

# **The Origins of the Vietnam War**

## **1945-1948**

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L'anti-communisme sera un levier sans appui aussi longtemps que le problème national n'aura pas été résolu.

— GÉNÉRAL LECLERC, 1947

Although several years have passed since the end of America's involvement in Vietnam, this war remains a highly controversial subject about which great reservoirs of heated emotion are easily let loose. No consensus has been reached concerning the lessons American foreign policy should have learned from this experience, and perhaps more important, how such situations should be approached in the future. Indeed, the dialogue on Vietnam that has taken place among political leaders, scholars, and the public at large has scarcely touched upon this issue at all, but has instead focused upon the question of which segment of American society's actions were justified at the time and which were not. Most recently, the study by Peter Braestrup, entitled *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, has drawn the conclusion that the American military actually won the Tet offensive, but the media unjustifiably portrayed it as a defeat. Others, such as Robert Gallucci in his book *Neither Peace Nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam*, have described how the Pentagon continually claimed that the war was being won in Vietnam when actually it was being lost. In short, the dialogue on Vietnam that has taken place since the war has been primarily a restatement by various people of the same views they held during the war.

Little rational consideration has been given to what the nature of the conflict in Vietnam was, and to what the goals of all the major actors involved in the drama were. The nature of what was at stake in the war was at the time, and still is, known only in the vaguest terms. Part of the reason for this is that the adversary powers did very little talking to one another, the Geneva negotiations of 1954 and the Paris peace talks of the late 1960's and early 1970's notwithstanding. As a result, neither the French govern-

ment nor the American government understood until too late what the source of the Vietnamese communists' strength was, and consequently, why the Western powers could not defeat them. In addition, both liberals and conservatives alike in America viewed the goals of not only Ho Chi Minh's government as rigid and uncompromising, but also those of the Soviet Union, China, France, and even the United States as single-minded in their opposing purposes.

An examination of the early years of this conflict, however, reveals more about its nature because all of the actors involved were much more flexible in their positions during the years 1945 through 1948 when the postwar international order was still evolving and uncertain than in the years after when the Cold War dominated the relations of all nations. In 1945, the basic conflict that existed was one of contending nationalisms between France wanting to reassert itself as a great power and the Viet Minh seeking independence. At the time, though, it was expected that a negotiated settlement could be reached between France and the Viet Minh. It also seemed highly doubtful that the Soviet Union would support Ho Chi Minh or that the United States would oppose him. By 1948, however, the conflict had largely evolved into the form it was to remain until weariness of the war made first France and then the United States withdraw from it. Before these later events occurred, though, France by 1948 was determined to reestablish its control of Vietnam by force, the Viet Minh was determined to win Vietnamese independence also by force, and the United States was convinced that the Viet Minh was completely dominated by Moscow and therefore had to be opposed.

How did this situation come about? The best way to examine this question is to look at the varying interests and goals of each of the major actors in the Vietnam conflict with regard to their changing expectations during the crucial years from 1945 to 1948. An examination will be made of the actions during this period not only of the Viet Minh, France, and the United States, but also of Japan, China, and the USSR.

### JAPAN

Wherever the Japanese had invaded a European colony in Asia and defeated the colonial power, their action gave a tremendous impetus to national liberation movements, for the Japanese

victory proved that European colonial powers could be defeated by Asians. Nowhere was this truer than in Vietnam where the French capitulated to the Japanese without a struggle. Shortly after the French agreed to Japanese overlordship of Indochina in 1941, the Viet Minh was formed.

The Japanese, though, were uninterested in governing Indochina and were concerned only with the strategic and economic gains that the region could offer. Only 35,000 Japanese soldiers were stationed in Indochina throughout the war, primarily in the larger cities.<sup>1</sup> Administration was left to the French who were charged with maintaining order. This task, however, proved difficult because the Viet Minh launched major rebellions in the autumn of 1943 and 1944.<sup>2</sup>

With the American recapture of the Philippines, the Japanese feared that all of their conquests would soon be lost. They decided, then, to make the return of the Western powers to Asia as difficult as possible, if not impossible, by establishing indigenous nationalist movements as full-fledged national governments that could hopefully organize successful resistance against the colonial powers. The Japanese also hoped that these struggling national governments fighting the Europeans would have to seek support from Japan and thereby provide a basis for an eventual return of their influence; they did not yet realize how totally Japan was to be defeated.

