
The Coming of the West

The expansion of the Vietnamese nation to the south after the tenth century had made Vietnam one of the most powerful states in the region. But it also brought problems. The "March to the South" had led to the creation of an unwieldy kingdom difficult to defend against its external enemies. The new lands in the Mekong Delta were inhabited by settlers with a frontier spirit unwilling to accept dictation from the imperial court at Hanoi in the north. By the seventeenth century, factionalism at court led to a civil war and the division of Vietnam into two competing regions. Each was controlled by a princely family (the Trinh in the north

*"Blood is boiling in your heart
Countrymen! Draw forth your swords!
There is a heaven, earth and us.
That is what we call true unity!"*
Phan Boi Chau 19th century

and the Nguyen in the south) who competed for dominance over the almost dead Le dynasty.

Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, the split in the state took place at a time of growing pressure on the entire region from a new source. In the early sixteenth century, European explorers, merchant adventurers and missionaries came in increasing numbers after the discovery of the route to the East. By 1600, Portugal, Spain, Holland, Great Britain, and France had begun to compete for territory, trade, and Christian converts in the area. At first, the Vietnamese permitted Europeans to trade and propagate Christianity but soon came to suspect their political motivation. By 1700, little was left of the European presence but a handful of missionaries, mainly French, who secretly served the several hundred thousand Vietnamese who had converted to Catholicism.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the civil war which had divided Vietnam for nearly two hundred years came to an end. In 1802, Nguyen Anh, a prince of the Nguyen house in South Vietnam, united the entire country under his rule. He was assisted in his rise to

power by French adventurers, who hoped that the new ruler would grant France commercial and religious privileges in the newly united empire, now called Vietnam (Southern Viet). But the new emperor and his successor were still suspicious of the French and tried to exterminate what remained of missionary influence. They persecuted Vietnamese Christians and executed French priests caught propagating their religion on Vietnamese territory.

But the effort to isolate Vietnam from western influence was unsuccessful. Spurred by the need for industrial raw materials and markets for their manufactured goods, nations like France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States sought to open Asian countries to western commerce. The British, from their base in India, seized Burma and the Malayan peninsula. The Dutch consolidated their hold over the oil-rich East Indies. Fearful of being left out of the scramble for territory in Asia, France decided to establish a "balcony on the Pacific" in Vietnam. In 1858, a French fleet landed at Da Nang harbor, near the new imperial capital at Hue, and attempted to force the Vietnamese court to accept a French protectorate. French troops were weakened by disease and local resistance; however, the effort was soon abandoned. France now turned its attention further south and seized several provinces along the Mekong. In 1862, Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc signed a peace treaty ceding the southern provinces to the French. A year later the French added to their new possession, which they called Cochinchina, by establishing a protectorate over Cambodia.

Twenty years later, the French resumed their expansion in the area. On the pretext of protecting the

*"When the enemy comes
Even the women must fight"*
from the *Phu* 19th century

interests of French merchant adventurers operating in Hanoi, the French invaded the Red River Valley and in 1884 forced the Vietnamese emperor to accept a French protectorate over the remainder of the country. Within ten years, they added the tiny kingdom of Laos. To facilitate control, the entire region was organized into a single administrative unit called the Indochinese Union, directed by a French Governor-General appointed from Paris.



French Colonial Rule

The French justified their conquest of Indochina on the grounds that they had a “mission civilisatrice” (civilizing mission) in the region, a French equivalent of the famous “White Man’s Burden” which the British poet Rudyard Kipling had used to describe the obligation of the English speaking nations to bring civilization to the “backward” societies of Asia. Like all western countries, the French had come to the east primarily for political domination and economic profit. In nineteenth century Europe, national prestige and power were measured in terms of colonies held all over the globe. The United States joined the competition by seizing Cuba and the Philippines from Spain at the end of the century.

