalist leaders, including Ho Chi Minh, were born.

The middle class is characterized primarily by education. Whether trained abroad or in the very few French-run schools available in Vietnam, these men and women were among the first Vietnamese trained completely within the French education system. After WWI had ended, the French decided to reform the schooling system in Vietnam, and the last purely indigenous schools were abolished in July, 1919, the last classical mandarin examinations in 1918. Also, in 1918, the University of Hanoi was opened as a group of technical schools arranged to meet the administration and professional needs of the French. However, by 1931, only 39,000 people had managed to receive some sort of higher instruction in the Indochinese school system (McAlister 80). The rest of this class was educated abroad, in France, Japan, or China. Those who held degrees, especially from institutions abroad, were very discontented with the opportunities allowed them: "Here were those who had not only absorbed a substantial knowledge of French culture, but were oftentimes passing on this learning by teaching in the French language to other Vietnamese. Blocked from higher teaching positions because of the lack of educational facilities, this group was caught between the decay of traditional avenues of mobility and the insufficiency of those created by the French" (McAlister 82). Those who were educated found that this did not afford them the respect or the opportunity that they felt they deserved.

The fourth social change, the deterioration of the social institutions in the rural areas, is linked to the deterioration of the authority of the monarch and his mandarins. According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "constant French meddling in the imperial succession and in the day-to-day running of the Imperial cabinet had fatally undermined the prestige of the monarchy" (36). The emperors had become puppets of the French, puppets that were easily replaced in the event that their cooperation was compromised. For example, when Khai Dinh died in 1925, the French placed his 12 year old heir, Bao Dai, on the throne, only to whisk him away to France for education, leaving the *résident supérieur* as the true ruler. The emperors had lost whatever authority they had possessed when they proved not only incapable of protecting the people, but cooperated with the invaders against the interests of their people and their country.

The authority of the mandarins was also destroyed, both by those who failed to lead the nationalist movement to victory and by those who chose instead to cooperate with the French. The mandarins who cooperated had little real power, turned into lackeys for the colonial regime. They were not well paid by the French, and were often given the most menial jobs. They were thoroughly corrupt and tainted by association, and over time hatred and resentment for the colonial regime were translated to hatred and resentment of the mandarins who did its dirty work. The traditional Confucian ethic that held the mandarin and the emperor in highest esteem was tarnished and weakened by the end of the First World War. Vietnam was trapped between a traditional, Confucian state and a modern, westernized nation. The first lacked moral authority and the second was denied to the Vietnamese, and it was up to the new generation of nationalists to provide an outlet for this confusion and discontent, and an identity for a nation.

A Time of Transition

While these new classes were emerging, most of the Vietnamese remained peasants and remained poor, living in the many villages scattered around the Vietnamese countryside. As mentioned in the previous chapter, their lives were condensed into a seemingly endless round of taxes, exploitation, and labor, often with little money, food, or opportunities. It is fairly well recognized that the peasant masses are slow to arouse, but when properly mobilized, organized, and inspired, have no other force their equal. With so few legitimate, organized, appealing options for the voicing of their discontent, they were sometimes driven to take rebellion into their own hands, staging peasant uprisings intermittently throughout French-colonial history. The French were very concerned by these uprisings, and often took very drastic measures to repress them before they could spread. One such revolt occurred in 1908, along the coasts of Annam. These peasants protested high taxes, the monopolies, land concentration, and forced labor; all of these concerns were more practical than political, having nothing to do with democracy or independence. In Quang Nam Province, crowds amassed in front of government buildings, and when the police attempted to respond with force, they stormed, pillaged, and burned the buildings to the ground, along with some of the homes of the wealthy. While some of the scholar-gentry did circulate among the crowd, rousing them to revolt, these uprisings were uncoordinated and without focus. They were quelled by May of that same year, and some of the leaders were jailed. This series of events was often repeated throughout Vietnam.

Thai Nguyen Prison Rebellion

The final important rebellion before the rise of political parties occurred in 1917 at the Thai Nguyen Penitentiary. On August 31, a group of political prisoners, common criminals, and indigenous prison guards seized the largest prison in Tonkin. They used the weapons stored in the prison to take control of the town, fortified the perimeter, and issued a proclamation for armed revolt distributed throughout the area. After five days of intense fighting, their revolt was defeated[13], but it marked an important transition between the traditional revolution led by the mandarins and the modern political movements of the 1920s. Prisons served as important sites where "traditional class and regional divisions might be overcome and new idea of fraternity and community could develop, flourish, and serve as a powerful foundation for collective resistance to the colonial state" (Zinoman 59). This rebellion was made possible by the unique setup of the colonial prison system, where political prisoners were incarcerated together with common criminals, free to circulate their ideas and discontent[14]. All were able to feel bound together by a common fate of forced labor, malnutrition, and eventually death at the hands of the French colonial establishment, and some of these men were imprisoned for small crimes like debt or theft. Added to this was the immense mistreatment and abuse of prisoners and guards alike by

[13] The defenders of Thai Nguyen held for five days against repeated attacks by colonial forces comprised of local militiamen, heavy artillery, and over five-hundred regular troops. When the French began to heavily bomb the town, the rebels retreated into the countryside, but many were slain in the retreat. By March 18, 1918, most of the rebels had been shot or captured. Sometimes, families were held hostage in order to induce their return. Some were sent to Poulo Condore for hard labor, others were sentenced to death.

[14] At this time, ideas about Marxism and Leninism were not major sources of discussion. National liberation was much more the subject of the day. However, prisons would continue to play this role throughout the colonial era and would integral in the spread of Communism as well.

the Resident Darles[15] or “the butcher of Thai Nguyen”, abuse that spurred the indigenous guards themselves to rebel as well: "Treated like prisoners, sometimes worse, the Garde Indigène freed the convicts who became willing auxiliaries. Maltreated by the Resident, they united with the prisoners in their hatred for the Administration which was supposed to protect them" (Zinoman 95).

The Thai Nguyen Rebellion is considered a transitional point because it was a rebellion that was guided by a deliberate body of men from many different backgrounds, a body composed not of mandarins or scholars, but two political prisoners, four sergeants, and a civilian jailor. Also, this body attempted to appeal to the lower classes with an ideology and program that reached out beyond their own local or personal circumstances: “It denounced the unfairness of colonial law, the violation of traditional burial customs, the disempowerment of the monarchy, the imposition of an onerous tax system, the impoverishment of the rural population, and the recruitment of Indochinese troops and workers for perilous service in the European War” (Zinoman 65). They related and distributed these grievances via pamphlet to the surrounding countryside, and gained considerable support. However, this support remained local, as did the circulation of the pamphlet, and there was no mention of a system that they would like put into place. Also, the rebellion lacked planning and organization, two key components of a modern political party. While it was different from the mandarin led rebellions and the mass peasant

[15] This abuse included “twenty-seven documented instances of beatings, canings, whippings, and assorted ‘acts of violence’” (Zinoman 92). He also struck prisoners and guards for obscure reasons, and was rumored to have raped the wife of a local native administrator. Resident Darles was never punished for the abuse that spurred the revolt. Punishment would have drawn the metropole’s attention to the ineptitude and oppression of the colonial government While Darles was acknowledged by many French officials to be the source of discontent among the prisoners, he was never officially charged.

revolts that preceded it, Thai Nguyen still suffered from the same lack of foresight, vision, and ideology. It did, however, foreshadow “the growth of a national style of communal imagining in which a modern political identity was determined by shared history, ethnicity, and race rather than native place or social situation” (Zinoman 98). By the mid-1920's, nationalism began to take the form of political parties that would attempt, in different ways, to appeal to this growing communal identity and, as in the case of the Communists, shape it to their advantage.

Chapter Three:

The Rise of Political Parties

The 1920's saw an explosive growth of more traditional political parties in Vietnam, ranging from reformist to revolutionary. Previous nationalist movements had not attempted to organize into parties based on ideological programs, but had tended instead to focus on regional or particularistic support. They had not attempted to appeal to the masses, and their failure can be attributed to the fact that they often did not have clear visions of the future of Vietnam after the French were expelled. This lack of political program led to the first phase's inability to motivate, inspire, or lead large political and militant revolutions against the colonial establishment, despite widespread dissatisfaction, frustration, and suffering. The young, educated, new revolutionary leaders of the second phase were often able to recognize this failure, but their ultimate success depended on their ability to "transform Vietnamese politics by creating mass-based political organizations having an ideology that would attract the widest possible support" (McAlister 84). This success depended heavily on their ability to connect the fading traditional structure of the family, village, and clan to the modern concepts of state, revolution, and political thought. Only then would a political party be able to move forward with the large scale revolt necessary to remove the French from Vietnam.

The Collaborators and the Constitutionalists

While the Communists were ultimately the winners of the mass-appeal battle, they were not the first political party on the Vietnamese stage. Political parties in Vietnam were always hampered by the French. A party had only two options: it could work clandestinely within the country, which required that they not arouse French suspicion or anger with their political program or activities, or they could operate underground with the main organization leading from abroad, usually in southern China. The former path was the first to be chosen, as the French began to recognize the rising Vietnamese nationalist sentiment and sought to give it an outlet, one under French control and surveillance. The first true political party was the *Khai Tri Tien Duc* (Association of the Intellectual and Moral Advancement of the Annamese), or AFIMA. This political party was comprised of Bac Ky collaborators, government employees who gained their positions not on the basis of their merit or through civil service examinations, but on the basis of their loyalty to the French regime. Many were trained as interpreters or functionaries, but lacked any real formal training. These men were known for their corruption and ultimate subservience to the regime that had given them power and position. They were united by their hatred of the revolutionaries and anti-colonialists, and were among the loudest Vietnamese apologists. During World War I, for example, Nguyen van Vinh wrote in his French sponsored newspaper the *Dong duong tap chi* (Indochina review):

> "Among the many possible approaches, our people today should follow only one ideology: the Franco-Vietnamese ideology [*chu nghia Phap Viet*]. Since we are so fortunate to have the Great France as our master, let us try to hang on to our French master. Let us concentrate on our livelihood and our studies. Those scoundrels who encourage stupid things, if arrested, should be put into a wicker basket and rolled into the river (*bo ro lan song*)" (Huynh 40).

AFIMA was thus founded, at the initiative of Governor General Albert Sarraut, at the end of World War I, and headed by Pham Quynh, who in 1934 became the prime minister of the French puppet royal government in Hué. Its primary purpose was to act as the native political front for the French colonial government, though it never gained any real popularity as it lacked any legitimacy as a collaborationist party made up of corrupt mandarins.

The second group of collaborationists formed in Vietnam was the *Dang Lap Hien,* or the Constitutionalist Party, in 1919 by Bui Quang Chieu (1872-1945), an agricultural engineer trained in France. This party was composed primarily of landowners, professionals, and the bourgeoisie, "a self-selected group of friends and business associates who had organized themselves to defend their interests" (Huynh 43). These men were primarily concerned with the protection of their own social and economic interests, advocating for more educational opportunities, more jobs, and higher salaries, along with increased political freedoms. Their primary goal was to "assimilate" into the French community by reaching parity with the colonists, which they intended to achieve politically by wresting concessions from the colonial establishment through increased enfranchisement.

One of the most sensitive issues for the Constitutionalists was naturalization. In 1922, the colonial government under Albert Sarraut passed new electoral laws that expanded native representation in the advisory bodies, though these laws stopped far short of universal suffrage. The native, educated elite were beginning to awaken to the possibility of reform through the ballot, and were agitating for more political representation and freedom. This class thus supported Sarraut's electoral reforms. But why, if these reforms were so limited, would the Constitutionalists back Sarraut's program? Firstly, they would curtail the powerful colonial lobby, the Colonial Council, and give more of a voice to native interests on the legislative and

advisory bodies. Also, they believed themselves, not the mandarins, to be the most suitable future, native leaders of Vietnam due to their economic and educational success. When they were faced with the imminent return of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese veterans from the war in Europe (who, due to their meritorious service, would be eligible for naturalization despite their class and thus the right to vote), the Constitutionalists began to fear for their own favored positions within the native elite. The French were equally concerned, as naturalization would give these uneducated, untrustworthy, lowly Vietnamese the right to vote not only in Vietnamese elections, but metropolitan ones as well. Thus, the French and the Constitutionalists pulled together their support to pass a stricter set of naturalization laws that would limit applicants to Western-educated, socially and economically successful members of the bourgeoisie[16]. While the French granted the Constitutionalists this much, they were unwilling to go any farther on the issue of political representation, as it would have given more power to the native elite by taking away from the power of the Colonial Council and the French colonial government.

France was always hesitant to give any sort of political autonomy or self-sufficiency to the natives of their colonies, and as the "only organized reformist group on the scene in Vietnam in the immediate postwar period" (Tai 389), the Constitutionalists were not only labeled collaborationists, they were also hampered by the need to play by the colonial government's own rules which were designed to restrict them at every turn. They believed that their interests were those of the Vietnamese as a whole, and that all Vietnam wanted to reform rather than rebel,

[16] Eligibility depended on meritorious service and attachment to French culture, but these standards of culture were expanded to pertain to private, as well as public life. Applicants had to prove, through a series of questions and an investigation, this attachment. Questions included: Do your wife and children speak French? Do they wear Western dress? Do you eat your meals at a table, or on a wooden platform? Do you eat rice or bread? Do you own property? Does your wife own property? What is your annual income? What is your religion? To what associations do you belong, and what is your position in them? Who are your close friends? Why do you want to become a French citizen? These questions revealed the applicant's status in life, as only a wealthy individual could answer affirmatively to some of the questions, and the government could then decided if a person was wealthy enough, educated enough, and loyal enough to become a naturalized citizen, guaranteeing that only certain elements could pass. (Tai 382).

content to leave the task in their hands. However, the regular Vietnamese were not knowledgeable about nor interested in electoral reforms or political freedom, and as the Constitutionalists themselves were able to gain more power through these electoral reforms, they gradually lost interest in advocating for more (which the French would not have given in any case). Ultimately the Constitutionalists' fear of the power of the masses would lead to their downfall. They were unable, unwilling, and unqualified to transform Vietnamese society in any drastic way, content to hoard their own power and prestige at the expense of their countrymen, and so lost any right or ability to lead the nationalist movement.

The Constitutionalists and AFIMA were too closely linked to the colonial regime to legitimately represent the interests of the people, especially as native politics became more radicalized between revolutionaries and collaborationists. If these two groups had been willing to sever their ties with the French, they might have been able to overcome this collaborationist image over time, but when forced to chose, they chose the French who guaranteed them power, prestige, and wealth. Their interests were too closely linked with the colonials, and they were above all interested in protecting their own interests. They advocated the "transfer of privilege and power from a few white rulers to a few yellow ones-themselves" (Huynh 45) and this all depended on the success of the *mission civilisatrice***,** which depended on the collaborationists' ability to convince the French that such a mission had been achieved and power could be successfully transferred to their hands, the only ones with the right to receive it. As it became more and more obvious over time that the French were not going to be so convinced, the Constitutionalists lost credibility and it became increasingly clear that they had ultimately backed the wrong horse. Collaborating takes two willing parties, not just one. Even though it was more and more obvious that the Constitutionalists were not going to and were no longer entirely

willing to achieve national liberation, they remained an active political group that lobbied instead for the protection of the interests of the wealthy native elite until 1954 when the first Indochinese War ended.

The Tan Viet

In 1926, in north-central Vietnam, the remnants of a few secret societies formerly allied with the now imprisoned Phan Boi Chau formed the *Tan Viet Cach Menh Dang* (New Viet Nam Revolutionary Party). This party was never very influential as it was wracked with internal dissent between the older generation of veterans from the scholar-gentry movement and the younger radicals who had been expelled from the French-run Vietnamese schools for their participation in rallies protesting Phan Boi Chau's arrest. The older guard wanted to resist French rule through mainly non-violent means, promoting education and political action as the road to reform, while the younger generation favored violent revolution in the spirit of Chau. What united them was only their anti-French stance, and eventually the young guard began to lean more toward the ideology of Marxism, which led them to seek alliance with the Communists. This divide severely hampered their activities and recruiting potential as they lacked a clear program and ideology[17]. They are mentioned in this study only in order to show the great need

[17] This is not to say that they lacked a following. Their organizational structure and support was concentrated in the north-central provinces of Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and Thanh Hoa. Their followers included mainly minor administrative personnel and teachers, but their organization was mostly regional. Teachers and functionaries were not very mobile, as their professions are linked to specific locations, and so their radius of operation was severely limited. Also, unlike the political cadres of the ICP, they considered themselves only part-time revolutionaries. Yet, their positions were ones of respect in traditional Vietnamese culture, so they were able to gain support in their local areas. This meant that the organization had no more than several hundred adherents, but due to the need of other revolutionary movements to operate mainly outside of Vietnam, the Tan Viet was, until 1927, the "only significant indigenous political organization in Vietnam, even though the weakness of the Tan Viet in the north and the south reflected the identity of the party's founders with their native province of Nghe An and the sedentary nature of their occupations" (McAlister 86).

for clear leadership and organization in these new political parties, and the lack of these traits led many of these early parties to succumb to the power of the larger organizations like the Communists, who eventually incorporated the Tan Viet.

The VNQDD

The *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, or VNQDD (the Vietnam Nationalist Party) was formed in Hanoi in 1927 on the model of the Chinese Kuomintang of Sun Yat Sen. This party was also regionally based in the north, though it achieved more success than the Tan Viet due to the organization's proximity to the labor force of Hanoi, the University of Hanoi, and the colonial administration center. Over half of the population of Vietnam was located in or around Hanoi, which meant that, even though the VNQDD was made up of primarily the same people as the Tan Viet, the sedentary nature of their jobs did not hamper their ability to reach more people. By 1929, there were over 1,500 people affiliated with 120 cells in North Vietnam, making it the strongest Vietnamese political group of its time (McAlister 88). Overconfident in its own strength, and eager to gain even more of a following, the party decided to focus on overt militancy in order to prove itself. To this end, the party assassinated the director of the General Office of Indochinese Manpower (which specialized in coolie recruitment for the rubber plantations of the south) M. Bazin on February 9, 1929 in Hanoi, in the hopes of gaining support from the abused working population. However, the French were quick to respond, arresting 229 members who delivered to the Surété many important pieces of information on the party, its structure, its composition, and its plans. Despite its size and importance, the VNQDD was never as tightly organized or controlled as the ICP, and thus had a major problem with information

leakage. The French secret police never had much difficulty in discovering the VNQDD's plans. This meant that the VNQDD was locked into a system of violence and repression from which they could never escape, as each of their acts of political violence only brought more repression, arrests, and deaths. By 1930, over a thousand members had been arrested, and throughout the country, networks were dislocated, disbanded, or destroyed.

This cycle made the VNQDD desperate, and their ultimate demise was the result of a rushed, premature, aborted insurrection in February 1930. The party chairman Nguyen Thai Hoc called an emergency conference in January to decide on a course of action to deal with the worsening situation, and it was decided to wage an insurrection in Bac Ky, which began with the mutiny of Vietnamese troops at Yen Bay garrison on the 9th of February. It was followed by the attacks on the Hung Hoa garrison and the district headquarters at Lam Thao. However, the French were again quick to respond and put down the revolt by the evening of the 10th. Two weeks later, most of the VNQDD leaders were arrested along with thousands of members. This repression was the first time that the French used aerial bombardment against Vietnamese revolutionaries. While many considered the actions of the VNQDD equivalent to martyrdom, the organization was basically destroyed. While some survived imprisonment to rebuild the party in southern China, relying on the support of the Kuomintang, "from this point on, there was no ideological alternative to international communism as the leading force in the Vietnamese revolution" (Huynh 98).

The Failures of the Early, Non-Communist Nationalist Parties

There are several key characteristics of the early nationalist parties that led to their ultimate downfalls. Firstly, many parties lacked an inner unity, as in the case of the Tan Viet. This hindered their ability to come up with a common set of goals, plans, and ideologies, which in turn hampered their recruiting ability. Most of these parties were centered on individuals or regional centers rather than mutual devotions to common political principles. They were not able to transcend regional and class differences with a common doctrine that would bind together all Vietnamese in one common cause: "The ideological symbols of Confucianism had been discredited by the collapse of the traditional institutions and the collaborationist attitude of the imperial court. Little now remained except the concept of Vietnamese nationhood. In the mid-1920's, this was not enough. Regional loyalties still divided intellectuals in the cities, and the life of the peasant was still bounded by family, clan, and village" (Duiker 13). This meant that parties like the Constitutionalists, and even, to some extent, the VNQDD were restricted by their predominantly urban natures. Their calls for democracy, nationalism, and modern politics did not resonate with the masses of the peasantry. Their programs lacked specifics on the primary concerns of the poor and instead concentrated on either vague ideas of political representation and independence, or narrow class concerns.