Thus, on 9 March 1945, when the French were about to launch their final drive to put down the Viet Minh rebellion that had begun the previous autumn, the Japanese attacked all French positions in Indochina. Nearly all the French forces were imprisoned, and the rest were forced to flee. An independent national government was formed under the leadership of Emperor Bao Dai in Hué, and the Viet Minh quickly seized most of the countryside.<sup>3</sup> However, it soon became apparent that Bao Dai's government would not be capable of organizing major resistance while Ho Chi Minh's could. Therefore in August 1945, the Japanese began to turn their weapons over to the Viet Minh. On 25 August, Bao Dai abdicated and charged the Viet Minh with forming a government. With Japanese consent, Ho declared in-

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris, 1952), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-113.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-25.

dependence 2 September and declared the foundation of the Democratic Republic.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Japanese were instrumental not only in expanding the power of the Viet Minh as a national liberation movement but also in establishing it as a functioning national government before the French returned to Vietnam.

#### CHINA

Throughout World War II, the Kuomintang had an ambivalent attitude toward the Viet Minh. On the one hand, the Viet Minh was feared for its communist orientation, while on the other, the KMT wanted to support any group that could cause enough trouble to keep the Japanese and the French occupied in Vietnam. This ambivalence led to seemingly contradictory actions; while Ho Chi Minh was incarcerated in a Chinese prison from 1942 to 1943, from 1943 to 1945 he was sent back to Vietnam and given both arms and money for the rebellions launched in 1943 and 1944.<sup>5</sup>

The KMT government also had designs upon Indochina after the war which they pursued with varying degrees of vigorousness. Above all, the Chinese wanted to prevent the return of the French to Indochina and to establish Chinese influence there instead, if not outright control. To this end, the KMT tried to get the Allies to agree upon allowing China to accept the Japanese surrender in Indochina, thus permitting China to station troops and maintain order in the region. The French, of course, opposed this, and while Roosevelt had also wanted to prevent the French from returning, it was agreed at Potsdam after his death to divide the region at the 16th parallel and permit the Chinese to take charge temporarily north of it and the British south of it.<sup>6</sup>

The British supported the French desire to return to Indochina, for if the French return was blocked by the Allies, Britain's own position in the Far East would be vulnerable to a similar challenge. Hence, very shortly after British troops were sent to Saigon in September 1945, they returned the administration to the French, allowed the French Army in, and quickly withdrew.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese behaved quite differently. During September

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137-43.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Lacouture, *Cinq hommes et la France* (Paris, 1961), p. 37-39.

<sup>6</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, pp. 144-50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

1945, 180,000 Chinese troops entered northern Vietnam, and the Chinese displayed no willingness to allow the French to return. The warlords in charge of the KMT operation, Lu Han and Siao Wen, appeared to want to remain in Vietnam permanently, and in the larger cities, they established a particularly rapacious regime.<sup>8</sup>

When the Chinese first entered, they decided that they would no longer support the Viet Minh, but would instead establish their own nationalist government composed of groups dependent on the KMT. By January 1946, however, it was clear that these KMT-sponsored groups were unable to organize large-scale resistance to the French while the Viet Minh could. Under pressure from the Allies to withdraw from Vietnam soon, and needing the troops to fight Mao's guerillas, the KMT decided that it was necessary to work with the Viet Minh if resistance to the French was to be conducted successfully.<sup>9</sup>

The Vietnamese experience of conflict with the Chinese was centuries longer than that of conflict with the French. As a result of the basic hostility that the Vietnamese felt for the Chinese, and the particularly repressive nature of KMT occupation, the Viet Minh's primary goal during this period was to rid themselves of the Chinese. Moreover, Ho Chi Minh was willing to cooperate with the French in order to do so. Hence, on 16 February 1946, much to the warlords' chagrin, Ho announced that he was willing to accept independence within the French Union.<sup>10</sup>

Vietnam, however, was of lesser importance to Chiang Kai-shek's government in Chungking than it was to the warlords in Hanoi. Thus, on 28 February 1946, the KMT government signed a treaty with France in which the French agreed to give up all the concessions they held in China in exchange for the French Army being allowed to return to northern Vietnam and the Chinese troops withdrawing by 31 March, pending an accord between chiefs of staff regulating the transfer of power. This latter accord, though, was never signed, and when the impatient French Army landed at Haiphong on 6 March, a battle broke out between the Chinese and French forces.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-93.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213-18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219-25.