Admittedly, the French did provide a number of economic benefits to the Indochinese people under their charge. They drained the marshes of the Mekong Delta so the area could be cultivated and they built roads and railways. They also modernized Vietnamese political and social institutions and introduced the country to the expanding international economy. But France’s primary interest was commercial profit. The export of rubber, rice, and other cash crops put money in the pockets of French merchants. Indochina also provided

an export market for French goods like wine, textiles and manufactured goods. Michelin made its tires from raw rubber originally exported from the plantations located along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

What were the political effects of French colonial rule on the peoples of Indochina? As with most colonial enterprises, the results were mixed. The French asserted that their goal in Indochina was to provide the native people with “a perceptible extension of their political rights” in order to give them “the instrument of liberation which will gradually lead you toward those superior spheres to which you aspire.” The French administration did introduce the concept of the secret ballot and, over time, some of the institutions of representative government common to western societies.

But there was an inherent contradiction between carrying out such a civilizing mission while enjoying economic profit from their colonial possession. Certainly, the extension of political rights to the peoples of Indochina could only lead to a desire for national independence and the end of French colonial rule. Caught in this dilemma, French administrators said one thing and did another. They talked about native representation, but gave them few rights. Elected assemblies at the local level had only advisory powers and were based on a very restricted franchise that limited voting rights to French residents and a handful of wealthy natives.

Popular pressure led to a gradual expansion of representative institutions through the establishment of advisory assemblies at the provincial level. Yet even these new bodies were mainly "talking shops" which could voice complaints but not make policy. Openly opposing French rule or advocating independence was strictly prohibited and, when discovered, harshly punished.

The effects of French economic policy were equally harmful. The stated premise of French colonial rule was that western commercial and manufacturing practices would produce rapid economic growth. Eventually this was supposed to make Vietnam into a technologically advanced industrial society on the western model. In actuality, the primary objective of colonial policy was to provide cheap raw materials for French industry and a market for French manufactured goods. As a consequence, colonial policy actively discouraged the development of a manufacturing sector which would com-

available to the highest bidder, resulting in the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a small number of wealthy landlords. The poor were brought in as tenant farmers, but had to pay excessive rents to lease the land. Small private farmers were squeezed by high prices charged by Chinese rice millers and even higher interest rates to borrow money for the next year's harvest. The overall result was that while rice exports increased, per capita consumption stagnated and in some years even declined.

The Rise of Nationalism

How did the Vietnamese people react to French occupation? As we have seen, the imperial court had initially resisted French attacks at Da Nang and near the southern city of Saigon. But the ease of the French military conquest of the south made a strong impression on Emperor Tu Duc. Over the next two decades, the court at Hue attempted to conciliate the French in order to avoid further military conflict. After the French conquest of the north in 1884, some civilian and military officials attempted to rally support for guerrilla operations against French occupation forces. But without official support from the now powerless emperor in Hue, such operations had little success. By 1896, the first phase of anticolonial resistance had come to an end.

*"A nation without the power to rule
is like a child without a home ."*

Phan Boi Chau 19th century

pete with French imports. As one example, the Vietnamese were forbidden to produce local rice wine—often used for ritual purposes—which might compete with the import of French wines, made from grapes. Tariff policies favored the importation of cheap machine-made goods from France, a practice that starved out the traditional handicraft industry in Vietnamese villages.