Secondly, this revolutionary movement was very radical in its complete rejection of the older system of values and governance, though it still lacked a cohesive idea about substitutes. While many of these younger revolutionaries rejected the old institutions of traditional society, they were forced to seek outside influences for alternatives. Nguyen An Ninh[18], in a lecture

[18] Nguyen An Ninh (1900-1943) was a journalist and writer from Cochinchina who was also an active revolutionary. He founded a newspaper, *La cloche felée*, in order to attack French colonial policy. The paper's

before the Hall of the Cochinchinese Society for Mutual Education in 1923, said: “For today’s generation, there must be new ideals- its own ideals, a new activity-its own activity, new passions-its own passions” (Huynh 49), but few in Vietnam were able to take these outside ideas of the Kuomintang, the Japanese, or the French and apply them to the Vietnamese context. They often advocated radical reform or militancy, but seldom had any real program for the post-French Vietnam. They were impatient and often lacked political sophistication, seeing themselves as only part-time revolutionaries. They believed that the struggle for independence was primarily either a military or political affair, and that the two could not and should not mix. The Vietnamese revolutionary scene was awaiting the arrival of a party that could overcome all of these defects, a party that could tie the Vietnamese of all classes and regions together behind a cohesive ideology that spoke to their interests and yet was unconnected with the past regime. It required a well organized, patient, and determined party able to combine both the political and military struggles for independence.

Ho Chi Minh and the Communists

Ho Chi Minh was one of those mysterious, influential, and extraordinary men around whom history and opportunity turn. This man was known by many different names, but perhaps the most important was Uncle Ho. He was a ruthless, cunning Communist who led his nation to victory against two Western superpowers despite heavy losses and even heavier sacrifices. Yet, the Vietnamese continue to think of him as : “the gentle Vietnamese, humble, soft-spoken,

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Marxist leanings were clear, as Ninh had been in close contact with Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) while studying law at the Sorbonne in Paris during the early 1920’s. He was in and out of prison, and in 1943, he died on the island of Paulo Condore. His poems, novels, and writings remain some of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s most treasured national writings.

mocking his own position, always seen in the simplest garb, his dress making him barely distinguishable from the poorest peasant- a style that Westerners for many years mocked, laughing at the lack of trappings of power, of uniform, of style, until one day they woke up and realized that this very simplicity, this cult of simplicity, this capacity to walk simply among his own people was basic to his success" (Halberstam 13). Uncle Ho, like the best Confucian leader, worked tirelessly for his people; that cannot be debated. However, there is very little known about his life.

Ho Chi Minh[19] was born in 1890 in the province of Nghe Thinh in central Vietnam, an overcrowded area known not for its agriculture but for its scholars. Ho's father, Nguyen Sinh Huy, was a mandarin who had abandoned his post in protest of the French presence. The young Ho was introduced to revolutionary activity at an early age as his father was friends with several important leaders of the mandarin-led rebellions, including Phan Boi Chau. However, Ho's family was poor and inconsequential, and his boyhood was a hard one, where he felt the poverty of the people and the injustice of the French first hand. Ho was educated in Vietnam, at the Lycée Quoc-Hoc in Hué which blended French and Vietnamese education and culture. He left without a diploma, and for a short while worked as a teacher in the village of Phan Thiet, but this paid very poorly, so in 1912, Ho took a job on the French liner *Latouche-Treville* as the assistant cook. For two years, he traveled the world, studying how the imperialist nations behaved in different colonies. During World War I, Ho stayed in England working as a pastry chef in a luxury hotel. It was not until 1917 that Ho Chi Minh made it to France.

[19] Ho Chi Minh is one of his many aliases. His given name was Nguyen Sinh Cung, which he changed according to Vietnamese custom at the age of ten to Nguyen Tat Thanh. Ho Chi Minh would possess many different aliases throughout his life in an effort to hide himself from the police. Ho was a master of disguise and often used these aliases and costumes to blend with the people. He is well known for having impersonated a monk on several different occasions, even giving religious lectures and performing ceremonies to those who would ask.

In metropolitan France, Ho was able to meet other French besides the colonials, ones who were far less prejudiced. Halberstam attributes Ho's early leftist leanings to this period, in which Ho was able to observe the plight of the European working poor, to see poor French, and to link their plights with those of his fellow Vietnamese. This linkage allowed him to move beyond the narrow vision of nationalism that his compatriots were advocating. In 1919, Ho, under the new name Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), attempted to present an eight-point article based on Wilsonian ideals to the leaders at Versailles, but was rebuffed along with many other petitioners from the colonies. Ho now believed that only harsh measures could free the Vietnamese from colonial rule, and so, in December 1920, he helped found the French Communist Party.

Ho Chi Minh was drawn to communism through the works of Vladimir Lenin, especially his "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions". In this work, "Lenin stated that the colonial and national question was one of the principal stakes in Bolshevik revolutionary strategy, and that the revolutionary path could lead to global liberation[20]. Quoc hoped that revolution would be an alternative to the slow and legal path of reforms and to dependence on the great powers to decide the fate of the world, often against the will of the people involved" (Brocheux 17). Now, with the founding of the FCP, Ho was not only an important figure among the Vietnamese nationalists in Paris, but was also a part of a world-wide ideological movement backed by the powerful Soviet Union. In 1924, Ho traveled to Moscow and entered the University of the People's of the East, where he studied communist doctrine and revolutionary principle, and he was soon sent to Canton to assist Mikhail Borodin, the Comintern envoy to the newly-formed

[20] It is important to note that there is some debate about whether Ho Chi Minh was more of a nationalist or a communist. He initially became a Communist because Lenin gave more primacy to the colonial issue than any other political party or ideology at the time, but throughout his political career, Ho Chi Minh stressed that the national liberation phase would be followed by a socialist revolution. It is clear that he believed the only possible future government of Vietnam was a Communist government, and he worked hard to eliminate both his political and ideological rivals. It can probably be best assumed that Ho Chi Minh believed that both his nationalist ambitions and his social/political ambitions were in harmony with one another, not mutually exclusive. This would make his a Nationalist and a Communist.

revolutionary government in China. However, this was mainly a cover for his own revolutionary activities. Here, Ho could meet with young Vietnamese revolutionaries in exile, as Canton was the hub for such activity.

In Canton, Ho took his first real steps toward national liberation. Up until this point, he had been focusing on his own education and indoctrination in the hopes of bringing his learning back to Vietnam. However, he knew that the time was not yet ripe for a communist party in Vietnam proper. The peasantry and the masses knew nothing about Communism or politics in general. What Ho needed was a front organization that could gather members based on the more unifying force of nationalism. But, there was one important obstacle in the way: Phan Boi Chau. Chau was the leader of Vietnamese nationalism at this point in time, even though his own influence was waning under the weight of his own failure and the changing nature of Vietnamese society (as discussed in previous chapters). Ho also looked at his father's old friend as a kind of disappointment, an outdated model of the revolutionary.

In order to get rid of this roadblock, Ho tipped off the French as to Chau's location in return for a monetary reward. To many, this is the first real indication of Ho's ruthless desire to pry the leadership of the Vietnamese nationalist movement from the hands of the other nationalist parties, but Ho saw it as an opportunity: "By selling Chau out to the French they would get a reward, while the arrest and trial would arouse the Vietnamese people and bring international attention. International feeling would be so strong that they would not be able to bring the death sentence against Chau" (Halberstam 45). Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Chau was sentenced instead to hard labor, though he was pardoned a few weeks later and went into seclusion. Ho was now able to take control of Canton and thus the nationalist movement by gathering what was left of Chau's followers around a new banner.

The League

In 1925, Ho and five other young Vietnamese nationalists founded the *Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Menh Dong Chi Hoi* (Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam). At this period in time, instructions from the Comintern encouraged the formation of new communist organizations in Asia that stressed revolutions against feudalism and imperialism before social revolution, along with alliances of several different classes: the peasantry, the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie. After the first united front had succeeded, then the Communists (led by the proletariat with the backing of the peasants) would seize power from the nationalists. Ho had been advocating such a revolution since his identification with the Communists. To this end, he created the Thanh Nien, also known as the League, as a "political party [that] could be formed to represent in embryonic form the ideas of Marx and Lenin and to appeal to the population on the basis of the one issue that could elicit the most favorable response- national liberation" (Duiker 18). Inside of the League was a committed communist core of six or seven members who would form the nucleus of the Vietnamese Communist Party when the time was ripe for its formation.

The League attracted mainly young Vietnamese radicals from the petty bourgeoisie intelligentsia. The League sought at this stage to attract as many people as possible, so it was willing to allow this group of young intellectuals into their communist front group. Many were students expelled from school for taking part in political protests or strikes. Some had arrived in order to join other nationalist groups like the VNQDD, but the League would intercept them and "persuade" them to join them instead. Those who accepted underwent a three to four week

training seminar at the “Special Political Training Course for the Vietnamese Revolution”. Much of the material taught there was from political pamphlets and journals written by Ho himself, who was also a regular lecturer. Most of their training was focused on recruitment techniques, while the most promising students were sent to the Chinese Whampoa Military Academy or back to Russia to attend the Workers’ University of the East for special communist indoctrination. The rest were sent back to Vietnam in order to form cells. There, they were guided by Ho’s pamphlet, *The Road to Revolution (Con duong kach menh*), a collection of his lectures and propaganda. In it, he discussed the meanings of revolution, the differences between capitalism, communism, and nationalism, and the merits of armed rebellion and political violence. However, he was quick to point out that violence had to be first prepared for with a political stage to gain support and solidify organization.

The League was very successful in its recruitment and training techniques. By 1929, it had over 1000 members, with 250 trained abroad and 200 operating within the country (McAlister 91). This success can mainly be attributed to Ho’s early emphasis on organization and training. *The Road to Revolution* was one of the first books to attempt to define Western political ideas in Vietnamese. These ideas could now start to form the basis of an ideology that went beyond pure national liberation, and it also paved the way for this ideology to be Communism. This ideology made it possible for the League to overcome differences in region, tradition, or ethnicity and to expand its influence to a larger radius of people in all three regions of Vietnam, Siam, and southern China. Its specific revolutionary strategy of eventual armed insurrection envisioned a three-stage revolutionary process that began with an organizational phase that emphasized training, the development of alliances with other nationalist organizations (though this never really materialized), propaganda, and the creation of a network of cells linked

back to a central governing body. The second phase focused on the semisecret agitational phase in which the group would begin its political violence on a small scale, resorting to terrorist activities, strikes, and boycotts in order to gain acknowledgment and support from the masses. The final phase would be the insurrectionary phase in which the true armed revolt would begin. Only when the colonial government was overthrown and a new government established would the social revolution be carried out.

The organization of the party was another unique strength for the League. It was structured around a Leninist organizational system. Before the League, political parties were structured around a governing head or body who relied on personal reputation and prestige. Thus, the fortunes of the party depended on that of its leaders; if they were captured or killed, the party had a difficult time reorganizing. However, the League (and later the Communists) was able to reorganize despite severe repression and the frequent absences and political difficulties of Ho Chi Minh himself. The League was formed around the nucleus of the Communist Youth Corps, from which several auxiliary branches extended. The CYC acted as the link between those branches and the Communist International. The League was the first branch organization, but later, the *Nong Hoi* (Peasants' Association) and *Cong Hoi* (Workers' Association) were created as well. From these also branched smaller interest organizations for women, youth, and soldiers. This organizational structure also reveals that Ho Chi Minh, and through him the League, thought highly of the political potential of the masses[21], while other organizations of the time were ignoring them in favor of the elite. To the League, they were among the oppressed and

[21] Communists around the world used the Bolshevik Revolution as a model of this potential. Also, the Vietnamese Communists used the French and American Revolutions as examples of the political potential of the masses. Even though two of these examples were not communist revolutions, all three stressed the ability of the people to rise up and overthrow a powerful, oppressive government in order to establish another.

disenfranchised, a group strong in numbers with the potential for explosive and unstoppable force.

The League was a very powerful ideological and organizational force in Vietnam during the late 1920's. It offered a dynamic new ideology that could replace the deteriorated Confucian world-view of the past, one that mirrored the resentment and anger of the population toward Western imperialism. It was a structured, organized, united front that stood in sharp contrast to the other unorganized, fragmented nationalist groups in Vietnam. It also emphasized the place of Vietnam within the international context, not just a weak and powerless country at the mercy of the Western powers. In short, "Leninism offered precisely what the Vietnamese liberation movement had heretofore lacked-organization, cohesion, external support, and a plan" (Duiker 20).

The strength of the League was its unity and common ideology, but in 1927, this unity became threatened. In that year, the alliance between the Chinese Communists and the Kuomintang fell apart and the KMT, in the wake of Sun Yat Sen's death, decided to act against all Communists in the country. Ho Chi Minh was tipped and fled to Moscow, so he was not there to advise the League at a time of intense political pressure. The CCP persuaded the League to assist in a general insurrection in Canton on 11 December 1927, which was soon suppressed. Many were arrested and the head organization, the nucleus of the League, was decapitated in one swift move. From this time on, the cells within Vietnam came to act more and more without central leadership or guidance: "Lacking mature leadership within the country and anxious to try their hands at agitational politics, many lost heart, considering the methodical creation of propaganda and organization of revolutionary cells beneath their dignity ("a childish game"); others exhibited a lack of initiative, awaiting an official sign for the agitational phase of the

revolution to begin" (Huynh 76). Some others grew angry at the central organization's inability to understand the changes occurring within Vietnam. This led to the breakup of the League.

Fragmentation and Unification

In 1929, some of the representatives of the League from Tonkin Regional Committee began to advocate for the creation of a true Vietnamese Communist Party, believing that the time was ripe for the next phase of agitation. They had begun recruiting heavily from the still small but growing working population in the North and wanted to more strictly follow Marxist ideology by recruiting only those from the proletariat. This point of view was shared by the now Stalinist Comintern, who decided to abandon the united front idea and "proletarianize" the communist parties. The split between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang had made Stalin sour on the potential for communist and nationalist alliance that he had previously promoted and he believed that the agitational phase was near to beginning. However, the Comintern was neither interested in nor aware of the specific situation in Vietnam. They could not see that the Vietnamese proletariat was small and unimportant, that the population still mainly identified with national liberation before social reform, and that the masses were dominated by the peasantry.

The Tonkin radicals, however, were convinced that the Comintern's policy was right, and at the First Congress of the League in 1929, they proposed the disbanding of the League and the formation of a communist party. The majority of the delegates (and later Ho Chi Minh himself) decided that this was premature and refused. The radicals walked out and in Hanoi, they formed the Indochinese Communist Party (*Dang Cong San Dong Duong*).

The ICP soon began to compete with the League for recruits, especially in the north. In response, the League decided finally to openly declare itself communist and renamed itself the Annam Communist Party (*Annam Cong San Dang*). These two communist parties were soon joined by a third as the remnants of the Tan Viet decided to rename themselves the Indochinese Communist League (*Dong Duong Cong San Lien Doan*). This third organization had been frustrated in its attempts to form an alliance with the League, and so it attempted to set itself up as a direct rival to the group, with its own mass organizations and communist ideology. All three factions sought recognition from the Comintern, who grew more and more frustrated and concerned with the intense factionalism and growing confusion within Vietnam.

In October 1929, the Comintern issued a directive that called for the unification of the three communist groups into a single party, but this was easier said than done as intense competition had fostered mistrust, anger, and dislike between party leaders. It was not until February 1930 that, under Ho Chi Minh's direct guidance, a Unification Conference was officially convoked in the name of the Communist International in Hong Kong. Here, the two original groups agreed to combine to form a united communist party, the Vietnamese Communist Party (*Dang Cong San Viet Nam*). However, in October 1930, the name of the party was changed to the Indochinese Communist Party in order to emphasize its international as opposed to nationalist character.

The ICP

The Indochinese Communist Party was officially formed at a time of intense nationalist fervor, and no matter its name, it was always primarily concerned with events in Vietnam.

Foregoing regional concerns, the ICP was always caught between two poles, the international and the national, as it attempted to appease the international communist movement headed by the Soviet Union (i.e. Stalin) while at the same time attempting to gain support among the peasantry within Vietnam and to hide its true communist face from the other nationalist groups. At the early stages of its formation, the ICP was not under the control of Ho Chi Minh and so the party found the 1930s its most difficult and trying time.

Ideology

Vietnamese society was facing two fundamental challenges at this time in history: imperialism and feudal landlordism. In the minds of many Vietnamese, these two issues were intrinsically linked as the French could best exploit the natives with the cooperation and support of the landlords, who in turn relied on the French to preserve their own interests. The ICP was able to see the necessity of also linking these two issues in its ideology, and so it made both anti-imperialism (the removal of the French) and anti-feudalism (the removal of the feudal landlords and the adoption of land reforms under the slogan "land to the tillers") its dual goals. For example, the governing document of the ICP, *The Political Theses of the Indochinese Communist Party* by Tran Phu, states:

> The essential aim of the bourgeois-democratic revolution is, on the one hand, to do away with the feudal vestiges and modes of pre-capitalist exploitation and to carry out a thorough agrarian revolution; on the other hand, to overthrow French imperialism and achieve complete independence for Indochina. The two faces of the struggle are closely connected, for only by deposing imperialism can we eliminate the landlord class and carry out a successful agrarian revolution; conversely, only by abolishing the feudal regime can we defeat imperialism. (Huynh 131).

While the ICP was departing from traditional Marxist thought that emphasized the class-based revolution in order to combine the social and national revolutions, they did accept a few fundamental communist doctrines. The first principle was that of the class approach to politics. Each issue was framed in the terms of class conflict. For the Communists, every political party was expressing the interests of a particular class, even if they did so in secret, and they were quick to point out the affiliations of each of their rivals, especially when they were linked with the elitist bourgeoisie. Secondly, the ICP believed in revolutionism, in which only revolution and social upheaval could overthrow capitalism and eliminate exploitation. Like the VNQDD, they stressed primarily violent rebellion and dismissed political reform as collaborationist and opportunist. They were again quick to denounce any party or opponent who expressed such a "weakness". Lastly, the ICP accepted the principle of internationalism, which assumes that all Marxist-Leninist parties are bound together by international solidarity, even if each must operate within its own set of constrictions, formulate its own policy, and follow its own strategy. This meant that the ICP was connected to the PCF (French Communist Party), the Soviet Union, and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), and while this gave them a sense of solidarity and mission beyond themselves, it also meant that these other parties could have a say in the operations of the ICP. This would cause the Vietnamese Communists a lot of trouble in years to come, but it would also open doors in their times of need.

Organization

The structured organization of the ICP was one of its key features that allowed it to survive repression, command a larger radius of operations, and to communicate with distant

cells. The ICP was organized based on Leninist party structure, who stressed a party of "'professional revolutionaries' acting as the intellectual head and the nucleus of a multiplicity of mass organizations of workers, peasants, students, and women, who would serve as the organizational base for the revolution" (Huynh 135). This party was structured for the sole purpose of political warfare, in which a militant, centralized, hierarchical body was formed around a core doctrine, a precise theory, and applicable strategy. The party was meant to be able to easily transform from a militant group to a functioning government once revolution was achieved, and so it was formulated to act as a government in the shadows. The heart of the party was made up of professional revolutionaries, so dedicated to their cause that they saw the party as their family and their life's work.

The party was hierarchical in nature, in which each organization was responsible to a higher authority until it reached the Central Committee who had judicial, legislative, and executive authority over every branch. The Central Committee (*Trung uong Dang bo*) also acted as the liaison to other communist parties like the PCF and the Communist International, under the regional sector of East and Southeast Asia. Under this committee were the three regional committees (*xu bo*), responsible for Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina respectively. There were also two equivalents of the *xu bo*, called Special Bureaus, for Laos and Siam. Under the *xu bo* were the provincial committees (*tinh bo*), the municipal committees (*thi bo*), and the prefectural or district committees (*huyen bo*). The party locals, or *chi bo*, were the cells comprised of around ten members who were grouped by occupation or place of employment. If a *chi bo* exceeded ten members, it was further divided into *tieu to* fractions. It was these *chi bo* and *tieu to* members who made up the bulk of the party and were not professional revolutionaries but workers, miners, coolies, railroad workers, soldiers, or students.