On the pretext of the chiefs of staff accord never having been signed, the Chinese did not fully withdraw until September 1946. Throughout this period, the Chinese attempted to incite the French and the Viet Minh against each other in order to make a negotiated settlement between them impossible so that the Viet Minh would be forced to turn to China for support.<sup>12</sup> The most serious of these incidents occurred on 8 August 1946, when the Chinese provoked a fight at the customhouse in Haiphong. The Viet Minh had been operating this facility since the previous year and derived much of its revenue from it. The French seized the customhouse in ending the fight, and the French administration in Saigon decided to retain it indefinitely.<sup>13</sup> The Viet Minh government was thus deprived of a major source of its income and the incident contributed to the breakdown of the French-Viet Minh negotiations then taking place at Fontainebleau. Thus, while the KMT was unable to maintain its influence in Vietnam, its attempts to do so aggravated the tensions between the Viet Minh and the French which hindered their efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement.

#### VIET MINH

The Viet Minh was formed in 1941 as a united front movement open to all nationalist parties, although it was largely dominated by the Indochinese communist party. The Viet Minh had a three-point program which hoped to achieve: (1) expulsion of the French and the Japanese and creation of an independent Vietnam; (2) alliance with all countries fighting fascism and colonialism, including the United States and KMT China; and (3) establishment of a democratic republic that would redistribute the land, grant universal suffrage, protect minorities, and guarantee other rights. No other nationalist movement developed a program beyond independence.<sup>14</sup>

It is not coincidental that the Viet Minh was the only nationalist movement able to carry out large-scale operations within Vietnam during the Japanese occupation. The policy of land redistribution was highly instrumental in gaining support for the Viet Minh in the countryside. The pattern of landholdings was extremely skewed in Vietnam with a minority of rich landlords

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 287-88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.98-100.

owning large estates and the majority of peasants subsisting on small plots which they rented. This was especially true in Tonkin where 60 percent of the peasants held less than 0.9 acres and it was estimated that 2.5 to 5 acres were needed to adequately support a peasant family.<sup>15</sup> In offering the force that was needed to dispossess the large landholder which would allow the redistribution of the land, the Viet Minh was able to rally the peasantry to its cause and gain a large basis of domestic support that no other group was able to obtain. A large number of landlords were alienated in the process, and this group formed the basis for the successive Vietnamese governments in Saigon. However, the fear of this group returning and reclaiming its land made the peasants rely all the more on the Viet Minh to protect their gains.

While there was strong internal support for the Viet Minh government established in September 1945, external support was lacking and so Ho Chi Minh attempted to gain recognition from the great powers. However, by January 1946 it was clear that the Soviet Union was ignoring Ho, the British sided with the French, and the KMT had its own aggressive ambitions in Vietnam. The United States had expressed some interest, but its attention was focused elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> In July 1945, Ho sent an aide-mémoire to Paris offering to allow a French governor to rule with an elected parliament in Vietnam if the French would agree to grant independence to Vietnam within five to ten years.<sup>17</sup> While de Gaulle rejected this proposal, as he had no intention of granting independence to any of the colonies then, the leftist victory in the French national election of January 1946 gave Ho renewed hope for a negotiated settlement.

In the three French elections of January, June and November 1946, the Left made strong gains, especially the Communist party. The expectation that Ho Chi Minh, and almost everyone else at the time, held was that the PCF would increase even further its electoral strength and eventually become the leading party in the French government. Ho had been one of the founders of the PCF, knew all its leaders well, and naturally thought that once they came to power, he would easily be able to reach an agree-

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Firth, "The Peasantry of South East Asia," *International Affairs* (London) 26 (October 1950), 503-514.

<sup>16</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, pp. 202-204.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Sainteny, *Histoire d'une paix manquée: Indochine 1945-1947* (Paris, 1953), p. 57.

ment that would grant all the Viet Minh's demands. While waiting for this to occur, Ho would enter into negotiations with the French reaching provisional agreements that would not meet all the Viet Minh's demands but would keep the negotiations going until more favorable times and thereby avoid a military conflict.