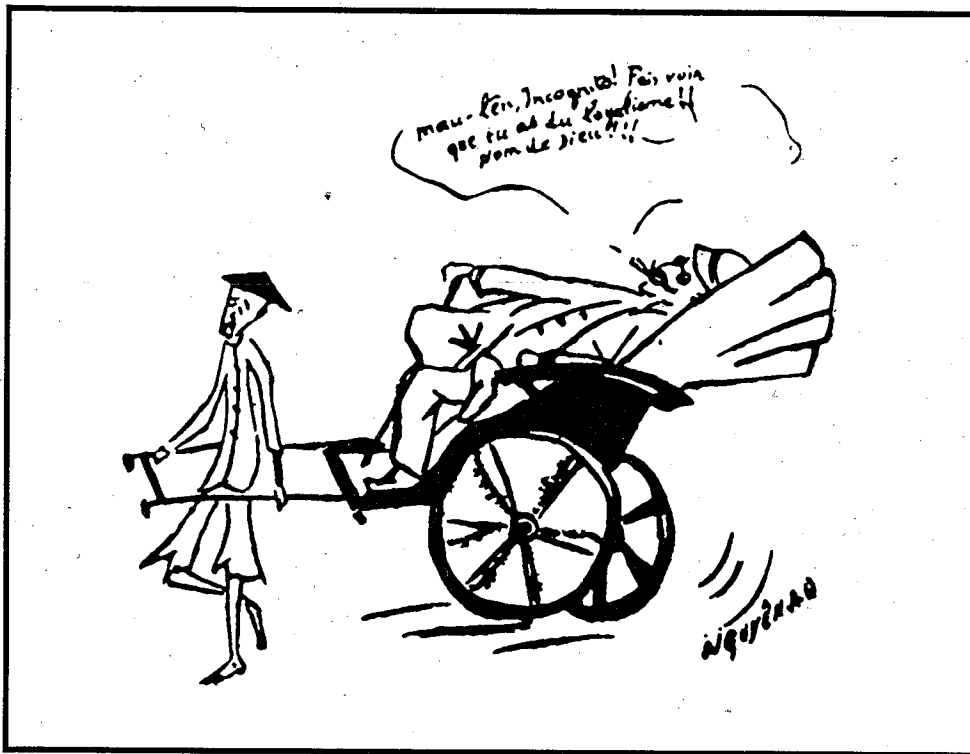
It is true that the export of raw materials provided profits for some residents of Indochina. Yet even here, the benefits to the local population were limited. Rubber plantations were owned primarily by Europeans. Vietnamese laborers recruited to work on the plantations received starvation wages and frequently died from poor sanitation conditions. Another example was the case of rice exports. Spokesmen for the colonial regime pointed proudly to the increase in rice production that had followed the draining of the marshes in the Mekong Delta. During the 1930s, Indochina became one of the world's primary rice exporting regions. But most of the profit went to European or overseas Chinese exporters rather than to Vietnamese farmers.

In the Mekong Delta, the new lands were made

*"We are not fighting
for freedom and independence.
We are fighting because
we are free and independent ."*

Student 20th century

With the opening of the new century, a new generation of Vietnamese began to take up the cause of Vietnamese independence. Unlike their predecessors, this new generation had no desire to return to the past. They were acquainted with the many benefits of western civilization through schooling or travel abroad. They aspired to restore Vietnamese independence while also creating a modern state built on the western or the Japanese model. At first, the leading members of



Cartoon drawn by Ho Chi Minh for the newspaper *Le Pariah* which he edited in Paris in the 1920s under the name of Nguyen Ai-Quoc.

Faster, Incognito! For God's sake, show a little loyalty!!!

this new nationalist movement were progressive members of the traditional Confucian scholar-official class. Soon, however, a sense of patriotism began to affect youth in the growing cities of Hanoi, Saigon, and Haiphong. While admiring the glitter of western science and democracy, many were intensely conscious of the humiliation of foreign rule. During the 1920s, this educated class of students, journalists, teachers, government workers, and small merchants began to form political organizations either to compel the French to grant political and social reforms or to drive the invaders from Vietnamese soil.

Parallel to this rising nationalism came a new awareness of the need to build a modern Vietnamese culture to replace the outmoded Sino-Vietnamese culture of the precolonial period. Spurred by French educational reforms, the traditional Confucian system was abandoned and replaced by one based on the western pattern. The old written language, based on the beautiful but cumbersome Chinese characters, gradually gave way to a new system based on the romanization of the spoken language (called quoc ngu, or national language). As a consequence of these

reforms, a new literature, art, and drama began to emerge. Western concepts such as the notion of individual freedom, political and economic equality, and women's rights began to win over increasing numbers of educated young Vietnamese.