This vertical network comprised the party, but attached to the ICP was the horizontal network of mass organizations that served as fronts that could act as links to non-Communists or to hide communist activities. These mass organizations allowed the ICP to mobilize the peasantry and to created alliances with other nationalist groups without raising alarm or requiring peasants to learn about communist doctrine. They also allowed the ICP a safe haven from repression and a quick way to rebuild. Perhaps the single most important function of these front organizations, however, was their ability to provide mobility for party cadres, who were thus able to spread their message across regions, occupations, and social groups in a way that other Vietnamese political parties had not been able to do. There was no limit to the number of organizations that could be created. In 1930, the party had seven specific organizations: the Communist Youth Corps (*Thanh Nien Cong san Doan*), the General Association of Peasants (*Tong Nong Hoi*), Indochina's General Association of Workers (*Tong Cong Hoi Dong Duong*), the League of Indochinese Women (*Dong Duong Phu Nu Lien Hiep Hoi*), the Indochinese Red Aid Society (*Hoi Cuu Te Do Dong Duong*), the Self-Defense Militia (*Doi Tu ve*), and the Indochinese Anti-imperialist Alliance (*Hoi Phan De Dong Minh Dong Duong*). The ICP could recruit from each organization, and it generally had communist sympathizers or cadres embedded in the groups, but most were not aware of their affiliation or the fact that the Central Committee directed their activities from the shadows.

Program

Another strength of the ICP in relation to the other nationalist groups in Vietnam was its clearly defined program of goals that every member knew and could follow. This ten point

program was written by Ho Chi Minh himself upon the creation of the party and it contained more specifics on the creation of a new Vietnam than any other party, including specifics aimed primarily at the poor and the peasantry. The points included:

1. To overthrow French imperialism, feudalism and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class.
2. To make Vietnam completely independent.
3. To establish a government composed of workers, peasants, and soldiers.
4. To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under control of the government.
5. To confiscate all of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class, and distribute them to the poor peasants.
6. To implement the eight-hour work day.
7. To abolish public loans and the poll tax. To waive unjust taxes burdening the poor people.
8. To bring back all freedom to the masses.
9. To carry out universal education
10. To implement equality between man and woman. (Halberstam 53)

We can see with this program that, while the Comintern was stressing a purely proletarian revolution and party organization, Ho Chi Minh, like Mao Tse Tung, was envisioning a uniquely Asian revolution, one that combined nationalist, communist, and socialist goals. This revolution would involve the rural masses, the latent force that had been neglected in favor of the participation of the educated elite. It is unclear whether or not Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communists directly borrowed or copied Mao's People's War strategy which he created for the Chinese Communist Party at this time. There is evidence that the ICP and the CCP were in direct contact during this period, and they did both place primacy on the importance of the peasantry to the revolution. Ho Chi Minh had been stressing the importance of an alliance between the peasantry and the proletariat for most of his career. In 1927, he stated, "The victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible in agrarian nations unless the proletariat is actively supported by the bulk of the peasant population" (Brocheux 42). The question of where he got this ideology is second in importance to the tenacity with which he clung to it at a time when no other political

party believed that the rural masses could fully participate in the quest for national liberation, including the more die-hard Communists. This deviation from the traditional party line put him at odds with pure Stalinism, but this program remained the dominant set of party aims for the ICP until the 1970's.

Armed with a common ideology, a strict organization, and a clear program, the ICP stood poised to take control of the nationalist movement in Vietnam. The ICP's ideology could hold its cadres together and inspire its members. Their organization could effectively lead the many cells and mass organizations throughout Vietnam and allow them to survive French repression. Their program would appeal to many classes, including the peasantry, giving them a wider basis of support than any other. It would seem that with these strengths, the ICP would have no problem taking control. However, the 1930's proved to be one of the party's darkest times and it was not until the Japanese occupation in 1941 that the party finally began to see some light.

Chapter Four:

The Struggle for Independence

The 1920's were years of rapid expansion for the Vietnamese nationalist and communist movements. New parties were formed on the basis of new ideas, and these parties focused more on their mass appeal and recruitment than any other group before them. However, the 1930's and 1940's were a testing ground for these parties' success. Those who managed to gain the largest following, from the most diverse group of people, from the largest area would rise above the others to take control of the nationalist movement. This mass appeal would depend on the ability of their ideology to inspire the people, the strength of their organization to survive French reprisals, and the farsighted preparation of their leaders to navigate the political turbulence of World War II. Even though the 1930's was a time of great hardship for the ICP, by 1945, they were the ones to win this battle. It was the Communists' able leadership, patient preparation, steady propaganda, and smart tactical decisions that allowed them to ride the back of the mass demonstrations following the end of the Second World War that finally put them into power.

The Nghe Tinh Soviet Movement

After founding the ICP in 1930, Ho Chi Minh's influence began to wane within the party when intense factionalism began splitting it in half. In 1928, the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International adopted a new revolutionary line. The Comintern called on parties to purify and to focus on proletarianizing their members. Alliances with nationalists and other classes were discouraged, as Stalin had soured on the idea in the aftermath of the breakup between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. This strategy was in direct contrast with that of Ho Chi Minh and Lenin who focused on the formation of coalitions "of republican

forces to create ‘a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’ that would permit the proletariat eventually to emerge as the dominant power, and [gain] the support of the most radical elements in the bourgeois nationalist parties in the backward nations” (Huynh 108). Ho had explicitly stressed this alliance in the ten point program for the ICP, but now the Comintern was directing its satellite parties to abandon not only the alliance principle, but also the prominence of the national liberation revolution over the class-based social revolution. This meant that an intense division developed in the party between those who stressed adherence to the Comintern and those who stressed adherence to the hybrid ideals of Ho Chi Minh, which they argued were more suited to Vietnam. The Central Committee of the ICP eventually decided to follow the Comintern, believing in the strength and wisdom of Stalin’s guidance.

This focus on the proletariat meant that the ICP had to concentrate on building its support in the urban areas. The Yen Bay uprising seemed to demonstrate all the earmarks of the Comintern’s Third Period, which predicted the end of the capitalist peace and stabilization through the fire of revolution and class war. The Yen Bay uprising of the VNQDD, though a failure, had ridden on the coattails of widespread workers’ strikes, peasant demonstrations, and boycotts. The ICP leadership decided that the time was right for advancement into the revolutionary stage, and decided to hold its own revolt in 1930. The ICP was the strongest party in Vietnam at the time, with 10,000 members in its underground trade unions, and another 70,000 in its peasant associations (Turner 20). The party mobilized these forces beginning with the Phu Rieng rubber plantation strikes in February, followed by the strikes of four thousand mill workers at the Nam Dinh Textile Mill in March, and the strike of four hundred at the match factory and saw mill at Ben Thuy in April. These strikes occurred in all three provinces as the Great Depression virtually halted industrial production, and the commercial and agricultural

industries equally suffered: “In 1929, the total value of Indochina exports stood at 228 million piasters. By 1932 this figure was at 102 million. During the same period, imports dwindled from 227 million to 94 million piasters. As elsewhere in the world, the effects of the Great Depression were manifested in a high rate of unemployment, business failures, bankruptcies, and widespread suffering” (Huynh 144). With living conditions deteriorating among all classes, the strikes began to spread from the industrial areas in Hanoi, Haiphong, Nam Dinh, Saigon, and Cholon to the rural areas of Thai Binh, Nghe An, Gia Dinh, and My Tho. From May 1 to the summer of 1931, few days passed without a strike, and all three provinces were affected. However, it was in Nghe Tinh of Annam that the insurrection reached its apex.

Early in the movement, unarmed peasant demonstrations had merely delivered petitions to district government officials demanding the end of the salt monopoly, the abolishment of certain taxes, and the postponement of tax collection. However, they soon became armed struggles, and peasants began to storm and ransack government buildings, even on occasion killing the officials inside. This created a local power vacuum, which allowed local Red Peasant Associations to take power and created “Red villages” (*lang do*) or soviets in several rural districts. Seventeen were established in Nghe An of northern Annam between September and December 1930, and fourteen others in Ha Tinh between January and February 1931 (Huynh 154). Within these soviets, the Red Peasant Associations performed regular government functions under the guidance and direction of the ICP Provincial Committee of Nghe An. These soviets instituted some political, economic, and social reforms, including literary campaigns to teach *quoc-ngu*[22] to the peasants, the abolition of taxes imposed by the colonial and royal government, and the annulment of debts. Some Red villages seized the lands of wealthy landlords and redistributed them to the poor. The French responded very harshly to these

[22] The Latinized script form of Chinese invented by the Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes in 1627.

uprisings, burning villages, killing without warning or restraint, and even using planes to indiscriminately bomb several demonstrations and villages. The periodical *L'Asie francaise* describes in detail one such occurrence, stating:

> The planes, by way of warning, dropped a few bombs ahead of the column [of demonstrators]. It continued to advance. The three planes then bombed the column itself. The effect was immediate: the rebels fled in disorder, leaving behind the dead and the wounded. A few groups tried to reform, but they were chased by the machine guns of the flyers.
> What was the balance sheet of this bloody morning? Sixty-seven dead and 51 wounded were gathered at the spot. But the real figures were probably higher. There were reports, perhaps with some exaggeration, of 200 dead and 800 wounded (Huynh 156).

However, the Communists soon lost control of the peasants' anger. With French reprisals decapitating many of the local and regional commands, the peasants soon were free to turn against the wealthy, educated, and even some remaining Communists whom they considered wavering and weak. So called "self-defense units" began roaming the countryside, stealing rice from landlord houses, terrorizing and pillaging where ever they went. Eventually, "even the Comintern censured the ICP for its indiscriminant violence, which was inconsistent with the 'organized violence' of Marxism" (Turner 20). The ICP had been demolished by the French reprisals. Many of the ICP leaders were arrested by April 1931, and Ho Chi Minh was arrested by the British in Hong Kong in June. Even though the party rebuilt itself by 1935, it remained disorganized until Ho Chi Minh's return in the early 1940s. The soviet experiment also frightened away many of the petty-bourgeoisie, who until this point in time had been the main source of support and leadership for the Vietnamese nationalist movement. When the Communists began emphasizing the class-based social revolution over the anticolonial movement, the elitist bourgeoisie were no longer interested. This revolution was directed against

them, and the last thing they wanted were the peasants and the coolies taking away all that they had built.

One of the positive consequences of the soviet movement was not perceptible until the later 1930s and early 1940s: the developing ideological unity of prisoners. The prisons became hotbeds of communist activity and indoctrination during the 1930s as thousands of political prisoners were confined. Here, ICP members and leaders gave lectures on general education and Marxism, along with past battles and uprisings that would serve as lessons for future activities. Some prisoners even managed to publish or acquire books on Marxist theory, including Bukharin's *ABC's of Communism*, the Program of Action of the ICP, and some Marxist classics. The experience of the soviets and the 1930-1931 revolts taught the Communists valuable lessons: that organization and ideological unity were instrumental in a successful rebellion, that local complaints could be manipulated to create revolution across classes, and that central leadership was crucial for the maintaining of discipline among the revolutionary elements. The political prisoners that would one day be released to form the vanguard of the party were passing these lessons on to men from all walks of life, from all classes, and from all regions that were locked away beside them. Thus, the prisons became a prime recruiting and indoctrination center for the Communists.

The Influence of Moscow

Despite the major setback of the 1930 revolt, the Executive Committee of the Communist International recognized the ICP as an independent section on 11 April 1931. This was done mainly so the Comintern could more directly influence the party and aid in its reorganization.

This close association with Moscow would have a detrimental, not positive, effect on the party during the 1930s as the Comintern refused to accept the blending of nationalism and patriotism with proletarian internationalism as was required for success in Vietnam. After the party was fully reorganized in 1935, it was completely dominated by those loyal to the Comintern's policies and direction.

There were, however, advantages to this close connection with Moscow and the international movement, advantages that aided the party in its reconstruction. For example, political cadres from Siam, France, China, and the USSR were sent to replace those imprisoned by the French colonials during the "White Terror" repression of 1931. Moscow also sent waves of ICP members who had studied at their University for the Toilers of the East. These professional revolutionaries, while highly trained, in many cases lacked the discipline and dedication of their compatriots who had fought for their party's survival. Others seemed content to simply take directions from Moscow without question. Some abandoned the movement altogether, choosing to leave Vietnam or to turn in their comrades to the French. The League had chosen only proven, dedicated members to be trained in Moscow, and these men were chosen personally by Ho Chi Minh and the Central Committee, or by the PCF (French Communist Party) from among the members in France. They were mainly petty-bourgeoisie or intellectuals. However, the Comintern now demanded that only members from the proletariat could be sent, most of who were cooks, domestic servants, or sailors who lacked the education, political consciousness, and revolutionary commitment of those who had come before them. Ho Chi Minh was released from the British prison in Hong Kong in 1933, after a two year stay in a rotation of prisons and hospitals, and went directly to Moscow, where he promptly disappeared from the political scene until 1938 when he reappeared in China. It was widely rumored that Nguyen Ai

Quoc was dead. Some say he went into hiding to escape the purges of Stalin, who would have surely singled him out for his "revolutionary" ideas about nationalist alliance and peasant-proletariat rebellion. Without the direction of Ho Chi Minh or the jailed former leaders, the ICP lacked a cohesive, trained, dedicated leadership that could help the party to grow. Now, the ICP's activities were directed from abroad by a group of men far removed from the events, realities, and necessities of Vietnam. The party became increasingly isolated from Vietnamese politics and nationalism, and this was to be a great obstacle during the Popular Front period of the late 1930s.

The Popular Front Period

At the Seventh World Congress in 1935, Stalin directed the communist parties around the world to change their strategy drastically: they were now to form popular fronts with other groups in order to fight fascism, a return to the formerly abandoned United Front strategy of the 1920's. At this time, fascist governments were coming into power in Europe and Stalin felt increasingly threatened. He wanted the other communist parties throughout Europe and the world to gain strength in case Russia needed allies in the fighting to come. The ICP was now instructed to attempt to win over the other classes by focusing on the anti-imperialist issue, and now the two factions of the ICP finally came into line. They began to emphasize the legal struggle that would be less intimidating for the non-radical elements of Vietnamese society.

In 1936, the new Popular Front government came into power in France under the leadership of the Socialists and Léon Blum. This government took a more lenient attitude toward the colonies, releasing political prisoners and increasing political liberties. The ICP was now able

to operate in the open, creating trade unions and peasants' associations (though still under innocuous names like "assistance societies" and "friendly societies"). They also began to publish several newspapers and books like *Dan Chung* (people's mass), *Tin Tuc* (news), *Lao Dong* (labor), *Avant-garde* (vanguard), and *The Peasant Question* by Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap.

However, the Popular Front government did not actually institute many reforms in Indochina. Many in Vietnam seemed to be operating mainly on the assumption that this government would promote more liberal colonial policies. Even the *colons* were convinced of this fact, and did not attempt to stop the Vietnamese nationalists and Communists as they became bolder, fearing reprisals from the government in Paris. For example, even though the French had released political prisoners and instituted a new labor code that set standard hours, a six-day work week, and the abolishment of child labor under twelve for all natives, the new government did not actually liberalize Vietnamese politics or grant more democratic liberties. While parties like the ICP attempted to engage in elections for the newly created Indochinese Congress, the power they gained remained hollow as the French authorities still feared giving too much power to nationalist groups. Even the Colonial Commission of Indochina[23] was eventually cancelled at the behest of colonial authorities. Evidently, even the Popular Front's socialist government was only willing to go so far in Vietnam, and this period turned out to be a large disappointment for nationalists and Communists alike.

By mid-1938, the Popular Front disintegrated and was replaced by a more conservative government that abolished the labor reforms and began to round up the released political

[23] This commission, promised by the Popular Front government when they came into power, was meant to review colonial questions for the government in order to determine possible changes to the colonial system. It was also supposed to examine possible crimes committed by colonial authorities, and to examine the success of the *mission civilisatrice*. If the mission was deemed successful, it was intended to give the colony more autonomy, though still within the bounds of the French Empire.

prisoners, many of whom had simply returned to their former rebellious activities or to the ICP. While the ICP still remained without a strong leader and had not had many resounding successes throughout the Popular Front period, it still had managed to gain more visibility:

> "for the first time, the Party had moved into the open, particularly in Cochinchina, and in the process it had managed to expand its influence in several areas- among urban workers in the industrial sectors of Saigon-Cholon, many of whom increasingly came to view the Communists as the staunchest defenders of their economic interests; among the rural population in Cochinchina where economic conditions were deteriorating and peasants were favorably impressed by the ICP's campaign to abolish the unpopular capitation tax; and among urban intellectuals, many of whom gradually came to view the Party as a fundamentally nationalist force, indeed the only political force capable of mounting effective resistance to the French colonial regime" (Duiker 54).

The party was recovering from the "White Terror" of 1931 and its disastrous policies at the command of the Comintern. From 1936 to 1939, its membership grew from more than two thousand members to forty thousand, which made it again the largest party within Vietnam (Duiker 55). Also, the ICP had returned to its policy of a united front which sought the support of the peasants and urban moderates through the unifying force of nationalism. Most importantly, its mass organizations had allowed the ICP to sink its roots into the countryside and to transmit its ideals and slogans to the villages. When Stalin signed the pact with Hitler in August, 1938, the party was told that fascism and Hitler were no longer their principle enemies. This pact was a repudiation of the Popular Front idea and it also meant that any communist party around the world was an enemy of the anti-Hitler west which included France. In response, the French Communist Party was outlawed in September 1939, and two days later, the ICP was also forced underground. The ICP was able to survive because of these roots, and it would not be destroyed simply by the ending of its legal activities.

The Specter of War

In late 1939, the ICP decided to embrace its new underground position and to entrench in the countryside, mountains, and forest regions to build bases of support and to protect party cadres. It was also decided that, isolated from the cities, the ICP would have to embrace Ho Chi Minh's original ideas and place the national liberation campaign before the social revolution in order to appeal to the peasants. The aggressive actions of Japan in South China were making everyone nervous, and the ICP wanted to wait out the storm as best it could. On 10 May 1940, Hitler attacked France, and by 18 June, the motherland was defeated. On May 11, the Japanese delivered an ultimatum to the French government in Vietnam, headed by the Governor General Catroux. The French were to stop all transport via the Hanoi-Kunming railway of all war-related goods to China, and were also instructed to accept Japanese troops. When Catroux bowed to this pressure and openly criticized the 1940 armistice, he was replaced by the Vichy government with the Admiral Jean Decoux, the commander of French naval forces in the Pacific and a strident Vichy supporter. By the end of August, an agreement was reached between the two nations. Japan would recognize French sovereignty over Indochina in return for military facilities, transit rights, and the right to station troops in the colony. This capitulation "shattered the myths of invulnerability to external menace and of the native population's support for French sovereignty" (Huynh 236).

Occupation and Collaboration

For the Japanese, the occupation of Indochina proved to be quite important. Politically, it stopped supplies to China and positioned the Japanese within striking distance of the rest of Southeast Asia. They were able to gain a colony with the least amount of effort. The Japanese kept all of the French administration, including Decoux, in order to save themselves the trouble of actually running the colony. However, Indochina was most important to the Japanese because of its function as a supply base for Southern Operations and for Japan herself. In order to meet the demands of the war, the Japanese encouraged crop conversions on a massive scale, forcing rice farmers in Tonkin to plant cotton, jute, hemp and other vegetable oil plants instead. This conversion was not geared to meet indigenous needs, but was strictly enforced by roaming Japanese officials. During the occupation, from 1938 to 1944, jute planting went from 500 hectares to 17,650 hectares, cotton grew from 8,800 hectares to 52,190 hectares, and peanut production went from 1,400 hectares to 47,500 hectares throughout Indochina (Bui 591). The port at Saigon proved to be in a perfect position for the Japanese, as it was connected by rail to the rest of Indochina. Coal could be transported from the north, and then shipped to Japan or to the front. Similarly, the transport and production of rice took a prime place in Japanese concerns. In the 1933-37 period, Japan had imported an annual average of 2,000 tons of rice from French Indochina, but by 1943, Indochina was Japan's largest supplier of rice. In 1942 alone, the Japanese bought 1,050,000 tons of rice (Bui 597-98). Rice from Indochina would also supply the rest of the Japanese territory, making Indochina (and above all Vietnam) one of the most important Japanese possessions.