Nevertheless, there were certain minimum demands that Ho strove to obtain French agreement on, if only to retain the support of the Viet Minh which was impatient to achieve the aspirations it had been fighting for. Among these were recognition of Vietnamese independence, along with all this implied in terms of internal autonomy in the military, political, and economic fields as well as diplomatic freedom externally, and equally important, the reunification of all of Vietnam. In the provisional French-Vietnamese accord of 6 March 1946, it was agreed that (1) France recognized Vietnam as a "free state" within the French Union and the Indochina Federation, and that unification of Vietnam would be decided by referendum; (2) the Vietnamese government would allow the French Army north of the 16th parallel subject to certain restrictions to be spelled out elsewhere, and (3) a cease-fire would come into effect throughout all Vietnam and negotiations for a final settlement between the two governments would begin soon.<sup>18</sup> Protocols of 6 March and 3 April governing the number and disposition of French troops called for a limit of 15,000 French soldiers north of the 16th parallel, notification to the Vietnamese government of all French troop movements, and scheduled to gradual reduction of French forces over a five-year period to be replaced by the Vietnamese Army.<sup>19</sup>

This agreement was highly ambiguous and allowed both sides to interpret it differently, leading to diverging expectations on the part of both the French and the Vietnamese. While Ho had not been able to obtain French recognition of Vietnamese independence, he had won recognition as a "free state," and the right to have the most important attribute of sovereignty, an army. While the Viet Minh was prepared to accept association with the French Union as a condition for a peaceful withdrawal by the French, this association was not envisioned to be any greater than that of Britain to the Commonwealth. As far as the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182-83.

<sup>19</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, pp. 225-26, 250.



Indochina Federation was concerned, the Viet Minh understood this to be an organization overseeing certain functional services, such as mail and other communications, that might usefully be continued on a larger scale; no higher political functions would be part of its responsibility. The French, however, understood the terms of this agreement to mean something quite different. The phrase "free state" only meant autonomy in internal affairs. France was to retain control of both defense and foreign affairs. Further, the Indochina Federation was to be a higher political authority controlled by France over the national governments.

The extent to which both governments interpreted differently these accords was first realized at the preliminary negotiations held at Dalat, Vietnam, between representatives of the French High Commission in Saigon and the Viet Minh from 17 April to 11 May 1946. The most important issue, though, only the resolution of which would allow the resolution of all other issues, was the question of reunification. When the conference opened, the Vietnamese requested that Cochinchina be placed first on the agenda. The French delegation refused; while France had established a protectorate over Annam and Tonkin during the nineteenth century, a colony had been established in Cochinchina, and it was now claimed by the French that Cochinchina could not be transferred constitutionally without the approval of the National Assembly in Paris and then a referendum. As a consequence, the conference ended with nothing agreed upon.<sup>20</sup>

Ho Chi Minh hoped that more could be obtained from negotiations with the national French government, which began at Fontainebleau on 6 July 1946. The agenda for the conference adopted 9 July comprised five points: (1) integration of Vietnam in the French Union and diplomatic relations; (2) the role of the Indochina Federation; (3) reunification of the three Kys and the referendum for Cochinchina; (4) economic problems, and (5) the drafting of a final treaty.<sup>21</sup> Again, the question of reunification proved to be the greatest stumbling block, and as a consequence no other question could be resolved either. Meanwhile, events took place that threatened to end all negotiations permanently. On 31 May, the French High Commissioner in Saigon, Admiral d'Argenlieu, had without permission from Paris recognized

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-66.

<sup>21</sup> Sainteny, *Indochine 1945-1947*, pp. 203-205.