By the mid-1920s, this new political activism began to shake the stability of French rule. Popular demonstrations, often led by disaffected students in large cities, provoked severe repression by the colonial regime. Secret political parties like the VNQDD (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) attempted to organize resistance to colonial rule. Unfortunately, many of these organizations were divided over tactics and unable to overcome regional differences between north and south. More important, most such organizations were composed primarily of urban middle class intellectuals who had little understanding of the problems and aspirations of factory workers, plantation laborers or peasants who made up the vast majority of the population. As a result, the program of such parties tended to concentrate on political issues such as freedom of speech and assembly and greater representation for natives in legislative councils. More basic concerns were ignored, including land re-

form, improving work conditions, and reducing the high rents and taxes that caused severe hardships for many Vietnamese farmers.

It was in this context that the young revolutionary Ho Chi Minh returned from Europe to south China. Ho Chi Minh had been born in Central Vietnam in 1890, the son of a Vietnamese official who had resigned from the imperial bureaucracy to protest the French conquest. Ho Chi Minh's father was a close friend of several of the early patriots who opposed French rule. From his childhood, the young Ho had absorbed tales of Vietnamese heroism against the nation's historical and modern enemies.

In 1911, after several years of schooling in the imperial capital at Hue, Ho accepted employment as a cook's helper on a French ocean liner. In his several years at sea, he visited ports all over the world. Thereafter, he worked briefly in the kitchen of a luxury hotel in London and then, at the end of World War I, he went to Paris. At that time the leaders of the victorious allied powers, including Great Britain, France and the United States were meeting at the Palace of Versailles to dictate

peace terms to the defeated Germans. Taking the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), Ho Chi Minh submitted a petition to the allied leaders asking that the concept of self-determination, one of the key planks in President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, be applied to Indochina in order to free Vietnam from French rule. The petition was ignored, but it brought much attention to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnamese exile circles in France.

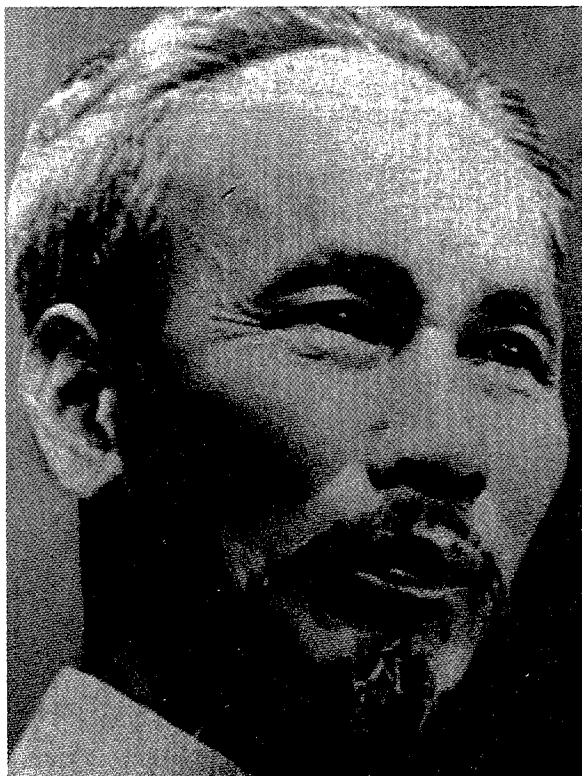
For the next few years, Ho Chi Minh became increasingly active in radical circles in Paris and, in 1920, was a founding member of the French Communist Party. As one of the most effective publicists and organizers in the Party, Ho soon came to the attention of leading members of the Communist International, an organization of communist parties directed by the Soviet Union. They invited Ho to Moscow to train as an agent. In 1924, after a year working and studying Marxist doctrine, he was sent to south China as a member of a mission to the government of Sun Yat-Sen. Although his assigned duty was to serve as an interpreter with the mission, Ho's real task was to help organize the first revolutionary movement in Indochina.