The Japanese occupation was a time of great trial for the French, but one of great opportunity for the Vietnamese nationalists and Communists. It is said that “at war, the Japanese preferred the French order. If victorious, the Japanese would prefer the Japanese order. If defeated, the Japanese would prefer the Annamite order” (Tonnesson 39). Maintaining the administration of the French in Indochina allowed the Japanese to avoid the burden of running the colony and of patrolling the Sino-Indochinese boarder. Above all, it allowed them a buffer from the political problems that might be caused if the liberation of fellow Asian peoples was not realized at the end of the war. However, this did not mean that the Japanese particularly cared for the French, and vice versa. The Vietnamese, the French, and the Japanese all schemed to profit from the presence and the failures of the others in order to protect their own positions in Vietnam.

The French and the Japanese were caught in a power struggle, attempting to create broader, more powerful bases of support among the Vietnamese. The Japanese began by promoting their own culture by stressing an “Asia-for-the-Asians” approach that was designed to inspire awe and fear of Japanese power, admiration for Japanese culture, and pride in Asian achievements. In order to accomplish this objective, they opened cultural centers in the major cities that offered courses in Japanese language and civilization, along with exhibition centers that displayed Japanese art and military exploits. The Japanese also implied to the nationalists that they would support their efforts, particularly in the South. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects especially profited from the Japanese presence. These two sects were militaristic religious organizations that often enjoyed Japanese protection at the expense of the French. The French police would often allow an organization to develop to a certain point, infiltrate them and record their activities, and than launch a sudden, destructive raid that was meant to capture the leaders.

However, when the French tried to arrest pro-Japanese agitators like those from the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, the Japanese would intervene to protect them, either by whisking them away just in time, or by breaking them out of French custody. The Japanese also formed some pro-Japanese nationalist organizations like the League for National Restoration of Vietnam (*Viet Nam Phuc Quoc Dong Minh Hoi*), a collaboration of Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and some other well-known political intellectuals in May 1943. This group advocated independence achieved through Japanese sponsorship, in which Prince Cuong De would return from exile to lead the new government.

The French government was forced to respond to these Japanese maneuverings. To offset the "Asia-for-the-Asians" propaganda, the French stressed the myth of the "Indochinese nation" which emphasized a vision of Indochina that was a federation of diverse ethnic groups striving for a blend of solidarity and autonomy under the French flag. The French were the cement holding this disparate "nation" together, and without them, it would fall apart. However, in order to compete with the Japanese, the French were forced to be far more lenient than they ever had been in the past toward the natives. Vietnamese students were, for the first time, allowed to study Vietnamese and national history, thousands of new elementary and village schools were opened, and the French stressed more liberal employment standards that gave the natives more opportunities for advancement. They also re-implemented the labor codes of the eight-hour work day and forty-eight hour work week, a Vichy policy that was also being implemented in France. One of their biggest campaigns, however, was the institution of the "sport and youth movement" that organized "approximately one hundred thousand urban youths into various sports clubs, boy-scout organizations, student and youth associations" (Huynh 248). These groups focused on the promotion of Vietnamese patriotism, in the hopes of inspiring more pride in the "Indochinese

nation", but in fact it had the exact opposite effect. The ICP was quick to capitalize on these groups, infiltrating them on every level and making them part of their own mass-organizations. These "sports and youth movements" gave more power to the Communists than the French realized. The competition for Vietnamese loyalty between the French and the Japanese created one of the most liberal atmospheres that colonial Vietnam had ever seen, allowing the nationalists and the Communists more freedom of movement and recruitment than ever before.

While the other nationalist groups in Vietnam were aligning themselves with either the French or the Japanese, the ICP was not. For once, its allegiance with Moscow proved to work in its favor by forcing the ICP to support the Allied effort once Hitler turned on Stalin and again became the principle enemy of the communist world, even though doing so restricted its movements during this period more than the other nationalist groups. In the years to come, this decision would prove to have been the best one the ICP could have made for when the war was over, time would prove that they had backed the right horse.

The ICP and the 1940s

Ho Chi Minh reappeared in 1938 in order to direct Comintern activities in Southeast Asia. When he arrived at Yunnan, he got in touch with local communist operatives Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong in order to establish contact with the ICP's Central Committee in Saigon. Ho was not pleased with what he saw. French repression had resumed in 1939 as reprisals against the Communists' pro-Allied stance. Its urban networks were seriously crippled, and over two thousand had been arrested, including many of its top leaders. The party was again dealt a hard blow when another attempted uprising failed. The party's Southern Regional

Committee had decided in 1940 to take advantage of the precarious political situation in Vietnam and stage a national insurrection. The Central Committee, meeting for the Seventh Plenum, decided that this was a premature action and postponed the insurrection. This postponement was ordered too late to halt the developments in the South and on 22 November 1940, the insurrection broke out in the southern provinces of Gia Dinh, Cho Lon, Tan An, My Tho, Can Tho, Vinh Long, Soc Trang, and Bac Lieu. Lacking organization, firepower, and manpower, the insurgents could not withstand the French response[24]. Within 40 days, 5,648 people were arrested, planes had bombed much of the area, and more than a hundred were executed, including some high-level ICP leaders (Huynh 254). However, most of these leaders were those who preferred to follow the orders of Moscow, which left the way open for Ho Chi Minh to shift the focus of power north, to take control of the party, and to capitalize on the ascendancy of those who emphasized the anti-imperialist revolution and the united front.

In 1941, Ho Chi Minh was to set foot in Vietnam for the first time in nearly thirty years in order to preside over the Eighth Plenum. This meeting was held from 10-19 May and would set the stage for Vietnamese communism in the years to come. In a cave in Cao Bang province, Ho Chi Minh established the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh*) or Vietminh. This league was to be a united front, one that welcomed all patriotic elements in Vietnam, regardless of class, ethnicity, and religion, to unite against the common enemy and to fight for independence. The Vietminh would be controlled by the ICP, but only from the shadows, as the party went through great efforts to disguise its role as to not scare away the nationalists and the moderates. The Vietminh was "the organizational nexus of several

[24] At this point, the French were still in charge of the daily functioning and policing of Vietnam. The Japanese would not take over these functions until 1945 when they staged a coup and replaced the French as the rulers of the colony. During this insurrection, they stood aside and let the French deal with the insurrection as they pleased.

political and social groups organized, sponsored, and orchestrated by the ICP on professional, ethnic, and religious lines" (Huynh 264). The front's political program included

> 1. Calls for the expulsion of the French and Japanese "fascists" and the restoration of Vietnamese independence
> 2. An alliance with the Allied Forces fighting against Germany and Japan, stressing China and the United States in particular
> 3. The establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (a concrete plan and vision of the future)
> 4. The extension of civil liberties like universal suffrage, equal rights for ethnic minorities and women, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, and freedom of organization.

The Vietminh did not stress an agrarian revolution in order to appeal to the patriotic landlords as well. In order to continue to appeal to specific interests, the mass organizations were extended to include workers, peasants, students, women, artists, writers, and religious groups. These associations, under Party guidance, could enlist popular support, provide outlets for the more extreme interests like agrarian reform, and funnel directives down to the masses.

In order to avoid a repetition of the 1930 and 1940 revolts, Ho Chi Minh's Eighth Plenum also created a series of conditions for general insurrection. Firstly, the front would have to achieve unity throughout the country. Secondly, the people would have to be in a state where they were unable to tolerate the French and Japanese presence and be prepared for sacrifice. Thirdly, the ruling circles would have to be in the middle of a crisis affecting the economic, political and military sectors. Finally, favorable international conditions would have to exist that would include a revolution in France or Japan, the victory of the Allies, or the invasion of Indochina by the Allies. If these conditions were met, then the Vietminh could prepare guerilla activities. However, in preparation for that time, the political war for the loyalty and indoctrination of the people had to be carried out in an organized, calculated, patient way. For

Ho Chi Minh, preparation was the key to success and he would not allow his party to miss its opportunity because it was not well enough prepared.

Vietnamese nationalists in China were not fooled by the Vietminh front and refused to cooperate with it. In 1942, a group of Vietnamese exiles met in southern China to form a coalition group of their own, the Vietnam Revolutionary League (*Viet Nam Cach Menh Dong Minh Hoi*) under the sponsorship of Chang Fa-k'wei, the regional military commander of Southern China. This organization included the VNQDD, but it was incapable of providing the Chinese with what they really wanted: information on Japanese and French activities in Vietnam. These groups did not have large followings within the country proper and were mainly relegated to the exiles in Canton. The Vietminh was the only organization that was capable of providing such information. It just so happened that the Chinese had managed to capture Ho Chi Minh in August of 1942, but the Chinese released him in September 1943 so he could head the Dong Minh Hoi. Ho Chi Minh used his position and the Chinese financial support meant for the Dong Minh Hoi in order to fund the Vietminh, and in six months he left the organization for good. He returned in 1944 to take full control of the ICP and the Vietminh.

When Ho returned to the Vietminh, he began to implement some important policies borrowed from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The first, in order of priority, was to establish a political base for the party through the Vietminh and the mass associations throughout the country. Secondly, the Communists needed to create a revolutionary base near the Chinese border where mountains and the proximity of China protected the ICP from French reprisals. This was to be achieved through the transformation of what until this point were armed, roving bands of guerillas in the Vietminh controlled mountains into local self-defense and combat self-defense militias for the Vietminh controlled villages of this region. Ho Chi Minh called this new

force the Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam (*Doi Viet Nam Tuyen Truyen Giai Phong Quan*), created on December 22, 1944 and put under the auspices of Vo Nguyen Giap. These forces needed to possess political and military functions, to be able to rely on the mass organizations and the local population for sustenance, growth, and mobility. These groups would play a supporting political role as a source of propaganda and as a tangible sign of Vietminh presence. First, men and women were selected from among the members of the mass organizations to create the self-defense militia (*tu ve*) which remained with the population to defend their own areas. The second level "fighting self-defense militia" (*tu ve chien dau*) was formed from among the best members of the local militia who expanded their political and military activities into neighboring areas. Finally, the "separation units" (*doi quan thoat ly*), the first of the regular guerilla army units, were developed and were comprised of units who fought away from their home bases in a more mobile band of fighters.

The propaganda campaign of the Vietminh was very successful in the border regions of Bac Son-Vu Nhai and Cao-Bac-Lang, which became the centers of Vietminh support and activities. In each village, a shadow government of Vietminh administrative committees controlled the everyday functions of the villagers and the local notables. In these towns, cadres were instructed by Ho Chi Minh to dress like the native populations in their instructed areas and to learn their local languages (many of these mountainous areas included groups of ethnic minorities). Ho Chi Minh published pamphlets, journals, and newspapers that cadres used as propaganda tools throughout the Viet Bac. These publications bore signs of Ho Chi Minh's propaganda genius and were designed to gain the most support possible. They were succinct, easy to understand, tailored to the region by the use of popular imagery and references, called often on patriotic slogans, and made no mention of the ICP (though they did carefully insert

Marxist ideals). The careful political preparation and organization gained good results, as more and more saw the Vietminh as a stabilizing influence during a time of great instability and uncertainty. By late 1943, Vietminh influence began to spread southward, riding the momentum of dissent created by the return of some political cadres from jail, the increasing Allied victories, the failure of the Decoux regime to provide a viable nationalist alternative, and the growing economic depression, though the North remained the center of Vietminh influence and support. Word of the Vietminh was spreading among all classes, and they came increasingly to represent the best hope for Vietnamese nationalism in the minds of many.

Another important factor in the popularity of the Vietminh during this period was the common enemy of Vietnam: famine. The reasons for the famine are many. First, the conversion of valuable rice land into jute, cotton, and peanut oil meant that production of rice suffered. Secondly, from late 1944, the French and the Japanese had begun participating in a race to store and hoard rice for their military depots. From January to early March 1945 alone, ten or more boats full of rice were delivered daily from the Tonkin rice fields to the French military depots in Phu Tho, Yen Bai, Tuyen Quang, and Thai Nguyen (Bui 583), despite mounting Japanese demands. Thirdly, the transportation of rice moved in only one direction: south to Saigon where it was to be shipped to Japan and other nations under its control. Traditionally, the south provided relief to the north during famine, as it had a smaller population but larger areas of fertile land. However, the export of rice and the railroads was also bogged down by the weight of demands for coal and finished products meant for the war. Allied bombing further slowed the process, as the transportation routes were prime targets. Even though the French and the Japanese could see the people dying around them[25], they continued to be preoccupied with their

[25] No one knows for sure how many died in the famine of 1944-1945. Estimates range from 400,000 to 2 million, though according to Marr, one million seems to be a more credible number. This would mean that in Tonkin, the

military and political maneuverings and did little to aid the people. The only ones who did try to help the people were the Vietminh, who opposed further tax collections, demanded distribution of existing grain stocks, and failing that, helped forcefully to storm granaries and depots in order to distribute rice to the needy. While their efforts made only a small impact, the sheer fact that they were the only ones to systematically attempt to aid the peasants during the famine gave them much prestige and respect.

By the end of 1944, the communist movement had made incredible strides. Although its membership remained small and most of its strongest supporters were from a small region in the north, it had reestablished itself as a credible revolutionary organization. Even the Chinese and the American Office of Strategic Services had sought out the Vietminh as the only possible source for intelligence within Vietnam, as the other nationalist organizations were not strong enough within the country to provide the information. The Japanese occupation, the erosion of French authority, the Great Depression, famine, and the resurgence of Vietnamese patriotism all facilitated the Vietminh's rise to power. Also, the ICP possessed a central leadership and a strong central figure that could command the loyalty of Party members throughout the nation. Ho Chi Minh had made sure that the Party had "put aside sectional interests and evolved a flexible, independent revolutionary line that appealed to a national constituency" (Huynh 289). The Vietminh provided a nationalist front that involved people from all ages, ethnic groups, and walks of life that operated with discreet guidance from the ICP. Much of the ICP's doctrine and decisions, in turn, match closely those of Mao's Chinese Communist Party, not the Russian Comintern:

1. The formation of a broad united front including all patriotic elements and directed primarily at the goal of national liberation

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hardest hit area, lost 10 percent of its people within in a five month period. Whole villages died out and some regions lost 11 to 20 percent of their populations. (Marr 106-107).

2. The open recognition of the dual importance of a political and military struggle
3. The reliance on protracted guerilla war in preparation for the final stage of general uprising
4. The establishment of a military force under the direction of the Party
5. The carving out, by this force, of a secure revolutionary base in rural areas (Duiker 71).

By adapting and adopting Mao's strategy of People's War, the Vietnamese Communists finally had a strategy that matched the situation in Vietnam, a leader who seemed to be able to sense the winds of change, and a party organization able to stand the test of time. All the Vietminh and the ICP really needed now was an opportunity, a lightning strike of change that would set fire to the country and to the world. This time of change was rapidly approaching, and the Vietminh was the sole organization within Vietnam poised to take advantage of this opportunity.

The Coup d'état of the Japanese

By the end of 1944, both the Germans and the Japanese were on the defensive. Few now doubted that the Allies would win, and most were simply counting the hours to the American invasion of Vietnam. Most of the nationalist groups, the Vietminh included, were preparing for that day. General Tsuchihashi, the Japanese commander in charge of the Indochinese forces, grew to have doubts about the loyalty of the French in Indochina. Decoux was loyal to Vichy, but with the liberation of France, he was now beginning to vacillate. The Japanese became worried about the possibility of French treachery on the event of an Allied landing. When the American fleet suddenly appeared, without warning, in the South China Sea to sink almost all of Indochina's transport ships, the Japanese decided that invasion was imminent. While the Americans never really intended to attack Indochina but were instead focused on a full frontal

attack on mainland Japan, the Japanese in Indochina were sufficiently spooked. General Tsuchihashi was in no mood to play the political games that the French and Japanese had been playing since the occupation began, and when the French put up diplomatic objections to Japanese stockpiling, entrenching, and recruitment activities, the General decided that French cooperation must be forcibly ensured or replaced. Ambassador Yokoyama, assigned to Vietnam during 1945, explained the Japanese thinking in an interview in 1966:

> As long as the French forces cooperated with our armed forces, we found it more practical to assure for ourselves this cooperation. As long as we had the French cooperation, we did not want to occupy the country.
> This entente continued for a number of years. But the Japanese defeat had then become imminent, and the French attitude in Indochina had also changed, in the sense that they now received orders from the French Resistance and wanted to resist cooperation with us. Although their communications with the French Resistance were secret, we knew all about their exchanges.
> When the French intentions were clear, that they did not want to continue cooperation with us, and there was a possibility that they would want to work with the Allied forces, we decided that we had to overthrow them. The main reason was to avoid being caught between two fires. We were afraid that the French forces would cooperate with the Allies behind our back (Huynh 293).

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese issued an ultimatum to the French, demanding that the French hand over the administration of the colony to the Japanese. Without waiting for a response, the Japanese attacked every center of French power throughout Indochina in a massive coordinated effort that betrayed the maneuver's advanced planning. By the afternoon of the next day, the French colonial administration that had existed for more than eighty years was destroyed. Many were killed or imprisoned in harsh prison camps. However, those nationalists who had hoped that Japanese occupation would bring with it autonomy were sorely disappointed: "except that Asian faces had replaced European ones in the top administrative posts, there were no perceptible changes in Indochinese political structures" (Huynh 294). The Japanese were too preoccupied with the increasingly bleak outlook of the war to bother ruling Vietnam, and they did not even

attempt to extend their authority beyond peace-keeping in the cities. They did attempt to form a puppet government under the Confucian scholar Tran Tong Kim, but its power was severely limited by the Japanese refusal to recognize Vietnamese legitimacy or independence. It seemed that the Japanese were not interested in ruling their colony, and many small political parties were formed in the hopes of filling the vacuum. However, this was too little too late for anybody but the Vietminh, who were the only ones with a structured organization, ideology, and experienced leadership, and they had used the Japanese years to develop a base of support and legitimacy that even the official government lacked.

Ho Chi Minh was cautious and did not immediately launch an insurrection. He viewed the time of Japanese occupation as a time when "a correct assessment of the situation and a slogan correctly attuned to the feelings of the masses would help carry the Party to power, and an incorrect assessment and inappropriate slogan would doom the efforts of two decades of revolutionary agitation" (Huynh 302). He believed that the situation was still too uncertain and the party was still too weak to successfully take over the country, but he also believed that the interim period was an opportunity to build this strength. Many Vietnamese citizens were not yet disillusioned enough with the Japanese regime and some still harbored hopes that their fellow Asian nation would still grant them independence. In order to prepare for the insurrection, the Vietminh stepped up their propaganda initiatives, capitalizing on the absence of Japanese presence in the countryside. On June 4, 1945, it was decided to formalize the shadowy parallel administrations in the villages of the Viet Bac to replace the governing bodies with those of the Vietminh. This area of direct Vietminh control became known as the liberated zone, and in it, the Communists set about to create the trappings of an independent state. This area would serve as the training ground and launching pad for the insurrection, which Ho still believed would come

on the heels of an American invasion. Word of this quasi-state spread and the prestige of the Vietminh reached mythic proportions. Recruitment greatly increased, and membership in the mass organizations grew on both local and national levels. In some towns, groups claiming to be part of the Vietminh were created but in reality had no ties to the ICP. Had this situation continued, it might have threatened the organizational security of the Vietminh, but again, events were about to deliver opportunity into the hands of Ho Chi Minh.