Cochin-China Republic in the name of the French government (the movement for a separate Cochin-China came primarily from the French planters and administration to retain local French control of this one region that had been most heavily colonized).<sup>22</sup> The customs house in Haiphong was seized 8 August, and at the beginning of the same month the Saigon administration sent French troops north of the 16th parallel to occupy areas populated by minorities traditionally hostile to the Vietnamese.<sup>23</sup>

With relations between the French and Vietnamese delegations now quite strained, the Interministerial Committee on Indochina met from 10 to 12 August to consider what offer the French could make to end the deadlock. This offer was presented to the Vietnamese 14 August after approval by the Council of Ministers: the Indochina Federation would be limited to dealing with certain economic, financial, and technical matters, but as far as the French Union was concerned, diplomacy was to be controlled by the French and defense was to be governed by a mixed Franco-Vietnamese military staff. Finally, a referendum would be held in Cochin-China "as soon as public order is reestablished."<sup>24</sup> On 25 August, Ho indicated that he would accept these terms provisionally if a date for the Cochin-China referendum was set. The debate that ensued in the Assembly, however, made it clear that the Right would block any attempt either to grant independence or relinquish Cochin-China, and that only increased parliamentary strength of the Left could overcome this.<sup>25</sup>

Disgusted, the Viet Minh delegation left France in early September without Ho. New parliamentary elections, though, were to be held in France on 10 November, and Ho, like almost everyone else, was sure that the Left would win a large victory and that a government would be formed that included the French Communist party (PCF). Ho, then, remained in Paris until 14 September when he signed a *modus vivendi* with the French government in which the French agreed to resume negotiations no later than January 1947 in exchange for the protection of French economic and cultural interests and a cease-fire below the 16th parallel.<sup>26</sup> Although this agreement outraged the Viet Minh,

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<sup>22</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, pp. 269-70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

<sup>26</sup> Sainteny, *Indochine 1945-1947*, pp. 208-209; 248-52.

Ho was certain that once a government of the Left took power, a negotiated settlement of Vietnamese terms would quickly be reached. Peace or war in Vietnam now depended on the outcome of the internal political struggle in France.

#### THE SOVIET UNION

It was mentioned before that by January 1946, Ho had concluded that the Soviet Union was ignoring his request for recognition. This was not because the Soviet leadership did not know about Ho; indeed, Ho had spent several years in Moscow before the war and the Soviets were well aware of both his and the Viet Minh's operations. The fact is that the Soviet leaders chose to ignore Ho deliberately at this time, as they had more important goals in Europe that support of the Viet Minh might have endangered.

After World War II, France did not immediately seek to ally with the United States and Great Britain, but chose to remain neutral and hoped to play the role of a great power. The possibility existed that France might ally with the Soviet Union against the Anglo-Saxons, and the Soviets did not want to jeopardize this possibility through alienating the French by supporting the Viet Minh resistance to the French return to Indochina.<sup>27</sup> In addition, France was the only Western power that supported the Soviet Union in calling for a harsh settlement in Germany. This was crucial to the Soviets since they wanted to prevent by all means a third German invasion of Russia. The Soviets saw French support as essential in preventing a rearmed Germany from rising up and, again, did not wish to jeopardize this through supporting the Viet Minh.

Finally, the Soviets also expected the electoral strength of the PCF to grow and that eventually it would become the leading power in the government. However, in order for the PCF to gain such support, it had to support certain policies that nearly all Frenchmen, including the average worker, supported. Among these were the reestablishment of France as a great power and the reestablishment of the empire. Since the Soviets wanted the PCF to come to power, they could not afford to let the communists' popularity to fall through supporting the Viet Minh.<sup>28</sup> Even after

<sup>27</sup> J. H. Brimmell, *Communism in South East Asia: A Political Analysis* (London, 1959), p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> J. Frankel, "Soviet Policy in South East Asia," in Max Beloff, *Soviet Policy in the Far East 1944-1951* (London, 1953), pp. 224-25.

the PCF left the government in May 1947, the Soviet Union still believed that the PCF would eventually gain power. For as President Auriol recorded in his memoirs, the PCF was not thrown out of the government, but withdrew from it deliberately over the wage policy question hoping that it would eventually return with even stronger electoral support to pursue its own policies.<sup>29</sup>

By 1948, when the chances of the PCF coming to power seemed to be permanently lost through its declining electoral strength, another reason had developed for the Soviets not to support the Viet Minh. Tito had shown that an independent communist movement could successfully defy the Soviet Union and pursue a foreign policy in its own country's national interests. Immediately, Stalin began to take a dim view of other independent communist movements. Most notably, in 1948 he directed Mao to end the civil war in China and take part in a coalition government with Chiang Kai-shek. Even when the United States began to provide large-scale assistance to the French military effort in Vietnam, the Soviets still did not support Ho and continued not to until 1950.<sup>30</sup> Thus, contrary to French and American claims that the Viet Minh was only powerful insofar as it received support from the Soviet Union, in reality the Viet Minh became powerful during these early years despite the USSR and its basis of support was almost entirely domestic.