Ho immediately set to work attracting support from patriotic young Vietnamese living in exile in south China. First he formed a small organization called the Revolutionary Youth League, assigning recruits to training in communist doctrine and tactics in Canton, and then sending them back to Vietnam to find more recruits to organize a revolutionary movement. On the surface, the League sought to cooperate with other nationalist organizations. In actuality, Ho viewed the other parties as rivals and attempted to lure their members into his own organization.

By the end of 1929, the League had over 1,000 members and had become one of the most effective anticolonial parties in Indochina. One reason for its rapid success was Ho Chi Minh himself. Hard-working, self-sacrificing, gifted with an attractive personality, he earned the allegiance and devotion of many young patriotic Vietnamese who rushed to join his cause. Ho Chi Minh also appealed to the needs and aspirations of poor peasants and workers. In the late 1920s, the Vietnamese economy was severely hurt by the onset of the Great Depression. Unemployment rose and the price of rice fell drastically, causing a significant decline in the standard of living.

In February 1930, just as a major revolt broke out

Ho Chi Minh





These men in stocks were part of a 1908 plot to poison French officers of the Hanoi garrison and take control of the city.

among desperate peasants and workers in several provinces in central Vietnam, Ho transformed the League into a formal Indochinese Communist Party. Party activists supported the revolt, but the French reacted quickly and put down the uprising. Most of the leaders of the Communist Party were arrested, and many were executed. Ho Chi Minh himself was arrested and briefly imprisoned by the British in the colony of Hong Kong.

For the next few years, the Communist Party struggled to survive. Harassed by French agents, it established its headquarters in south China with new leaders trained in Moscow. Party members turned Vietnamese prisons into "schools of Bolshevism" as they taught other prisoners about Marxism and attempted to enlist them in the revolution.

The party began to revive in the late 1930s when the Soviet government, fearful of the rising threat of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany, encouraged communist parties around the world to cooperate with all parties and governments that opposed world fascism. When the French Communist Party supported the government in Paris, the latter became more tolerant of communist and nationalist activities in Indochina and its other colonies. The Indochinese Communist Party took advantage of the situation by setting up various types of

self-help organizations in villages, schools, and factories. This period of toleration came to an end in August 1939, when the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. The French outlawed the Communist Party, and its leaders fled to the hills for survival.

The decisive event for the future of communism in Vietnam was the coming of the Second World War. In 1940, Japan demanded the right to station troops in French Indochina and use the area's natural resources. After a brief refusal, France agreed in return for Japanese recognition of continued French sovereignty over the area. But with Japanese occupation and the collapse of French resistance to Hitler in Europe, colonial authority in Indochina was severely weakened.

Under the cover of these events, the Communist Party began to organize a revolution to seize power at the end of the war. In 1940, Ho Chi Minh returned to south China after spending several years in the Soviet Union. In May 1941, a meeting of the top leadership of the Party launched a new movement to struggle for national independence. At the head of this movement was a new political organization called the Vietminh Front, or League of Independence of Vietnam. The Vietminh Front was set up by the Indochinese Commu-

nist Party, but its program emphasized issues such as national independence and moderate political and economic reform in order to broaden its appeal to all Vietnamese individuals and groups opposed to French colonial rule in Vietnam. As a result, it earned the support and participation of many Vietnamese who were motivated by patriotic aspirations rather than a desire to create a communist society.