The August Revolution

The atomic bomb that ended the Pacific War was dropped on Hiroshima on the 6th of August, 1945. By the 16th, the Japanese had surrendered. No one had predicted such a fast ending to the war, but the Vietminh's directing Provisional Leadership Committee was fast to act. On the 13th, they issued Military Order No. 1 that officially called for the beginning of insurrection. At last, the opportune moment had come and Ho Chi Minh was anxious to capitalize on it. He foresaw a moment of opportunity in the political vacuum created between the surrender of the Japanese and the imminent arrival of the Allies into Vietnam to relieve them. He knew that he and the Vietminh had to be in power before the Allies arrived in order to be taken seriously as the representatives of Vietnamese nationalism. This meant that he had to move fast. It took the Central Committee until the 16th to put together all of the planning required of a national uprising, but on the 17th Giap began marching the Vietnamese Liberation Army toward Hanoi, the administrative center of Vietnam. Meanwhile, party cadres were returning to their home bases and began insurrectionary activities there, replacing governing bodies with their own organizations and cadres. Disheartened and thoroughly tired of intervening in affairs that were

not their own, the Japanese were content to remain removed from the political frenzy and in some instances simply surrendered to the Vietminh. In the cities, flags, slogans, and songs praising the Vietminh were present at every demonstration, and popular enthusiasm was so high that many of the other nationalist parties could not compete. They did not have the benefit of the organization, leadership, support, prestige, and legitimacy that the Vietminh had been carefully and consistently cultivating since 1940. They also believed the Vietminh propaganda that the organization was backed by the Allies, a credible statement as they had provided the Americans and the Chinese with intelligence during the war and were one of the few parties that openly sided with the Allies since the beginning.

The cooperation of the Japanese, the capitulation of the other nationalist groups, and the enthusiasm of the population meant that the Vietminh had to do decidedly little. There was very little bloodshed as the Japanese made themselves conspicuously scarce. By the 19th, Hanoi was in the hands of the Vietnamese, thanks to negotiations with the Japanese who had agreed to hand over key installations in the city in return for guarantees for their safety. Hue was taken by the 23rd, along with Danang, and Saigon on the 25th. All of these cities were taken without bloodshed and on the backs of mass demonstrations. By the 30th, the emperor Bao Dai formally abdicated in favor of the Vietminh, and three days later, Ho Chi Minh stood in front of a massive crowd in Hanoi to proclaim the success of the revolution, deliver the Declaration of Independence[26], and present the independent Vietnamese government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with him as the leader.

[26] The Declaration was consciously modeled on the American Declaration in an effort to play to the sympathies of the American OSS officers standing behind him during the speech. Ho wanted not only to give the appearance of Allied and American support, but to gain it in truth by convincing the American representatives of the popularity, legitimacy, and non-Communist nature of his government.

The Vietminh, headed by the ICP and the shrewd Ho Chi Minh, came to power with an ease belying the intense difficulties, pressures, and obstacles they had to overcome in order to prepare for that one momentous opportunity. When the day finally came that the French and the Japanese had lost control, the Vietminh was in a position to take it. They had finally mobilized the masses of Vietnam behind a single flag, a feat that had not been accomplished in Vietnam since the end of the Chinese occupation thousands of years before. It is impossible to overstate the importance of the days of August for the Vietnamese, for they put in place a government and an ideological movement that thirty years of war, two international superpowers, and massive losses would not be able to dislodge. Uncle Ho had become the face of the Vietminh which had, in turn, become the face of Vietnamese nationalism.

Chapter Five:

Le rôle du mythe colonial français dans la guerre en Indochine

Pour la France, les colonies étaient une partie intégrale et inséparable de l'empire français. Il était donc impossible de donner aux colonies l'autonomie sans détruire l'identité, l'unité, et la grandeur de la France entière. Cette idée d'un lien indissoluble entre la métropole et les colonies était « le mythe colonial" et c'était une vision commune de pratiquement toute l'élite française. Ce mythe aveuglait les Français à la haine et le nationalisme croissant dans les colonies pendant une époque à laquelle le monde était en train de changer et pas dans leur faveur à cause de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Deux nouvelles superpuissances ont émergé – les Etats-Unis et l'Union Soviétique, l'Organisation des Nations unies a été formé, et les colonies ont commencé à s'agiter pour avoir de plus en plus d'indépendance et d'autonomie. La France, par contre, souffrait des effets réels et psychologiques de sa défaite et elle s'est trouvée réduite à une puissance secondaire parmi les pouvoirs globaux. Elle s'est trouvée aussi incapable de redéfinir ses relations avec ses colonies dans le contexte du monde changeant, et le mythe colonial a repris sa place à la pointe des politiques coloniales. Les décisions prises par la France après la guerre étaient cruciales et il était possible qu'ils avaient pu créer un nouvel ordre, mais les Français ont plutôt eu recours au recyclage des anciennes idées pour traiter de ce monde, et cette décision a eu pour résultat la guerre en Indochine et la fin de l'empire français.

Le mythe colonial

Pour totalement comprendre l'impact du mythe sur les relations après-guerres entre le Vietnam et la France, on doit étudier d'abord son contenu et son développement. Le mythe colonial était né du mythe républicain, qui considérait le gouvernement français comme défenseur de la justice et de la raison des philosophes du Siècle des lumières et la République comme un pays abstrait et indivisible attaché par une souveraineté populaire. Cependant, sa souveraineté populaire a subordonné le mythe colonial et ses questions importantes à la politique domestique qui dépendait des considérations tactiques de la politique de l'Assemblé. Le mythe est donc arrivé à être défini comme « communauté globale des gens unis dans une seule nation par des liens communes des intérêts économiques et politiques, incarné dans les institutions gouvernementales républicaines, et en partageant une base culturelle commune » (Marshall 12)[27]. Le mythe colonial a permis aux leaders politiques français de concentrer « leur attention sur des principes philosophiques abstraits et les institutions officielles qui pouvaient être conçus pour les promouvoir, plutôt que sur des intérêts concrètes et souvent contradictoire [et] quand telle conflits ont apparu, le mythe colonial a aussi permis aux leaders métropolitains et d'outre-mer de justifier des politiques et des institutions qui ont promis les récompenses pour eux-mêmes et leurs électeurs » (Marshall 4-5)[28]. Par conséquent, le mythe républicain colonial est devenu le

[27] "A worldwide community of peoples bound together into a single nation by common ties of economic and political interest, embodied in republican governmental institutions, and sharing a common cultural base."

[28] "Their attention on abstract philosophical principles and the formal institutions that could be devised to promote them, rather than on concrete and often conflicting interests [and] when such conflicts did emerge, the colonial myth

fondement de la politique française coloniale parce qu'il était facile à façonner et à modeler pour correspondre à des besoins de la République, mais il était solide comme une roche aux peuples coloniaux.

Le mythe colonial peut être vu aussi comme une prolongation de la mission civilisatrice, qui exprimait que la responsabilité et le devoir du monde « développé » de l'Ouest était d'apporter les idéals de justice, de civilisation, et de culture aux peuples coloniaux. C'est la raison pour laquelle ils ont colonisé, et qu'ils ont continué à s'accrocher aux colonies même quand la mission échouait ou était abandonné en faveur des intérêts métropolitains. L'interaction entre la mission civilisatrice et le mythe colonial était une composante importante des considérations après-guerre françaises. La mission a permis au mythe colonial une justification du fait de la religion, l'humanitarisme, et le nationalisme, ce qui était particulièrement important pour une nation qui se définissait par « la liberté, la fraternité, et l'égalité » mais qui en même temps s'engageait dans une expérience colonial qui a refusé ces libertés aux indigènes.

Il est important de comprendre que la mission civilisatrice était intrinsèque à la raison pour laquelle la France a bien colonisé. Les colonies était vues au départ comme essentielles au pouvoir et à la survie de la métropole. Il y avait un impératif industriel parce que les colonies pouvaient fournir des matières premières et un marché pour les biens manufacturés de la France. Il y avait aussi un impératif politique parce que les autres pays d'Europe, et surtout l'Angleterre, ont commencé à s'étendre. Des colonies pouvaient aussi donner à la France de la richesse, des soldats, du territoire, et du prestige qui pouvaient faire de la France une puissance globale pendant l'époque de l'élargissement colonial. Finalement, l'impératif moral était établi dans des idées de supériorité culturelle, raciale, et religieuse et il était utilisé comme la justification

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also allowed both metropolitan and overseas leaders to justify policies and institutions that promised tangible rewards for themselves and their constituents."

rhétorique primaire pour la colonisation, même si les autres impératifs s'avéreraient être plus importants à la longue aux yeux des Français. Le mythe colonial a dit que ces impératifs non seulement justifiaient la possession des colonies mais aussi l'obligation morale de la France de rester dans les colonies, mais, en réalité, ils ont seulement « institutionnalisé les relations inégales entre les Européens et les non-Européens et ils ont promu le mauvais traitement social, économique, et culturel des indigènes » (Aldrich 200)[29].

On peut voir que, ensemble, la mission civilisatrice et le mythe colonial ont permis à la France non seulement de justifier sa place dans les colonies, mais aussi de les retenir même malgré les sentiments des indigènes. Les avantages à être obtenus par l'entreprise coloniale étaient trop pour être sacrifiés légèrement. L'Indochine était la colonie la plus fructueuse pour la France en matière de la richesse et des ressources : « Indochine a contenu des ressources minérales de valeur et elle a fourni la terre fertile pour les plantations ; un climat tropical a permis la culture des récoltes qui ne peuvent pas être cultivées en France. La Banque d'Indochine a fourni des fonds. La population importante a fourni la main d'oeuvre. Saigon et Hanoi sont devenus de grandes villes coloniales importantes. L'Indochine était bien située pour jouer le rôle d'une base pour le commerce français avec la Chine, l'Asie du sud-est, Australasie, et Océanie » (Aldrich 188)[30]. Il est facile de voir pourquoi la France serait peu disposée à laisser partir cette colonie, même quand la population est devenue violente à la poursuite de leur indépendance.

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[29] "Institutionalized unequal relations between Europeans and non-Europeans and promoted social, economic and cultural abuses of indigenous peoples."

[30] "Indochina contained valuable mineral resources and provided fertile soil for plantations; tropical climate enabled the cultivation of crops which could not grow in France. The Banque d'Indochine provided finance. The large population supplied a labor force. Saigon and Hanoi became major colonial cities. Indochina was well situated to act as a base for French trade with China, Southeast Asia, Australasia and Oceania."

L'argument

La Première Guerre mondiale a eu des ramifications importantes pour la pensée coloniale française. L'entre-deux-guerres était dominé par un débat entre des extrêmes. La France et ses parties politiques ont continué à penser que les questions coloniales étaient des problèmes secondaires dans l'importance à la politique domestique, mais cette période a vu l'essor de la politique coloniale comme un outil pour la manœuvre tactique entre les partis politiques. Juste après la guerre, la plupart des parties ont cru que les colonies ont fait une contribution positive à la France parce que beaucoup d'indigènes se sont battus pour « la patrie » pendant la guerre. A cet endroit, le débat s'est concentré sur le développement des colonies, par opposition à l'expansion de l'empire. Cependant, l'allocation de plus d'autonomie, la diminution de l'autorité française, ou la création d'une organisation intermédiaire qui pouvait réduire le control central du gouvernement dans les affaires coloniales étaient tous considérés comme anathème. La politique coloniale a cherché, par contre, à créer les liens sociaux et économiques entre les colonies et la métropole : le mythe colonial. C'était compris par les Français « qu'il y avait un besoin de réformes, mais on ne questionnait que la France doit maintenir son contrôle solide et que tout ce qui est envisagé comme changement au niveau local ne serait pas s'attendu à mener à la création des communautés politiquement indépendants » (Marshall 49)[31]. Tel optimisme n'a pas duré.

La première vraie opposition au mouvement colonial est venue des Socialistes qui attaquaient les privilèges accordés à l'élite économique par le système colonial, mais aussi ils ont attaqué la violence et la cruauté de l'oppression coloniale. Cependant, ils n'ont jamais questionné la mission civilisatrice comme une idéologie, et au lieu de préconiser l'abandonnement des

[31] "Reforms were needed, but there was no question that France must remain in firm control and that whatever changes might be contemplated at the local level were not expected to lead to the creation of politically independent communities."

colonies, ils ont rejeté l'élargissement de l'empire. Bien qu'ils aient recommandé les reformes dans l'établissement colonial, ils ont subordonné ces appels aux besoins de la partie, surtout pendant la période de la coalition de la Front populaire (1936-1938). Par exemple, Léon Blum, le premièr ministre de la France pendant la Front populaire, a dit en 1925 : « Nous sommes trop imprégnés de l'amour pour notre patrie pour renier l'expansion de la pensée et la civilisation française…nous reconnaissons le droit et même le devoir des races supérieurs de s'attirer les gens qui ne sont pas arrivés au même niveau de la culture » (Aldrich 115) [32] . Au lieu de combattre l'idée de la colonisation, comme des indigènes (compris Ho Chi Minh) ont voulu, les Socialistes ont choisi de combattre les abus du système, pas le système lui-même.

Les Communistes étaient aussi des opposants bruyants au projet colonial. Ils ont cru que les colonies représentaient une forme de l'exploitation capitaliste. Marx a argumenté dans son livre *Das Kapital* que l'exploitation des colonies a permis aux états capitalistes et bourgeois de devenir riche et de se développer. Il a donc rejeté les colonies pas parce qu'elles sont mauvaises et injustes mais parce qu'elles ont partie d'un système exploitant qui détruit les colonies et les indigènes pour l'avantage d'une classe étrangère. Marx était convaincu que les colonies étaient donc secondaires en importance et que la révolution serait dans les pays plus développés, bien que les colonies aient des conséquences importantes pour cette révolution. Notons que Marx a aussi cru que « les pouvoirs coloniaux jouaient un rôle nécessaire en abolissant des aristocraties féodales en Europe, en ouvrent le chemin à le changement et éventuellement au socialisme » (Marshall 55)[33]. Le colonialisme français fournissait une étape historiquement impérative, pas

[32] "We are too imbued with love f our country to disavow the expansion of French thought and French civilization…We recognize the right and even the duty of superior races to draw unto them those which have not arrived at the same level of culture." Cité dans Biondi, *Les Anticolonialistes*, pp. 133, 17.

[33] "The colonial powers were playing a necessary role in breaking up the old, feudal, pre-industrial societies of Africa and Asia much as the capitalist bourgeoisie had disrupted the feudal aristocracies within Europe, opening the way for change and eventually for socialism."

seulement pour les colonies mais aussi pour la France. Cette idée est simplement une déformation de la mission civilisatrice parce que le bien des colonies reste encore dans les mains de la France civilisée, développée, et avancée. Ce n'était qu'à l'arrivée de Lénine que les colonies eux-mêmes sont devenues intégrales à la révolution dans les pensées communistes. Lénine a mis les colonies dans un rapport réciproque avec Europe, et il a dit qu'une révolution dans les colonies pouvait déclencher une révolution en Europe en privant des pays capitalistes de leur capital. Staline a aussi partagé ce point de vue dans son livre *Marxisme et la Questions coloniale* dans lequel il a mis l'accent sur l'importance de l'alliance entre le prolétariat dans les pays industriels et les nationalistes des colonies. Cependant, avec l'apparition de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, Staline a décidé que les colonies peuvent être des fronts importants dans la bataille avec les Nazis et le pouvoir doit donc être préservé dans les mains des Alliés. Quoique les Communistes aient prévu l'indépendance des colonies comme le but ultime, ils ont subordonné cet objectif à celui d'une société socialiste intégrée qui peut être dirigé par les parties communistes du monde industriel. Ils ont cru que soit les colonies vont arriver à la révolution plus rapidement en collaboration avec l'Europe, soit que leurs révolutions vont déclencher celles de l'Europe. Donc, l'indépendance and les révolutions sociales dans les colonies étaient toujours subordonnées à celles de l'Europe et de la France.

Pendant l'entre-deux-guerres, le projet colonial était menacé, mais le mythe colonial et la mission civilisatrice sont restés pratiquement inaltérés. Bien que beaucoup d'intellectuels et d'hommes politiques en France aient commencé à dénoncer les abus de la gestion colonial, même les opposants les plus critiques de l'impérialisme n'ont jamais débattu ouvertement l'idée que les colonies avaient besoin de la gestion français pour atteindre l'indépendance (et la révolution sociale). Personne n'a pensé à faire activement campagne pour la dissolution

immédiate de l'empire parce que les avantages à être gagnés pendant l'entreprise étaient souvent plus importants que sa critique. Quand les alliances ont du être formées, les Socialistes et les Communistes ont mis leurs programmes coloniaux dans les ombres pour ne pas aliéner ces alliés plus conservateurs, et cette action a souvent frustré et déçu les nationalistes dans les colonies qui comptaient sur ces parties pour les défendre dans le parlement. Même le Front populaire sous les socialistes était incapable de surmonter la politique métropolitaine pour prêcher le reforme et l'autonomie dans les colonies. Le mythe coloniale était un mythe puissant, celui qui soutenu les idées de la grandeur et le prestige français qui a contribué à la formation de l'identité nationale de la France.

De Gaulle et le mythe colonial

Le prestige et la grandeur français étaient extrêmement importants à Charles de Gaulle à la suite de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Les pertes de la France dans la guerre, pas seulement en Allemagne mais au Japon aussi en Asie (compris l'Indochine) ont beaucoup affaibli l'autorité et la légitimité de la France dans ses colonies en même temps que l'image que les Français avaient d'eux-mêmes. Beaucoup des gens en France se référaient à la contribution des soldats coloniaux et aux fournitures des colonies pendant la guerre comme des raisons pour la rétention de ses possessions. Le général de Gaulle a aussi cru que les colonies étaient intégrales comme une portion de l'empire et pouvaient contribuer à l'effort de la reconstruction. Pendant la guerre, De Gaulle a mis accent sur l'importance des contributions coloniales, et il les a utilisées comme un tremplin militaire et politique. Après la guerre, De Gaulle et le reste de la France ont trouvé nécessaire de redéfinir le rôle des colonies pour maintenir leur loyauté.

De Gaulle lui-même n'a jamais annoncé explicitement à son projet ou philosophie vis-à-vis les colonies, mais ceux qui le suivaient ont extrapolé de ses œuvres écrites pour créer leurs propres usages politiques. La vue gaulliste reflète la personnalité, la philosophie, la vision du monde, et la vision de la France de Général de Gaulle. Par exemple, De Gaulle a donné l'importance au rôle des militaires dans les affaires politiques et étrangères, qui est compréhensible si on considère son rôle comme chef d'un mouvement de la résistance. Donc, pour lui et les gaullistes, les considérations militaires étaient toujours de la grande importance. Il a aussi eu un idéale romantique de l'unité historique qui a incarné la vérité universelle de la vertu et la grandeur française. Cela correspond beaucoup au mythe colonial qui a aussi mis l'importance sur l'idée de l'unité de l'empire et ses liens avec l'honneur et le prestige de « la patrie ». Dans ses *Mémoires de Guerre,* écrits pendant la guerre en trois volumes, De Gaulle dit : « Mais aussi, le coté positif de mon esprit me convainc que la France n'est réellement elle-même qu'au premier rang ; que, seules, de vastes entreprises sont susceptibles de compenser les ferments de dispersion que son peuple porte en lui-même ; que notre pays, tel qu'il est, parmi les autres, tels qu'ils sont, doit, sous peine de danger mortel, viser haut et se tenir droit. Bref, à mon sens, la France ne peut être la France sans la grandeur » (De Gaulle 1:1). On peut voir que De Gaulle a voulu rendre à la France son pouvoir, et les colonies étaient très importantes pour l'atteindre de ce but.

Avec sa vision patriotique de la France, De Gaulle était convaincu que sa nation avait besoin d'être restaurée aux rangs des puissances globales à la suite de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, en soulignant l'importance de ses anciennes gloires et son potentiel futurs au-dessus de sa destruction actuelle et sa lassitude. Les colonies étaient une partie de cette gloire. Pendant la guerre, cela signifie que les colonies pouvaient être un autre front et donner de la légitimité à

la Résistance qui, empêché d'engager les Allemands et ses alliés en France, était capable de lutter dans le territoire français en Afrique du Nord et autour du monde. Dans beaucoup des colonies, la Resistance était prête à encourager le sentiment pro-français et le nationalisme parmi les indigènes pour mobiliser le soutien populaire pour les Allies. Quoique la Resistance ait été prête à donner plus d'importance au potentiel militaire des colonies, elle n'était pas prête à leur donner le soutien égal au potentiel politique des colonies. Ils ont continué de voir les intérêts et rôle politique français comme plus importants.