#### FRANCE

Nearly all French political parties, both of the Right and of the Left, agreed upon three basic elements of an external policy that was supported by the general public: (1) Germany was to be divided and weakened; (2) France was to be a great power, and (3) the empire was to be reestablished.<sup>31</sup> The PCF before 1948 especially promoted such an external policy, for it had to do this in order to regain its nationalist credentials after it had taken a pro-German position following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Many statements were made supporting the continuation of the French position in Vietnam, such as, "The national interest

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<sup>29</sup> Vincent Auriol, *Journal du Septennat 1947-1954; Tome I—1947* (Paris, 1970), pp. 212-217.

<sup>30</sup> Guy J. Pauker, *The Soviet Union and Southeast Asia: RAND P-5080* (Santa Monica, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Aron, *L'âge des empires et l'avenir de la France* (Paris, 1946), pp. 349-50.

demands the maintenance of French influence and positions in the Far East.”<sup>32</sup> Though willing to promote a ministerial crisis and leave the government in May 1947 over the wage policy question, with regard to military credits for the war in Vietnam, Jacques Duclos stated, “The communist ministers, through not breaking ministerial solidarity, have shown to what point the Communist Party cares for the interests of the country and has an acute sense of its responsibilities.”<sup>33</sup> These statements are relatively mild compared to the ones made by the PCF demanding the maintenance of the French position in North Africa, especially Algeria.<sup>34</sup>

The only major party that did not at first agree with this external policy was the Socialist party, which called for a more lenient settlement on Germany, did not wish to waste resources on the military in attempting to be a great power, and was anticolonial. In the election of 2 June 1946, the Socialists were, as a result, the only party of the Left to lose ground.<sup>35</sup> It was thus made clear by the electorate that the Left could only support the Viet Minh to a limited extent and still retain power. The difference that developed between the Right and the Left over Vietnam after this was only a matter of degree; while the Right wanted to give Vietnam as little autonomy as possible and not negotiate with the Viet Minh, the Left was willing to grant relatively more autonomy and include Ho among those whom the French would negotiate a settlement with.

In addition, the Fourth Republic, both in its provisional and constitutional forms, had a weak executive; much to the chagrin of de Gaulle, the French electorate voted on 13 October 1946 strongly in favor of a constitution establishing a near-powerless president.<sup>36</sup> But with the tremendous diversity of political views held in France, and thereby reflected in the Assembly, a consensus over any important issue was extremely difficult to achieve in parliament, and indeed, an attempt to do so could lead to a political crisis of such dimensions which no party wanted to face often. Consequently, major questions could only rarely be brought before the Assembly. As a result of the weakness of both the executive and the legislature, the permanent bureaucracy was

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Jacob Moneta, *La politique du Parti communiste français dans la question coloniale 1920-1963* (Paris, 1971), p. 158.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, p. 289.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

often able to both initiate and enforce policy according to its own special interests. This proved to be especially true of the army and the French High Commission in Saigon who were for the most part determined to maintain a strong, permanent French influence throughout all of Indochina.

French High Commissioner d'Argenlieu and General Valluy, commander of the French forces in Indochina, also believed that a victory of the Left at the polls in November 1946 would lead to a negotiated settlement with the Viet Minh, and the loss of French authority. They therefore worked to subvert this effort by creating conditions in which negotiations would be impossible. On 20 November, conflict erupted between French and Vietnamese soldiers over the customhouse in Haiphong, but by the end of the day the local authorities on both sides agreed to a cease-fire and the return of both sides to their encampments in the city. When news of the incident reached Saigon, though, General Valluy ordered that the French demand the complete withdrawal of the Viet Minh from Haiphong and that the French be allowed total liberty to station troops there. When the Vietnamese refused on 23 November, Valluy ordered the French to drive out the Vietnamese by force, which they did.<sup>37</sup> The Vietnamese immediately became suspicious of French intentions, and when the latter steadily built up their forces in and around Hanoi during December, the Viet Minh leadership believed that the Haiphong incident was about to be repeated. The Viet Minh, then, attacked the French on 19 December in order to prevent this.<sup>38</sup> The French military and civil administration seized upon this incident to demand that all negotiations with Ho cease and that a military solution favorable to France be imposed.<sup>39</sup>