During the next four years the Communist Party and its parallel organization, the Vietminh Front, attempted to organize a political network throughout the country while preparing guerrilla forces in the mountains of North Vietnam for an uprising planned for the end of the war. In March 1945, facing imminent defeat at the hands of the allied powers, Japan seized power in Indochina from the French, leaving the countryside almost wholly without colonial administration. This aided the Vietminh cause immensely. Vietnam also was struck by a disastrous famine that caused the death of over a million people. The Japanese forbade relief work and the French did nothing. However, the Vietminh confiscated rice stocks and helped the starving, further promoting their cause. The Vietminh had by now become widely recognized as the primary political force fighting for national independence and social justice in Vietnam.

The August Revolution

On August 14, soon after the dropping of two atomic bombs by the United States and a declaration of war by the Soviet Union, Japan surrendered. Ho Chi Minh took advantage of the sudden political vacuum and called for a general uprising to seize power from Japanese troops throughout Indochina. Guerrilla forces seized villages. They set up a revolutionary administration in the rural areas. Special units of workers and students took control of key installations from the Japanese authorities in the cities. In early September, in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the formation of a new provisional Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with himself as president. The communists were the dominant force in the new government, but it was supported by many Vietnamese patriots and included members of several non-communist parties.

But the French were not ready to accept the loss of their most valuable possession in Asia. According to arrangements made by the victorious allies, occupation forces from Great Britain and the Republic of China were instructed to occupy the southern and northern

*"Guns and bombs are not
our way of life.*

We have never been friends of war.

But here they are, fully armed.

Shall we resign ourselves to slavery?"

Thanh Hai 20th century

halves of Indochina in order to accept the surrender of Japanese troops and maintain law and order until civil government could be restored. In the north, Ho Chi Minh's government was able to maintain a precarious authority by conciliating Chinese occupation forces and sharing power with non-communist parties. But in the south, the British commander agreed to assist the French in restoring colonial authority. Within two months, French troops had driven the Vietminh and other nationalist elements out of Saigon and restored control over the southern provinces of Vietnam.

By late fall of 1945, Vietnam was divided into two hostile regimes—the Vietminh in the north and the French in the south. In an effort to avoid conflict, the two sides opened negotiations. In early March 1946, Ho Chi Minh and the French representative in Vietnam, Jean Sainteny, reached a preliminary agreement according to which France recognized the DRV as a "free state" with its own parliament, army, and finances. In return, the economic, military, and cultural presence of the French was to be restored in the north. Because the two sides could not agree on the fate of the ex-French colony of Cochinchina, the decision was left to a popular referendum.

This agreement laid the basis for a possible compromise: autonomy for Vietnam and a continued French presence in the area. But the course of events was to lead in the opposite direction—a collapse of the agreement and, eventually, to war. In Paris, the new government that took over in the spring was not inclined to compromise with the Vietnamese. When formal negotiations got underway in June, the French refused to agree to a referendum in Cochinchina; and the peace talks broke

down. At the last minute, Ho Chi Minh negotiated a compromise calling for the resumption of negotiations early the following year.

Back in Vietnam, relations between the French and the DRV became increasingly tense, leading to bloody clashes between military forces on each side. Within the Vietnamese government in Hanoi, the delicate balance between communists and non-communists was upset; and in October Ho Chi Minh reconstituted the cabinet. The DRV was now totally under the domination of the Indochinese Communist Party. In November, a disagreement over the control of customs revenues led the French to bombard the port city of Haiphong, killing thousands of Vietnamese civilians. Convinced that war was inevitable, Ho Chi Minh instructed his Minister of Defense, Vo Nguyen Giap, to



prepare for armed conflict. On December 23, Vietminh forces launched a surprise attack on French installations in Hanoi while their main force units withdrew to prepared positions in the mountains north of the city. The first Indochina War had begun.



"At the center of Vietnamese history stood the peasant, grim and heroic defender of the land bequeathed by his ancestors against foreign aggressors, but also periodically rising up against the home rulers, in an endless revolt."

Nguyen Khac Vien
20th century