En 1944, le congrès de Brazzaville a été organisé pour discuter l'avenir des colonies dans un contexte politique. A la fin du congrès, il était évident que la France n'était pas prête à donner l'autonomie aux colonies, malgré des slogans de la libération utilisé pendant la guerre. Le congrès a décidé que : « la mission civilisatrice accomplie par la France dans les colonies excluent des idées de l'autonomie et tous les possibilités d'évolution dehors le bloc impérial français. L'autonomie, même dans l'avenir éloigné, est hors de question » (Rioux 86)[34]. Ce n'est pas pour leur libération que les soldats coloniaux ont combattu mais la libération de la France, et il est aussi devenu évident que les Français seraient encore libres d'exploiter ses colonies comme ils voulaient. Cependant, les Français étaient prêts à concéder un peu de décentralisation et un peu plus de participation par les indigènes, mais ils ont fait seulement des promesses. La constitution de la Quatrième République, adopté en octobre de 1946, a fondé la nouvelle Union française. L'Union française était modelée sur le Commonwealth anglais pour remplacer l'ancien empire. Elle a créé des départements, des territoires, des colonies, et des protectorats pour donner un peu plus d'autonomie locale. Le préambule de la Constitution décrit l'Union :

[34] "The civilizing mission accomplished by France in the colonies precludes any idea of autonomy and all possibility of evolution outside of the French imperial bloc. Self-government, even in the distant future, is out of the question"

> La France forme avec les peuples d'outre-mer une Union fondée sur l'égalité des droits et des devoirs, sans distinction de race ni de religion. L'Union française est composée de nations et de peuples qui mettent en commun ou coordonnent leurs ressources et leurs efforts pour développer leurs civilisations respectives, accroître leur bien-être et assurer leur sécurité. Fidèle à sa mission traditionnelle, la France entend conduire les peuples dont elle a pris la charge à la liberté de s'administrer eux-mêmes et de gérer démocratiquement leurs propres affaires ; écartant tout système de colonisation fondé sur l'arbitraire, elle garantit à tous l'égal accès aux fonctions publiques et l'exercice individuel ou collectif des droits et libertés proclamés ou confirmés ci-dessus. (Constitution de la Quatrième République)

Cette citation montre que les Français ont pensé qu'ils étaient les défenseurs et les guides des colonies, que la mission civilisatrice était toujours leur principe justifiant, et que de se dessaisir des colonies n'était pas seulement une renonciation de leur responsabilité envers les colonies mais aussi un rejet d'une partie de la France elle-même. L'Union a divisé les colonies en départements, des territoires, etc., mais en réalité, ses rôles et ses droits n'ont pas beaucoup changé : les populations des colonies françaises n'ont pas eu l'occasion de voter sur l'acceptation de la constitution. Les changements ont éliminé le mot « colonie » de la terminologie légale française, les « gouverneurs » et les « gouverneurs-généraux » sont devenus des hautes-commissaires. Mais la domination française de l'Union est restée : le président français était le président de l'Union, et le gouvernement français était son gouvernement. L'assemblé de l'Union, séparée du parlement français, jouissait seulement des droits consultatifs » (Aldrich 282)[35]

Ce n'est pas clair si les colonies ont eu le potentiel d'aider la France dans le rétablissement du prestige et du pouvoir, comme De Gaulle et ses sympathisants ont prétendu, ou non. La reconstruction d'après-guerre a commencé au milieu des années quarante et jusqu'au

[35] "The populations of France's colonies were not even given the opportunity to vote on whether or not to accept the constitution. The changes erased the word 'colony' from the French legal terminology; 'governors' and 'governors-general' similarly became 'high commissioners'. But French domination of the Union remained: the French president was president of the Union, and the French government was its government. The Union assembly, separate from the French parliament, enjoyed only consultative rights."

milieu des années soixante-dix, et elle a créé des affaires et des emplois dans la France métropolitaine. Les entreprises françaises ont donc eu des possibilités et des primes pour l'investissement, la production, et le marketing dans le pays et l'Europe pendant l'avènement de la société consommatrice qui a suivi et qui à son tour a désaccentué l'importance des produits de base fournis par les colonies. Les Français étaient plus riches, plus puissants, et plus indépendants qu'auparavant, surtout quand ils ont développé des liens économiques et politiques avec les autres pays européens et les Etats-Unis. Les guerres dans les colonies ont servi principalement à épuiser les ressources, les hommes, et l'argent de la France qui pouvaient être utiles pour la reconstruction ou pour créer des postes pour le nombre croissant de chômeurs en France. Cependant, alors que la vraie importance économique des colonies baissait, le soutien pour l'entreprise coloniale et le mythe colonial est resté élevé. D'après Aldrich, « 81 pourcent des gens sondés en 1949 étaient d'accord sur le fait que la France 'a eu un intérêt dans la possession des territoires étrangers' ; 62 pour cent ont pensé que la France a fondamentalement fait un bon travail dans sa mission coloniale. Mais un tiers a avoué qu'ils ont eu aucune information sur les colonies, et 19 pour cent n'était pas capable de nommer une seule colonie » (283)[36]. Le soutenu n'était pas unanime, mais beaucoup ont continué à croire que les colonies sont restées une partie intégrale de la grandeur française.

Le mythe colonial est très utile pour expliquer pourquoi la France a continué à croire cela, même quand l'évidence était en train d'augmenter que les colonies sont devenues de moins en moins importantes à la France. Le peuple (et De Gaulle) n'a pas eu besoin de preuve parce qu'ils étaient convaincus de la vérité de leur mythe. Les colonies ont donné la grandeur à la France auparavant, et ils vont la donner encore, malgré la différence dans les circonstances

[36] "81 per cent of those polled in 1949 agreed that France 'had an interest in possessing overseas territories'; 62 per cent thought France had basically done good work in its colonial mission. But one third admitted that they possessed no information on the colonies, and 19 per cent could not name a single colony"

internationales. De Gaulle, et plus tard le MRP (*Mouvement Républicain Populaire*) qui représentait sa position après la formation de la Quatrième République, s'efforçait de retenir les colonies en même temps que les autres Alliés s'efforçaient de reconstruire le monde avec la construction des organisations comme les Nations Unies. La France a vu les Etats-Unis en particulier comme une barrière à ses intérêts, et les événements comme Potsdam servaient seulement à augmenter cette méfiance. La France n'était pas invitée à cette conférence entre les autres Alliés : les Etats-Unis, le Royaume Uni, la Chine, et l'Union Soviétique. A cette conférence, il a été décidé que la Chine et le Royaume Uni vont entreraient au nord et au sud de l'Indochine respectivement pour faciliter le désarmement japonais. Cette décision a beaucoup offensé les Français, qui étaient mis en colère par le manque d'invitation et aussi par la division de « leur » territoire. Les Anglais, un autre pouvoir colonial, étaient bien disposés à la rentrée des Français en Indochine, mais les Chinois n'était pas favorables à l'idée, et le gouvernement français a dû beaucoup retarder leur rentrée à cause de l'intervention chinoise.

De Gaulle, les Gaullistes, et éventuellement le MRP n'ont jamais fait face directement au problème de l'autonomie politique pour les colonies. Ils ont choisi de préserver toute l'autorité français possible mais ce but était toujours caché derrière les semblances des concessions aux nationalistes indigènes, tous au le nom de la préservation du mythe colonial français. La prochaine section va examiner les conséquences particulières que ce mythe a eu sur les rapports franco-vietnamiens juste après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, des relations qui en fin de compte a mené à la première guerre en Indochine de 1946-1954.

L’accroissement des tensions

Il y avait peu de doute dans les pensées de De Gaulle que l’Indochine pouvait et devait être réoccupée. Dans une conférence le 10 juillet 1944 avec le président Roosevelt à Washington, il a dit : « la France va certainement récupérer intact tout ce qui est à elle » (Marshall 191-192). A cette première étape, la France commettaient trois erreurs sérieuses de jugement : elle a surestimé le pouvoir et l’influence des élites pro-françaises au Vietnam en relation aux autres groups nationaux ; elle a manqué d’apprécier l’assistance qui était donné aux nationalistes par Decoux et les Japonais pendant l’occupation ; et, par conséquence, elle a surestimé sa capacité à contrôler les événements politiques qui se passaient dans le pays sans sa présence militaire directe. Les Français ont cru que les Vietnamiens les accueilleraient à leur retour à bras ouverts, et leur insistance que les colonies étaient essentielles à la grandeur française empêchait la prise de conscience et la réévaluation de leur attitude vers l’Indochine, même quand les événements les poussaient de plus en plus vers la guerre. Cette section va examiner comment l’incapacité française d’accepter l’autonomie vietnamienne en fin de compte a limité leur marge de manoeuvre et a mené à la Première Guerre en Indochine.

Même avant la guerre, les deux cotés ont rendu leurs intentions et leurs demandes très claires. Le 24 mars 1945, le gouvernement provisoire français a émis une déclaration dans laquelle ils ont exposé leurs intentions de reconquérir l’Indochine. La déclaration a aussi fait des promesses pour l’avenir du Vietnam gouverné par la France, les promesses comme : « La fédération indochinoise va former avec la France et les autres parties de la Communauté une « Union française » et que ces intérêts dehors l’Union vont être représentés par la France. Dans

cette Union, l'Indochine va jouir de la liberté appropriée » (Cameron 34)[37]. Cette déclaration montre que la France n'avait pas l'intention de donner l'autonomie ou l'indépendance aux Vietnamiens. L'Union française était une façade de l'autonomie parce que le Vietnam serait resté dans le domaine français. La déclaration continue à exposer brièvement la formation d'un nouveau gouvernement (surtout sous le contrôle du Gouverneur général), des nouvelles lois d'éducation (qui ont toujours mis l'accent sur la culture et le langage français), et l'autonomie économique (mais sous la gestion française). En réponse, le Vietminh a envoyé un aide-mémoire à la mission française en Kunming en juillet 1945 (passé par l'intermédiaire du Bureau des Services stratégiques américain) qui a demandé :

1. un parlement élu par le suffrage universel
2. l'indépendance garantie en au moins de cinq années et en maximum de dix années
3. le retour des ressources naturelles et la propriété aux indigènes, mais avec la reconnaissance des privilèges économiques des Français
4. l'allocation de libertés proclamées par les Nations Unies
5. l'interdiction de la vente d'opium en Indochine (Cameron 41-42)

Le Vietminh n'était pas la seule organisation à dénoncer la promesse d'une place dans l'Union française comme un substitut pour l'indépendance. Le sentiment anti-français était fort au Vietnam avant la Révolution d'août dans laquelle le Vietminh a pris le pouvoir et déclaré l'indépendance. En fait, il est possible de dire que le Vietminh est seulement arrivé au pouvoir sur une vague de manifestations populaires à la suite de la capitulation japonaise. L'empereur de Vietnam, Bao Dai, un homme élevé et éduqué en France, a écrit une lettre au général de Gaulle en aout 1945 qui a dit : « la seule façon de protéger les intérêts français et l'influence spirituelle de la France en Indochine c'est de reconnaitre sans réserves l'indépendance du Vietnam et de renoncer à toute l'idée de rétablir la souveraineté française ou l'administration française ici dans

[37] "The Indochinese Federation will form with France and the other parts of the Community a "French Union," whose interests outside the Union will be represented by France. Within that union Indochina will enjoy appropriate liberty."

n'importe quelle forme » (Cameron 48)[38]. Même avec ces avertissements, les Français ont continué à voir la réoccupation de sa colonie comme incontestable.

En Septembre 1945, les Anglais et les Chinois ont commence à occuper le sud et le nord de Vietnam respectivement, comme décidé à Potsdam. Cette division a eu des conséquences graves pour le pays parce qu'elle a défini le conflit au Vietnam pendant trente ans. Dans le sud, les Anglais, bien disposés à un autre pouvoir colonial, étaient prêts à aider les Français à réoccuper leur territoire. La Cochinchine n'était pas seulement gouvernée par le Vietminh en 1945, mais par le Parti uni, une coalition des parties et des groupes religieux sous le control d'un Communiste Tran Van Giau. Giau n'était pas affilié officiellement au Vietminh, mais il était prompt à voir qu'il pouvait profiter du prestige du Vietminh et il a rapidement obtenu la proéminence dans la coalition. Cependant, quand les Anglais et leurs troupes indiennes sous le General-majeur Douglas D. Gracey (1894-1964) sont arrivés le 23 septembre 1945, ils n'étaient pas enclins à reconnaître le Comité exécutif provisoire de la République de sud Vietnam sous le Partie uni et Giau. Gracey a vu sa mission comme l'entretien du ordre public jusqu'à l'arrivée des troupes françaises. Une partie de ce devoir était d'entraver les actions des Vietnamiens. Cependant, le commandement anglais sous le control de l'amiral Mountbatten, le Commandant suprême des Alliés dans l'Asie de Sud-est (CSAASE) a voulu que Gracey évite l'intervention dans la politique interne du Vietnam et qu'il se concentre sur le rapatriement des prisonniers et la capitulation japonaise.

Gracey a choisi de suivre ses instincts, pas ses ordres, et il a interdit les manifestations, les défilés, et les réunions publiques. Il a aussi interdit les armes, a imposé un couvre-feu, et a fermé des journaux vietnamiens. Il a établi la loi martiale en disant : « Je veux souligner que,

[38] "the only means of safeguarding French interests and the spiritual influence of France in Indochina is to recognize unreservedly the independence of Viet-Nam and to renounce any idea of re-establishing French sovereignty or French administration here in any form."

même si il semble que je me suis mêlé des politiques du pays, je l'ai fait seulement pour maintenir l'ordre public et en collaboration proche avec des représentants supérieurs français » (Springhall 120)[39]. Pour minimiser son influence, Gracey a réarmé les prisonniers français et il a aussi utilisé des troupes japonaises comme son bras militaire. Ces hommes ont remplacé le comité exécutif provisoire le 23 septembre. Ce coup a provoqué des manifestations et des émeutes armées en Saigon en Cochinchine, mais en octobre, les troupes principales françaises sont arrivées sous le contrôle du général Leclerc et il a rapidement réprimé ces manifestations. Les partisans du Vietminh et du comité était repoussés à la campagne ou ils ont commencé la résistance de guérilla. Le Royaume Uni a eu beaucoup de raisons pour soutenir le retour rapide des Français en Indochine. Premièrement, leur présence dans le pays les a mis dans un dilemme politique : « Gracey, et par extension le CASE…n'ont pas été capables de continuer leur soutien pour les Français en Indochine sans éloigner la Chine nationaliste et l'opinion américain anticoloniale. Mais, la retraite prompte de Saigon pouvait fâcher la France et peut-être encourager les révoltes nationalistes dans les possessions coloniales réoccupées d'Angleterre en Asie de sud-est comme la Birmanie. Les troupes françaises devaient être envoyées au sud d'Indochine très rapidement, ont conseillé les spécialistes du Bureau étranger, si les troupes anglais devaient se retirer aussi vite que possible » (Springhall 126)[40]. Même si les Anglais n'étaient pas en Indochine longtemps (ils étaient partis avant l'arrivée du premier haut commissaire, l'amiral d'Argenlieu, arrivé en novembre 1945), leur présence dans le sud de

[39] "I would stress that though it may appear that I have interfered in the politics of the country, I have done so only in the interest of the maintenance of law and order and after close collaboration with the senior French representatives."

[40] "Gracey, and by extension SEAC…could not continue to support the French in Indochina without alienating nationalist China and anti-colonial American opinion. Yet precipitate retreat from Saigon would certainly anger the French and perhaps encourage nationalist revolt in Britain's own reoccupied south-east Asian colonial possessions like Burma. French troops had to be sent to southern Indochina with the utmost dispatch, advised the Far Eastern experts at the Foreign Office, so that British troops could be withdrawn as soon as possible."

Vietnam servit de bouclier derrière lequel les Français pouvaient réoccuper le pays et rétablir leur autorité.

La situation dans le nord était exactement le contraire de celle dans le sud. En septembre, 1945, 180,000 troupes du sud de la Chine ont commencé à occuper le nord de Vietnam, et les autres groupes nationalistes qui se sont abrités en Canton depuis les années 1930s sont venus aussi avec leurs patrons. Les Chinois ont pillé la campagne, ont détruit la direction Vietminh dans beaucoup des villages qu'ils ont occupés, et ils les ont remplacés par les dirigeants des autres groupes nationalistes comme le Dong Minh Hoi et le VNQDD. Cependant, il est devenu clair très tôt que ces groupes nationalistes n'avaient pas de soutenu populaire du Vietminh parce qu'ils étaient absents du pays pendant l'occupation, et que le Vietminh était la seule alternative à la présence française. Le Vietminh a beaucoup essayé de ne pas résister aux troupes chinoises, même s'ils souffraient à leurs mains, donc les Chinois ont accepté le Vietminh comme le gouvernement légitime du nord Vietnam. Cependant, ils ont insisté que les autres groupes nationalistes était inclus dans le gouvernement. Ho Chi Minh et le Vietminh ont fait des ouvertures symboliques aux leaders nationalistes en leur donnant des postes, mais ils ont gardé les postes les plus puissants pour leurs partisans. Pour calmer les Chinois nationalistes qui sont restés méfiants des Communistes, Ho Chi Minh a aussi dissous la Partie communiste indochinois en novembre, 1945.

Quand les troupes de Leclerc sont arrivées au seizième parallèle, le général a trouvé que « les Chinois semblait en soutenir d'en gouvernement fantoche en Hanoi, et [il] a soupçonné qu'ils voulaient qu'il reste en pouvoir quand ils quittent le pays pour former un état tampon. Il a aussi noté le développement de l'armé de Giap et il a estimé que, quand l'heure est arrivée pour le rentré de la France dans le nord, la résistance pouvait être très dure, donc il a fait ses projets

appropriés » (O'Ballance 62)[41]. Leclerc était si impressionné par la puissance militaire et politique de la position du Vietminh qu'il a recommandé une attaque immédiate pendant que Giap était en train de construire sa armée : « Ce serait une erreur absolue de négocier d'une manière sérieuse avec des représentants du Vietminh, avant d'avoir montré notre force…J'estime qu'il n'y a qu'un moyen et un seul [de régler le problème du Nord], c'est un débarquement en force au Tonkin….Les indigènes tonkinois résisteront, mais la question sera vite résolue » (De Folin 131).

Cependant, même si le conseil des gens au Vietnam était saillant et perspicace, le gouvernement en Paris a décidé à procéder avec les négociations. Premièrement, ils devaient s'occuper de l'occupation chinoise dans le Nord. Comme les Anglais et les Français dans le sud, les troupes chinoises étaient un bouclier derrière laquelle le Vietminh pouvait consolider leur pouvoir. Giap était en train de recruter et d'entraîner son armée en même temps qu'il achetait des armes chinoises, les Japonais, et l'ancien Garde indigène. Entre mars et décembre, 1945, les Vietnamiens du nord ont fait l'acquisition de près de 45,000 armes (McAlister 247). Mais les Chinois n'étaient pas prêts à contribuer plus au Vietminh en ce moment. Ils s'intéressaient plus à leur position dans le nord comme un outil pour forcer les Français à négocier. Le 28 février 1946, les Chinois ont accepté de donner leurs responsabilités à la France qui a accepté de renoncer à leurs possessions en Chine. Ils ont aussi signé l'Accord concernant les relations sino indochinoises qui a donné à la Chine des concessions économiques. Les Chinoises ont finalement quitté le Vietnam qui était totalement abandonné à la clémence française.

Ho Chi Minh a décidé qu'il n'avait pas d'autres options que la négociation. Giap avait

[41] "The Chinese appeared to be supporting a puppet government in Hanoi, and [he] suspected that they would like to see it remain in power after they left so as to form a docile buffer state. He also noted the buildup of Giap's army and estimated that when the time came for the French to re-enter northern Indo-China they might meet with stiff resistance, so he made plans accordingly."

besoin de temps pour construire son armée, détruire les autres nationalistes, et préparer le peuple pour une guerre prolongée sous la bannière du Vietminh. Les Français avaient aussi besoin de temps pour envoyer leurs troupes et leurs fournitures au nord. Par conséquent, les deux côtés se sont rencontrés pour les négociations pour signer "la Convention franco-vietnamienne préliminaire et ses Annexes" le 6 mars 1946. Dans ce document, l'équipe française des négociations, sous la direction de Jean Saintenay (1907-1978), a accepté de reconnaître la République de Vietnam comme "un état libre avec son gouvernement, son Parlement, son armée, et ses finances propres, et formant une partie de la Fédération indochinoise et l'Union française" (Cameron 78)[42] qui a donné plus d'autonomie et de la recognition que toutes les autres déclarations françaises. En contrepartie, Ho Chi Minh a accepté de permettre un maximum de 25,000 troupes françaises dans le Nord pour réoccuper des positions stratégiques le long de la frontière avec la Chine. Cependant, le statut de la Cochinchine était soumis au résultat d'un référendum populaire. Cette décision était un grand sujet de la dispute dans les mois á venir parce que les Français ont soutenu l'idée que la Cochinchine était un état indépendant avec son propre gouvernement (profrançais). Le gouvernement français á Paris était aussi offensé que la reconnaissance de la République de Vietnam était cédée dans les négociations par Saintenay et ils ont refusé de ratifier le document, même quand ils ont profité de leur retour au Nord. Ho Chi Minh a insisté sur l'idée que l'accord a permis au Vietminh de gagner du temps, mais l'accord est resté impopulaire parmi la population.