The new government in Paris and the Viet Minh still hoped to achieve a negotiated settlement. On 5 March 1947, Admiral d'Argenlieu, who had become increasingly vocal in describing the conflict as an anticommunist one, was replaced by the Radical Bollaert. The same month, Socialist Prime Minister Ramadier offered to renew negotiations leading to peace and independence within the French Union, which Ho accepted. In order to prevent this, however, General Valluy demanded provisions that the Viet Minh could not possibly accept: 50 percent of the Viet Minh's

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 335-37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 349-57.

<sup>39</sup> Général Jean Marchand, *Le drame indochinois* (Paris, 1953), p. 10.

arms were to be turned over to the French Army, and the latter was to be allowed free movement behind Vietnamese lines.<sup>40</sup> Either this demand was supported by the government in Paris or it was too weak to prevent it from becoming part of its formal position, for on 12 May negotiator Paul Mus sent from Paris presented it as a condition that must be met before the French government agreed to an armistice; Ho, of course, refused.<sup>41</sup>

The debate that ensued in France until September 1947 was whether to offer independence and unification to all nationalist groups including the Viet Minh as proposed by Bollaert, or whether to defeat Ho militarily and deal only with those nationalist leaders amenable to French influence, as proposed by Valluy. With the PCF leaving the government in May and the shift in French politics rightward in 1947, the Right was able to weaken Bollaert's political offer into meaninglessness, and Valluy was able to launch an all-out offensive in October. While Ho had previously been calling for independence within the French Union, he now called upon the Vietnamese to fight for independence alone.<sup>42</sup>

Bollaert and Valluy had both agreed that the best way to weaken Ho and end the conflict on French terms was to select a nationalist leader trusted by the French to whom they would freely offer all the demands that Ho was exhorting the people to fight for. The Vietnamese would then presumably abandon Ho and rally to Bao Dai, the former emperor whom the French hoped to resurrect, who could gain their desires without suffering. However, President Auriol's memoirs reveal that the French were no more willing to grant nationalist demands to Bao Dai than they were to Ho, and that the government had no intention of relinquishing control over Indochina. For example, Auriol noted during a Council of Ministers meeting that all Vietnamese nationalist elements demanded an independent army and diplomacy. Auriol, though, did not

believe it is possible to yield, because this concession would lead to the evacuation of Indochina. By itself, this evacuation would not be a misfortune. But if we yield, the repercussion will be terrible in North Africa. Thus the constitutional posi-

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<sup>40</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, p. 387.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 389-90.

<sup>42</sup> Auriol, *Tome I—1947*, pp. 399-401.

tion is the cornerstone of the system. Some accommodations are possible; some satisfactions of pride can be given in the negotiations.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, Bollaert and Bao Dai signed an accord on 5 June 1947, in which "France solemnly recognizes the independence of Vietnam, to whom it behooves to freely bring about its unity. On its part, Vietnam proclaims its adhesion to the French Union in the capacity of an associated state to France."<sup>44</sup> The Assembly was enraged that the government would make such an agreement, especially with regard to the status of Cochinchina, without its approval. After reassuring the Right that France would maintain control of defense and diplomacy, Paul Coste-Floret, minister of Overseas France, declared that "no parcel of French sovereignty has been transferred."<sup>45</sup> During October of the same year, Bao Dai demanded an independent army and diplomacy as well as removal of French control over certain internal matters; the government refused on all counts.<sup>46</sup>

By March 1948, the Valluy offensive was an acknowledged failure, the Viet Minh appeared stronger than ever, and the French faced a protracted war in Vietnam if they were to reassert their control there. In order to reduce the cost of this effort, Prime Minister Schuman proposed to the Council of Ministers that France ask the United States for arms and assistance "given that the communist army has established itself on the border of Indochina, and that it is a threat against the American position in the Far East."<sup>47</sup> As has been seen, the French were fighting in Vietnam not to prevent the spread of communism, but for nationalistic reasons that all political parties at first supported, with the exception of certain Socialists. With the onset of the Cold War and the failure of the French to defeat Ho alone, the French government was increasingly to emphasize the communist nature of the Viet Minh in order to secure American assistance in carrying out the war.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 498.