Le deuxième congrès à Dalat (17 avril à 11 mai) entre la France et le Nord Vietnam était un précurseur des négociations formelles qui auraient lieu plus tard à Paris. Les deux côtés étaient séparés par les questions de l'indépendance et l'unification. La France a voulu maintenir

[42] "A free state having its own government, parliament, army, and finances, and forming part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union."

le contrôle autant que possible et elle n'était pas prête à donner l'indépendance au Vietnam. De la même façon, la France n'a pas voulu céder sa base en Cochinchine au Nord. Ho Chi Minh a refusé de n'accepter rien moins qu'un Vietnam libre, indépendant, et uni. Les négociations ont fini sans accord.

Le 30 mai, d'Argenlieu a formé et a reconnu la République de la Cochinchine sous la direction du docteur Nguyen Van Thinh, un ancien membre du parti Constitutionaliste. Cette décision prise sans le consentement de Paris et le rejet de la première version de la Constitution français ont retardé le congrès sur Indochine à Paris en avril. Pour éviter l'attention de la presse, le gouvernement français a décidé de déplacer le congrès à Fontainebleau. Les Vietnamiens étaient offensés en plus par les actions d'Argenlieu qui a organisé une autre conférence à Dalat à laquelle la République démocratique du Vietnam (le Nord) n'était pas invitée. Cependant, c'était l'échec du gouvernement français à Paris de renier ces actions qui a forcé les négociateurs vietnamiens à cesser le congrès le 1 aout. Mais les négociations secrètes continuaient, même si les Français ont rendu très clair avec leur refus d'accorder des concessions et leur silence sur les actions prise par d'Argenlieu qu'ils n'avaient pas l'intention de donner l'indépendance au Vietnam. Le seul accord qui était fait, le *modus vivendi*, a accordé des droits économiques et financiers à la France, mais il n'a pas adressé les statuts de la Cochinchine ou le Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh est rentré à Hanoi et il a trouvé que Giap n'a pas seulement développé l'armée, mais qu'il avait aussi supprimé les autres partis nationaux qui étaient capable d'être des concurrents aux Communistes. Par conséquent, bien que le *modus vivendi* ne fussent pas populaire, le peuple n'avait pas d'un autre choix que le Vietminh. De plus, Ho a formé un autre front populaire, le Lien Vien (*Hoi Lien Hiep Quoc Dan Viet Nam*) qui, en théorie, était une coalition des individus et des parties pour la démocratie et l'indépendance sous la banderole qui

n'était pas le Vietminh, mais en réalité, c'était seulement un autre front pour les Communistes. Toutes ces mesures ont servi à consolider son pouvoir comme la tête de la RDV, et en même temps, le gouvernement dans le sud a trouvé qu'il n'avait pas de vrai pouvoir dans la campagne. Il était facile de voir que les Français n'étaient pas prêts à changer radicalement la nature de leur contrôle or leur gestion de l'Indochine, mais en même temps qu'un nouveau mouvement au Nord gagnait la puissance du soutien et des armes : « Pendant l'été de 1946, dans la saison de la pluie, la situation dans le Nord pendant la période du cessez-le-feu était que le gouvernement du Vietnam géré par Ho Chi Minh était assis à Hanoi et avait le vrai control de Tonking et l'Annam du nord. Mais les Français, avec des troupes à Hanoi, à Haiphong, et des autres garnisons, avaient un contrôle néant. Les ordinaires du Vietminh ont regardé prudemment les soldats français qui, mieux entrainés et mieux équipés, ont regardé de haut l'armée de Giap avec mépris et ils ont déploré le marchandage politique et l'irrésolution qui ont retenu leur action. Dans le sud, les Français avaient le contrôle évident et les activités du Vietminh était étouffées dans les villes » (O'Ballance 72)[43].

Bien que les deux adversaires aient été très inquiets d'éviter la guerre pour commencer, la première bataille de la guerre a commencé dans le port de Haiphong le 20 novembre 1946. Les Français étaient de plus en plus humiliés et frustrés par leur incapacité de simplement marcher au pas à Hanoi et reprendre leur territoire des troupes inférieures du Vietminh. A Haiphong, ils ont essayé d'empêcher une jonque chinoise qui transportait les armes pour le Vietminh, qui ont rapidement réagi par la prise d'otages français. Les troupes françaises à la garnison ont essayé

[43] "In the summer of 1946, in the rainy season, the situation in the north during the cease-fire period was that the Viet Nam Government led by Ho Chi Minh sat in Hanoi, and was in actual control of Tongking and northern Annam, while the French, although having troops in occupation in Hanoi, Haiphong, and other garrisons, were in control of nothing. The Viet Minh 'regulars' warily watched the French soldiers, who, better trained and equipped, looked down on Giap's rag-tag army in contempt, deploring the political wrangling and indecision that kept them inactive. In the south, the French were in overt control, and Viet Minh activities had been smothered somewhat in the towns."

immédiatement de libérer leurs camarades, et même si les deux côtés ont essayé d'arranger un cessez-le-feu, les Français ont très tôt donné un ultimatum que les troupes vietnamiennes évacuent la ville. Avant que l'heure de réponse soit arrivée, le bateau français *Suffren* a commencé à bombarder la ville et a tué beaucoup des civils. Le Vietminh a eu assez en ce moment, et quand les Français ont donné un autre ultimatum le 27 novembre, la décision a été prise d'évacuer les troupes du Vietminh de toutes les villes pour se retirer à la campagne où elles pourraient commencer la résistance de guérilla.

L'impact du mythe colonial sur la guerre en Indochine

La guerre entre la France et le Vietnam était-elle inévitable? Il y a des gens qui disent qu'il aurait été possible d'éviter la guerre si les deux partis avaient sérieusement considéré un réel accord qui engage, mais un tel accord aurait exigé les concessions de chaque côté. Les deux étaient si séparés par des idées de l'indépendance et de l'unification qu'il avait semblé impossible à trouver un compromis à l'époque. Les Vietnamiens ont vu l'indépendance comme le seul résultat possible et ils n'étaient pas disposés à accepter une autonomie limitée dans la structure de l'Union française qui les aurait mis à la merci des caprices et des désirs de Paris. Ils étaient aussi incapables d'accepter la séparation de leur pays entre le nord et le sud. Les Français n'ont pas voulu un compromis qui aurait diminué leur pouvoir et leur prestige de puissance globale. Les colonies étaient, pour eux, des manifestations physiques de la grandeur française, et à la suite de la deuxième guerre mondiale, la France avait besoin d'assurance. Elle avait besoin de prouver au monde qu'elle était toujours grande, et elle se cramponnait à l'idée que les colonies n'étaient pas seulement le chemin à sa grandeur, mais qu'ils étaient aussi des parties

indivisibles de la France qui devaient automatiquement vouloir aider « la patrie » dans sa reconstruction et son accession dans le monde d'après-guerre. Ce point de vue a aveuglé les Français à la réalité de l'Indochine. Ils se sont cramponnés à l'idée qu'il n'y avait pas d'autre résultat acceptable que la restauration du pouvoir français en Vietnam, malgré les preuves croissantes que telle présence ne serait jamais acceptée par le peuple vietnamien. Même Bao Dai, dans sa lettre de 18 aout 1945 au General Charles de Gaulle à annoncé : « Vous comprendriez mieux si vous étiez capable de voir ce qui se passe ici, si vous pouviez ressenti la volonté pour l'indépendance qui a commencé à couver dans les cœurs de tous et qu'aucune force humaine peut se retenir en plus. Même si vous arriviez à rétablir le gouvernement français ici, il ne serait pas obéi : chaque village serait un nid de la résistance, chaque ancien collaborateur serait un ennemi, et vos colons eux-mêmes demanderaient à partir de cette atmosphère irrespirable » (Cameron 48)[44]

Le mythe colonial était la raison pour laquelle les Français ont perdu l'Indochine et les à forcés à reconnaitre, même si en silence, que l'empire n'était pas une communauté globale des peuples qui sont de différentes races et cultures mais sont unis par une expérience historique et des objectifs sous une même bannière. Cette communauté était maltraitée par les Français. S'ils avaient créé un système qui avait inspiré « des nouveaux liens diverses entre la France et les régions étrangères qui étaient capable de donner la vraie substance aux principes larges et générales qui étaient contenu dans le mythe colonial » (Marshall 208)[45], peut-être aurait-il été possible de préserver l'empire, mais il aurait été nécessaire de donner plus autonomie aux

[44] "You would understand better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel the will for independence which has begun smoldering in the hearts of all and which no human force can hold in check any longer. Even if you were to come to reestablish French government here it would not be obeyed: each village would be a nest of resistance, each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and your colonists themselves would ask to leave that unbreathable atmosphere."

[45] "Diverse new links between France and the overseas areas capable of giving real substance to the broad general principles contained in the colonial myth."

colonies et plus des droits aux indigènes. Cependant, ils n'étaient pas capables de le faire en Indochine. Avant 1946, ils avaient déjà perdu l'Indochine, et la guerre sanglante qui a duré huit ans n'était rien qu'un retard de leur parti. En 1954, les Français étaient forcés à reconnaitre l'indépendance du Vietnam et leur échec à y rétablir leur autorité, mais ils n'étaient pas encore prêts à reconnaître l'échec du mythe colonial.

Summary of Chapter Five:

The Role of the French Colonial Myth in the Indochinese War

The Vietnam War between the United States and the Vietnamese Communists is one of the most studied, controversial wars in modern history. However, there is a tendency to forget that another war between the French and the Vietnamese Communists, the First Indochinese War, set the stage for our involvement. This first war was not part of the Cold War; it was a war of decolonization and independence. The Vietnam War had a massive impact on the national psyche and confidence of the United States, an impact that continues to affect our foreign policy decisions and relations with other countries. The First Indochinese War had a similar destabilizing effect on the French self-image, one that severely hampered the nation during the following wars of independence in some of its other colonies, most notably Algeria, in the years following the end of World War II. France clung to the belief that the colonies were imperative to the restoration of French prestige and grandeur and that they were inseparable, integral parts of the Empire. This belief, the so-called colonial myth, severely hampered the French in their relations with the colonies, and, in particular, Vietnam during the period of decolonization that ended with the devastating war in Algeria. The myth blinded the French to the rising nationalism and resentment within the colonies at a time when the global balance of power was shifting away from colonialism and toward a new era, the Cold War. This meant that France was unable and unwilling to redefine its relationships with the colonies to match the context of the changing world, a situation clearly demonstrated in Vietnam during the period following the August Revolution of 1945 and the end of World War II.

The study of the colonial myth must begin with an exploration of its formation and contents. It was born from the republican myth which depicted France as the ultimate defender of justice and reason as dictated by the Enlightenment philosophers. This image of France depicted that nation not as a parcel of land or grouping of specific peoples but as an abstract, indivisible state bound together by popular sovereignty. France was "a worldwide community of peoples bound together into a single nation by common ties of economic, and political interest, embodied in republican governmental institutions, and sharing a common cultural base" (Marshall 12). However, such a definition allowed political leaders to focus on "abstract philosophical principles and the formal institutions that could be devised to promote them, rather than on concrete and often conflicting interests [and] when such conflicts did emerge, the colonial myth must also allow both metropolitan and overseas leaders to justify policies and "institutions that promised tangible rewards for themselves and their constituents" (Marshall 4-5). This myth is also connected to the "civilizing mission" which stated that it was the responsibility of an advanced, "developed" nation like France to bring the ideals of justice, civilization, and culture to the colonized peoples. This myth not only allowed the French to justify the conquest of the colonies, but their continued presence even when the mission failed or was abandoned in favor of metropolitan interests. These interests were vast, ranging from the provision of raw materials and labor to the political prestige to be gained during the period when European colonial expansion was considered the height of power and influence. Indochina "contained valuable mineral resources and provided fertile soil for plantations; tropical climate enabled the cultivation of crops which could not grow in France. The Banque d'Indochine provided finance. The large population supplied a labor force. Saigon and Hanoi became major colonial cities. Indochina was well situated to act as a base for French trade with China, Southeast Asia, Australasia and

Oceania" (Aldrich 188). It is easy to see why France would be reluctant to let go of such a colony.

This is not to imply that there was no debate surrounding France's colonial venture. The inter-war period was a time of intense debate not only on the floor of the Assembly but also among the French intellectual elite. Colonial questions were also second in importance to metropolitan interests, but they could be used as a tactical tool among political parties in particular. Most of the debate, however, centered on the expansion of the empire or colonial policy. Few actually considered granting increased autonomy, the reduction of French authority, or the creation of intermediary organizations that would reduce the central control of the government in colonial affairs. The Socialists attacked the abuses of the colonial elite, but did not question the legitimacy of the colonial myth or the civilizing mission, nor did they advance the abandonment of the colonies. Even these moderate appeals were often subordinated to party interests, especially during the Popular Front coalition period when the Socialists wanted to avoid alienating any part of the electorate. They were willing to fight the system's abuses when able, but were not willing to fight the system itself.

The Communists went a little farther than the Socialists in their vocal opposition to the colonial venture. They advanced the idea that colonial exploitation was a form of capitalist exploitation, but they continued to say that the presence of the colonial powers in these countries provided an historical imperative: "the colonial powers were playing a necessary role in breaking up the old, feudal, pre-industrial societies of Africa and Asia much as the capitalist bourgeoisie had disrupted the feudal aristocracies within Europe, opening the way for change and eventually for socialism" (Marshall 55). Later, Lenin took this idea further, stating that reciprocally, the colonies were advancing the revolutions in Europe because their decolonization efforts would

disrupt the capitalist power in their colonizing countries. However, when World War II broke out, Stalin decided that the colonies would be important battlegrounds in the fight against the Nazis and decided that the Allies had to maintain their power in the colonies in order to deprive the fascists of their resources. Thus, the Communists similarly subordinated their colonial policy in favor of a large, political imperative to create an integrated socialist society led by the communist parties of the industrialized world. They believed that either the colonies would come into the revolution faster through association with France, or that their revolutions would trigger revolutions in Europe. Thus, the independence and social revolutions in the colonies were always subordinate to those of Europe and of France.

During the interwar period, the colonial project came under attack, though the colonial myth remained virtually untouched. While many intellectuals and politicians in France began to denounce the abuses of colonial rule, even the most critical opponents of imperialism never openly challenged the idea that the colonies needed French leadership in order to reach independence (and social revolution). No one thought to actively campaign for the immediate dissolution of the empire, as the benefits to be gained through the venture often outweighed the disadvantages presented by its critics. When alliances needed to be formed, the Socialists and the Communists would put their colonial agendas into the shadows in order to avoid alienating their more conservative allies, and this often frustrated and disappointed nationalists in the colonies who looked to these parties to support them in Parliament. The colonial myth was a powerful one, one that supported the ideas of French grandeur and prestige that contributed to French national identity.

World War II not only returned the colonial myth to center stage but it prompted many to rally to its defense. One of its most strident supporters was the general Charles De Gaulle.

During the war, France lost much of its prestige and sense of self-worth. It also weakened her legitimacy and authority in the colonies. De Gaulle believed that only a strong, coordinated re-conquest of the colonies could restore France's power, prestige, and grandeur and that the colonies would form an integral part of the metropolitan reconstruction. De Gaulle strongly believed that France deserved to be returned to the first rank of the world powers and that she was not France without this power: "But also, the positive side of my spirit convinces me that France is not really herself but among the first rank; that alone, vast undertakings are susceptible to the ferments of dispersion that all men carry within them, that our country, such as it is, among others, that which they are, must, at the risk of mortal danger, aim high and stand upright. Briefly, to my senses, France cannot be France without grandeur" (De Gaulle 1:1)[46]. De Gaulle thus saw the restoration of the colonies as a necessary component of the restoration of French grandeur, linking the two together with the colonial myth which stated that the two were inseparable; the colonies were France and France was the colonies.

De Gaulle was not entirely unaware of colonial discontent and made efforts to regain some of the legitimacy and authority that France had lost by holding a conference in Brazzaville, Algeria in 1944 to discuss the future political construction, the French Union. However, by the end of the conference, it was clear that France was not willing to grant autonomy to the colonies: "the civilizing mission accomplished by France in the colonies precludes any idea of autonomy and all possibility of evolution outside of the French imperial bloc. Self-government, even in the distant future, is out of the question" (Rioux 86). Many of the native peoples of the empire had fought and died to protect the "motherland" but it was not for their own liberation that they were

[46] « Mais aussi, le coté positif de mon esprit me convainc que la France n'est réellement elle-même qu'au premier rang ; que, seules, de vastes entreprises sont susceptibles de compenser les ferments de dispersion que son peuple porte en lui-même ; que notre pays, tel qu'il est, parmi les autres, tels qu'ils sont, doit, sous peine de danger mortel, viser haut et se tenir droit. Bref, à mon sens, la France ne peut être la France sans la grandeur »

fighting, and it was also clear that French did not intend to mend their ways upon their return but would be seeking to continue exploiting the colonies as they pleased. The Constitution of the Fourth Republic, adopted in October 1946, founded the French Union, stating in its preamble:

> "France forms with the peoples abroad a Union founded on the equality of rights and duties, without the distinction of race or religion. The French Union is composed of nations and of peoples who put together or coordinate their resources and their efforts to develop their respective civilizations, increase their well being, and assure security. Proud of her traditional mission, France waits to guide the people of whom she has been given charge their liberty and the self-administration to democratically control their own affairs; moving away from any system of colonization founded on the arbitrary, she guarantees to all the equal access to public functions and the exercise of individual or collective freedoms and liberties proclaimed or confirmed above » (Constitution de la Quatrième République)[47].

This quote shows that the French still saw themselves as the protectors and the guides of the colonies, that the civilizing mission was still their justifying principle, and that to give up the colonies was not only a renunciation of their responsibilities toward their possessions, but a renunciation of a part of France herself. While the Constitution made many promises about the fairness and justice of the French Union, it did little in reality to change the roles and rights of the natives: "the populations of France's colonies were not even given the opportunity to vote on whether or not to accept the constitution. The changes erased the word 'colony' from the French legal terminology; 'governors' and 'governors-general' similarly became 'high commissioners'. But French domination of the Union remained: the French president was president of the Union, and the French government was its government. The Union assembly, separate from the French parliament, enjoyed only consultative rights" (Aldrich 282). The French were not willing to give up their power in the colonies.

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[47] « La France forme avec les peuples d'outre-mer une Union fondée sur l'égalité des droits et des devoirs, sans distinction de race ni de religion. L'Union française est composée de nations et de peuples qui mettent en commun ou coordonnent leurs ressources et leurs efforts pour développer leurs civilisations respectives, accroître leur bien-être et assurer leur sécurité. Fidèle à sa mission traditionnelle, la France entend conduire les peuples dont elle a pris la charge à la liberté de s'administrer eux-mêmes et de gérer démocratiquement leurs propres affaires ; écartant tout système de colonisation fondé sur l'arbitraire, elle garantit à tous l'égal accès aux fonctions publiques et l'exercice individuel ou collectif des droits et libertés proclamés ou confirmés ci-dessus. »

Even though De Gaulle was convinced that the colonies could aid in the reconstruction of France, there is little real evidence that this would have been the case. France began to recover rapidly after the end of the war, and was richer, more powerful, and more self-sustaining than ever before. It seemed that the benefits provided by the colonies were now unnecessary. However, popular and political support for the colonial venture remained high, even though few actually had any knowledge of the colonies or their problems. Many continued to believe that the colonies were integral to the reformation of French grandeur. Any concessions granted to the nationalists in the colonies were merely smoke screens and delaying tactics to give the French time to reoccupy their territory. This attitude, fueled by the colonial myth, would have severe consequences in Vietnam.

On February 15, 1945, De Gaulle made a radio announcement that clearly indicated France's intention to reoccupy the country: "France intends to make the political, social, economic, and cultural development of the Indochinese Union one of the principle goals of her activity in her reborn power and her refound grandeur" (Marshall 191-92). In making this statement, De Gaulle was seriously overestimating the power and influence of the pro-French elite in Vietnam in relation to the other nationalist and communist groups. He also was failing to appreciate the assistance given to these groups by Decoux and the Japanese during the war, and as a consequence, was overestimating France's ability to control the political events taking place within the country without its direct military presence. The French seemed to believe that the Vietnamese would welcome them back with open arms on the strength of their promises, and their insistence that colonies were essential to French grandeur kept them from revaluating their attitude toward Indochina, even as events pushed them closer and closer to war. From September 1945 to November 1946, the French and the Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh's communist

Vietminh, constantly struggled to come to some sort of political agreement about the autonomy of Vietnam. However, tensions grew as the French began to retake the South by force and were finally allowed to reoccupy strategic positions in the North as well. Both sides were attempting through negotiations to gain time in order to prepare for war, but negotiations continually stalled as the French refused to give the Vietnamese what they really wanted: a unified, independence Vietnam.

It would have been possible to avoid war in Vietnam if both sides had been willing to make real concessions in a lasting, binding agreement. However, the French and the Vietminh were so deeply divided over the issues of independence and unification that it seemed impossible at the time to reach a compromise. The Vietnamese saw independence as the only possible outcome and were unwilling to accept a limited autonomy within the framework of a French Union that would have kept them at the mercy of the whims and desires of Paris, nor were they willing to accept a division of the country between the communist-controlled north and the French-controlled south. The French were unwilling to accept a compromise that would have diminished their perceived prestige as a world power. The colonies were seen as physical manifestations of the greatness of France, and in the aftermath of WWII, France was in dire need of a confidence boost. She felt the need to prove to the world that she was great, and she clung to the idea that the colonies were not only the road to this greatness, but also indivisible pieces of France that should automatically want to aid the mother country in her reconstruction and rise to power in the post-war world. This point of view blinded them to the reality of Indochina after the war, as they clung to the idea that no other outcome besides the restoration of French power was acceptable in Vietnam, despite mounting evidence that such a presence was never going to be

accepted by the people again. Even Bao Dai, in his letter of August 18, 1945, warned De Gaulle of the impossibility of a French return to power, saying:

> "You would understand better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel the will for independence which has begun smoldering in the hearts of all and which no human force can hold in check any longer. Even if you were to come to reestablish French government here it would not be obeyed: each village would be a nest of resistance, each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and your colonists themselves would ask to leave that unbreathable atmosphere" (Cameron 48).

The colonial myth caused the French to lose Indochina, to recognize, even if only silently, that the empire was not a worldwide community of racially and culturally diverse people united by historical experience and broad political objectives under one banner, but one imposed from above that had been mismanaged and abused. Had the French instituted a system that created "diverse new links between France and the overseas areas capable of giving real substance to the broad general principles contained in the colonial myth" (Marshall 208) then they might have had a chance to preserve the empire, but it would have required them to grant more autonomy to the colonies and more rights to the natives. However, they were not able to accomplish this in Indochina. By 1946, they had already lost Indochina, and the eight year, bloody war was nothing but a delay of their departure. In 1954, the French were forced to recognize the independence of Vietnam and their own failure to re-establish their authority there, to recognize the failure of the colonial myth.

CONCLUSION

On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. By the end of 1946, the nation was again on the road to war. To the Vietnamese, the war with the French and the Americans was a single continuous war of national liberation and unification. To the French it was one of decolonization, and to the Americans it was one battle of many in the context of the global Cold War. However, by 1975, Vietnam was again a united, independent, communist country. This project has sought to explore the series of events that led to the August Revolution and the peculiar strengths of the Vietnamese Communists that allowed them to take the reins of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, reins that they have yet to relinquish.

Of course, the Vietnamese Revolution of August 1945 could not have occurred without the confluence of certain major events that were specific to the Vietnamese situation. Firstly, French repression and political complexity during the 1930s had virtually destroyed or rendered helpless any other nationalist movement besides the ICP. Secondly, famine, economic exploitation, and political instability during a time of war provided the opportunities not only for large scale revolt but also for the Communists to capitalize on this latent popular dissatisfaction. While it is true that these events were particular to Vietnam, there are some larger conclusions that can be drawn. There were certain strengths that the Communists possessed that, if replicated, could benefit other nationalist and communist movements, even though they lack the peculiar situation of Vietnam.

The revolutionary movements of Phan Boi Chau and the VNQDD, competitors of Ho Chi Minh and the ICP, ultimately lacked a clear, definitive ideology that went beyond narrow class

or regional interests, and this hampered their mass appeal and recruitment. They did not have clear visions for the future Vietnam that they would like to create, and they often relied heavily upon the support of an outside force that some feared would become merely another colonizer. The Communists did not suffer from these same failings. They were part of a worldwide ideological network that included the powerful USSR, but ultimately emphasized the power of the Vietnamese themselves to rise up and overthrow the French. Vietnam was not alone, but it was not a weak power reliant upon the aid of other, larger nations to decide its own destiny. Communism also offered an ideology that went beyond narrow interests, one that bound together all of its members in a common, well-defined cause no matter their ethnicity or region. This ideology had a clear vision for the future, a plan of action, and a dynamic new set of ideas that were totally unrelated to those of the colonial regime.

The Communists' use of propaganda was another of their major strengths. Traditional Marxist doctrine was not immediately tailored to the situation in Vietnam as it focused mainly on a proletariat, industrial class that was miniscule in comparison to the agrarian class in Vietnam. In order to overcome this, the Vietnamese Communists (as directed by Ho Chi Minh) took a series of steps to make Marxist ideas appealing to the peasantry that would constitute the manpower of their revolution. The mass organizations were tailored to appeal to certain segments of the population, giving communist ideology a nationalist front behind which it could hide. The ICP also stressed equally the importance of the national liberation and the social revolution, promising such changes as land reform. Other political parties and revolutionary movements focused their propaganda and programs primarily on the concerns of the educated elite, not the peasantry, but the ICP and the Vietminh were able to tap into the latent power of the masses thanks to their propaganda campaign tailor made to make Marxism suit an Asian reality.

The ICP's strict, centralized organizational strategy allowed the Communists to more easily reorganize and survive French and Japanese repression campaigns. This organization did not center around a single leader but on a central committee made up of determined, professional revolutionaries. Thus, the success of the party did not depend entirely on the fortunes of one man, and the central committee could be replaced if necessary. This central organization was surrounded by a web of mass organizations that acted as the roots of giant tree, allowing it to survive the winds of political change, colonial repression, and the fires of war. The mass organizations also provided a direct link to the populace, where the ICP could easily find new members and revolutionaries.

Finally, the patient preparation of the ICP proved to be its fourth main strength. Ho Chi Minh would not allow his party to repeat the mistakes of the early 1930s or the earlier nationalist movements who, in their impatience, staged revolutions without first assuring that the time was right, that the support existed, and that every branch was coordinated, trained, and informed. He stressed the slow build up of support, organization, and legitimacy among the people, waiting for a singular, favorable turn of events that would assure the best possible outcome for the revolution. While this strategy often frustrated the lower political cadres, it proved invaluable. When the Japanese surrendered and a political vacuum was created, the Vietminh was the only group that had not wasted its resources, and had achieved a larger base of support, and was organized enough to quickly capitalize on the surge of nationalist fervor among the people. It was the moment Ho Chi Minh had been waiting for, and it was his patient policies that had won him the support he needed to take advantage of the vacuum.

However, these strengths might well have meant little if not for the strong, competent leadership of Ho Chi Minh and his subordinates. Little is known about this man or the exact

amount of direct influence he had over the party and its activities. However, it is well accepted that his was the hand behind most of the propaganda and political maneuvering of the Vietminh. For most of his career, he had stressed the importance of the factors that ultimately led to the success of the Vietminh and the Communists. He had placed much emphasis on the importance of patient preparation, propaganda, and the tailoring of Marxist ideology to fit the circumstances of Vietnam. While he was sometimes ostracized or punished for this point of view, he ultimately clung to his convictions, and when he returned to Vietnam on the eve of war in 1941, he deftly guided the party through the waters of international and national pressures, war, and famine to lead them from the depths of their failures of the 1930s to the August Revolution.

While a certain series of events ultimately gave the Vietnamese Communists the opportunity to rise up, such events would have meant little if the ICP and the Vietminh had not possessed the strengths that made them able to take advantage of the situation. Without the deft leadership of Ho Chi Minh, would the Communists have been able to rebuild so quickly after 1941, or to steer through the difficult political waters of World War II and its aftermath? Would the ICP have been able to coordinate its efforts to take advantage of the underlying popular discontent and revolution in August 1945 without its strong, centralized organization? What if they had lacked the patient preparation that gained them legitimacy among the people and also gave them the ability to wait for the perfect moment? Would they have moved too soon and been destroyed by the militarily superior French or Japanese? And, lacking the cohesive ideology and propaganda, would they have been able to gain as much support for last the thirty years of bloody warfare that followed the 1945 Revolution? It is hard to imagine that the Declaration of Vietnamese Independence could have ever been made on September 2, 1945 without the

intersection of historical events and communist strengths. Both were important and necessary to the success of the ICP, the Vietminh, and Ho Chi Minh.

But why is it important to study the strengths of the Vietnamese Communists? Hasn't Communism failed as an ideology? What does this have to do with American interests, and what lessons can we possibly take away from this? Besides the fact that nationalist movements could learn from the strengths of the Communists in Vietnam, a study of this nature can also shed some light on the American Vietnam War. The Vietminh, renamed the Viet Cong, became our principle enemy during the 1960s and early 1970s and a study of the nature of their strengths can only aid in our understanding of the war. In 1985, former President Richard Nixon stated, "no event in American history is more misunderstood than the Vietnam War. It was misreported then, and it is misremembered now." This quotation, made just ten years after the fall of Saigon that marked the end of the bloodiest period in Vietnamese history, is as true today as it was then. Even after billions of dollars were spent and thousands of lives were lost in the war from 1959 to 1975, the United States, the most powerful nation in the world, still does not fully understand the nature of the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese War, its own defeat, or its impact on the fabric of American consciousness. There are few topics as intriguing or as unsettling to America as one of its biggest blunders, a war in which so many lives were lost for so little due to sheer lack of understanding, foresight, and initiative on the part of our nation's leaders. This war, along with the First Indochinese War against the French, changed the face of Vietnam. These wars allowed the Communists of the North to take control of their country; however, the wars were not what ultimately allowed the Communists to take control of the movement for national liberation in Vietnam. The confusion and chaos surrounding the end of World War II opened new doors and opportunities for the Vietnamese people, but when that time came, only the Communists were in

a position to fully exploit these changes. In order to fully understand the Vietnam War, to learn from our mistakes, we must first try to understand the nature of communist power and the true nature of the war in which we were so tragically engaged during the 1960s and early 1970s.

One of our biggest mysteries when we entered the war remains so today: Ho Chi Minh. Who was this mysterious man, this "Uncle Ho" who had the ability to inspire a nation and yet was ruthless and intractable to his enemies? Ho Chi Minh is often described as a man "part Gandhi, part Lenin, all Vietnamese" (Halberstam 12). It is difficult to place him in a category. For some, Ho Chi Minh was more communist revolutionary that nationalist: "He was a nationalist only in the sense that he could not establish a communist state in Vietnam if it were part of the French Empire. His only loyalty was to winning power for himself and his ideology" (Nixon 32). Those who believe this point to Ho's ruthless extermination of competitor nationalists: "Instead of cooperating with nationalists to win independence, he spent his entire career eliminating all independent nationalists, even if it meant openly collaborating with colonial France. Though he used the rhetoric of nationalism, Ho was first and foremost a communist totalitarian. He used nationalism to serve communism rather than the other way around" (Nixon 35). To the supporters of this view, Ho Chi Minh was merely an opportunist who betrayed true nationalists like Phan Boi Chau and the Diem brothers to further his own (communist) goals. This represents the prevailing view of American policy makers in the late 1950s who decided to enter Vietnam in order to prevent the fall of the whole of Southeast Asia.

Others believe that Ho Chi Minh was primarily a nationalist, a committed patriot "dedicated above all to the reunification of his country and the creation of a society based on self-determination and social justice" (Brocheux ix). To his sympathizers, Ho Chi Minh turned to Communism because of Lenin who placed more emphasis on the colonies than any other

ideology at the time, citing them as an integral part of the global social revolution. Proponents of this view point to Ho's early involvement in revolt and rebellion, citing primarily his ten-point program of 1919 that he meant to present to the world leaders at Versailles, a program based not on Socialism or Communism but on Wilsonian ideals. For those who hold to this view of Ho Chi Minh, he chose Communism because he believed that it was the best means to the end of Vietnamese independence, but he was first and foremost a devout patriot and nationalist.

These views about Ho Chi Minh reflect our dual understanding of the nature of the war in Vietnam. Those who believe that Ho was primarily a communist revolutionary also believe that the war was primarily one of communist aggression. For Nixon, the Vietnam War of the Americans that began in 1961 should have placed solely in the Cold War context: "Communism, not colonialism, was the *principal* cause of the war in Indochina. Colonialism complicated the prosecution of the French phase of the war, because it allowed the Communists to obscure the issue, but the war itself originated in Ho Chi Minh's willful push for total power and was sustained by Communist China's massive support for the Vietminh. Our mistake was failing to understand that the issue was not whether colonialism would succeed, but what would succeed colonialism" (Nixon 32). This represents the prevailing view among the nation's leaders during the war. This meant that the United States viewed Vietnam as a battle in the global Cold War against the USSR and its communist satellites. Those who hold to this view tend to oversimplify and place the war and its people into a neat pigeon-hole definition by refusing to recognize that the war could have been both communist and nationalist in nature, that Ho Chi Minh could have been a ruthless dictator and a national hero. They thus treat the conflict as one poker chip among many in a gamble between superpowers, not as a revolution of a people struggling for independence.

In order to truly understand the Vietnam War, one must understand that the dual nature of Ho Chi Minh is reflected in the dual nature of the war. This study has shown that Ho Chi Minh continually placed emphasis both on national liberation and on social revolution and was often willing to sacrifice or go against traditional Marxist ideals to gain a larger following among the people who were largely illiterate and more interested in nationalism than larger, ideological questions like Socialism or Communism. Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a realist, and he recognized the importance of blending his communist message with that of nationalism, an idea that all the peoples of Vietnam could support. However, this nationalism meant that the Communists could not stop at a divided nation; to most of the people in Vietnam, the nation could only be free and independent as a unified state, and the war was not going to end until they achieved that goal. That is why they viewed the war as a single continuous battle for unification and independence, while the Americans and the French attempted to place them in their own context. Like its main leader, the war in Vietnam was both one of nationalism and communism. These two ideas became so intertwined and codependent because of the ability of the Vietminh and Ho Chi Minh to consciously design their programs to support this vision. To view the wars in Vietnam as merely those of communist aggression or national independence would be to misread and misunderstand their true nature.

Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your enemy is one of the major foundations for success in any campaign, and yet the United States went in without knowing either, believing that its massive firepower advantage could win the day. It operated in Vietnam believing that the struggle was mainly one of military strategy, but we failed to recognize the main lesson that this study proves: the war in Vietnam and the strength of the Communists was not based on military strength but on political support. The Vietminh and later the Viet Cong called this strategy Dao

Tranh, which emphasized the political nature of the struggle, the importance of teamwork, discipline, and well-planned goals. Their strategy called for them to take political action directed at the enemy population in order to drain their will to fight, at the enemy forces in order to weaken their ability to fight successfully, at its own troops in order to make them more willing to fight and die for their cause, and at its own people to build up their own support. Ho Chi Minh and the Communists understood that a guerilla war relied upon the support of the people; that is why they referred to this combat strategy as People's War. The Vietnamese understood that the main conflict occurred on the village level, not on the battlefield, but the United States continually ignored this reality. Had American leaders understood the true nature of the war, they would have realized that they needed to strike at the real strength of the Communists: their popular support.

It is unclear whether or not Americans would have been able to actually accomplish this task, even if they had known it was needed. It would have required them to create a legitimate government in Saigon, but it is possible that no government would have gained legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people. Any government we would have created would have been tainted by our hand. The people were too used to puppet governments under foreign direction. Even if Ngo Dinh Diem's government had not been corrupt, there remains a distinct possibility that he would have been unable to present an alternative to Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong who did possess all the strengths and the support they had spent decades building. We would have needed a non-communist organization and leader that also benefitted from strong leadership, organization, preparation, ideology, and propaganda. It would have had to have legitimacy in the eyes of the people as a true voice of the nationalist movement. It would have had to have a strong

following, a committed history, and the ability to inspire the people. There was no such alternative to the Communists.

A study of the strengths of the Vietnamese Communists is therefore far from useless. It has much to teach us about the necessary components of a nationalist movement and about the nature of the American war in Vietnam. When Ho Chi Minh climbed that podium on the 2nd of September 1945, he was making history. His party had taken control of the country and was about to embark on a thirty year war that would overthrow the colonial order and defeat the strongest nation in the world, a defeat that would haunt the United States for years to come. Even today, we are comparing wars to the disaster that was Vietnam. Until we understand our defeat in the "most misunderstood war in history" we will be unable to learn and apply the lessons it has to teach us in any comprehensive, effective way.

Appendix I

Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam[*]

September 2, 1945

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights."

Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the field of politics, they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty.

They have enforced inhuman laws; they have set up three distinct political regimes in the North, the Centre, and the South of Vietnam in order to wreck our national unity and prevent our people from being united.

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[*] *Source:* Minh, Ho Chi. On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966. Ed. Bernard B. Fall. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967. pp. 143-145.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood.

They have fettered public opinion; they have practiced obscurantism against our people.

To weaken our race, they have forced us to use opium and alcohol.

In the field of economics, they have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people and devastated our land.

They have robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our raw materials. They have monopolized the issuing of bank-notes and the export trade.

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty.

They have hampered the prospering of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers.

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese fascists violated Indochina's territory to establish new bases in their fight against the Allies, the French imperialists went down on their bended knees and handed over our country to them.

Thus, from that date, our people were subjected to the double yoke of the French and Japanese. Their sufferings and miseries increased. The result was that from the end of last year to the beginning of this year, from Quang Tri province to the North of Vietnam, more than two millions of our fellow-citizens died from starvation. On the 9th of March, the French troops were disarmed by the Japanese. The French colonialists either fled or surrendered; showing that not only were they incapable of "protecting" us, but that, in the span of five years, they had twice sold our country to the Japanese.

On several occasions before the 9th of March, the Viet Minh League urged the French to ally themselves with it against the Japanese. Instead of agreeing to the proposal, the French colonialists so intensified their terrorist activities against the Viet Minh members that before fleeing they massacred a great number of our political prisoners detained at Yen Bay and Cao Bang.

Notwithstanding all this, our fellow citizens have always manifested towards the French a tolerant and humane attitude. Even after the Japanese putsch of March 1945, the Viet Minh League helped many Frenchmen to cross the frontier, rescued some of them from Japanese jails and protected French lives and property.

From the autumn of 1940, our country had in fact ceased to be a French colony and had become a Japanese possession.

After the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies, our whole people rose to regain our national sovereignty and to found the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam.

The truth is that we have wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French.

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries. In its place has been established the present Democratic Republic.

For these reasons we, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligations that France has so far subscribed to on

behalf of Viet Nam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland.

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country.

We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Viet Nam.

A people who have courageously opposed French domination for more than eighty years, a people who have fought side by side with the Allies against the fascists during these last years, such a people must be free and independent.

For these reasons we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, solemnly declare to the world that Viet Nam has the right to be a free and independent country- and in fact it is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

Hanoi, the Second of September 1945

HO CHI MINH, President

Tran Huy Lieu
Chu Van Tan
Duong Duc Hien
Nguyen Manh Ha
Pham Ngoc Thach
Vu Trong Khanh
Vu Dinh Hoe

Vo Nguyen Giap
Pham Van Dong
Ngyuen Van To
Cu Huy Can
Nguyen Van Xuan
Dao Trong Kim

Appendix II

Map of Colonial Vietnam



* *Source:* "Vietnam War Overview". *Voices Education Project*. n.d. *Web*. 5 April 2010. < http://www.voiceseducation.org/content/vietnam-war-overview>.

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