<sup>44</sup> "La France reconnaît solennellement l'indépendance du Viêt-Nam, auquel il appartient de réaliser librement son unité. De son côté le Viêt-Nam proclame son adhésion à l'Union Française en qualité d'Etat associé à la France" (Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, p. 431).

<sup>45</sup> Vincent Auriol, *Journal du Septennat 1947-1954: Tome II - 1948* (Paris, 1974), p. 655.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 476, 485-87, and 497-89.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.



## UNITED STATES

The United States government's position varied during the period from the end of World War II until 1948. President Roosevelt was opposed to colonialism in principle, to French colonialism particularly, and to French colonialism in Indochina especially, which he believed was worse off after experiencing French rule than it had been in the previous century before they came. Truman, however, was less concerned about the problem. During and immediately after the war, the Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) was convinced that Ho was the prime nationalist leader of Vietnam and recommended that the United States assist the Viet Minh in fighting the French. While Ho's communism was recognized, it was seen as subsidiary to his role as an independent nationalist leader. This was confirmed by Ho actively seeking support from the United States.<sup>48</sup>

The Department of State, though, opposed supporting Ho for reasons similar to those of the Soviets not supporting him at the same time either. Right after the war, the French government chose to remain neutral and the State Department wanted to woo it into friendship with the United States, or at the least, prevent France from allying with the Soviet Union. France was seen to be of much greater importance to the United States than Vietnam. Thus, the United States would not antagonize the French and induce them into allying with the Soviets by assisting the Viet Minh. Vietnam was thought to be best handled through encouraging the French to seek a peaceful solution, but in not interfering with French actions.

Throughout 1946 and 1947, the American press was highly critical of French actions in Vietnam. American diplomats in Southeast Asia frequently filed reports stating that all the Vietnamese wanted was for the French to leave, that Ho was willing to negotiate, and that the United States should encourage the French to be reasonable. United States disapproval of French actions was especially evident when on 7 October 1947, the U.S. ambassador in Paris warned President Auriol that the Valluy offensive would evoke an unfavorable reaction from the United States.<sup>49</sup> However, on 13 October, William Bullitt privately advised Auriol that American support would be forthcoming if the

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<sup>48</sup> Edward R. Drachman, *United States Policy Toward Vietnam, 1940-1945* (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1970), pp. 147-58.

<sup>49</sup> Auriol, *Tome II-1948*, p. 466

French could separate Ho's communists from the nationalists.<sup>50</sup> With the Chinese Communist party's increasing gains, French claims that the war in Vietnam was an anticommunist one brought about more and more the desired responses from the United States. By the time that the French government asked the United States for assistance in 1948, the United States was quite willing to provide it, and 1948 became the first year that massive American aid was given to France for the war in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup>

Even at the end of 1948, Ho Chi Minh was hoping to gain American support, for the Soviets were even now still not supporting him. In October, a State Department study noted that the Viet Minh press had not taken an anti-American stand while the French press in Saigon had.<sup>52</sup> In November, the American consul in Saigon reported, "No evidence has yet turned up that Ho Chi Minh is receiving current directions either from Moscow, Peking, or the Soviet legation in Bangkok."<sup>53</sup> With the continuation of American support of the French and the coming to power of Mao in 1949, the situation changed. By giving Ho no other option, U.S. aid to the French forced the Viet Minh to turn to the powers that both could and would support it. On 18 January 1950, the People's Republic of China recognized Ho's government and Chinese assistance began.<sup>54</sup> It was not until 30 January 1950 that the USSR finally recognized the Viet Minh government,<sup>55</sup> indicating that it was Moscow's fear of Peking becoming the dominant influence over the Viet Minh that was the primary reason for Soviet recognition and limited assistance. Thus, while from 1945 to 1948 Ho sought U.S. support against the French, by 1950 he was unable to cooperate with the United States at all and was receiving assistance from the USSR and PRC thanks more to the nascent Sino-Soviet rivalry than to any other reason.

#### CONCLUSION

The issues that the French and the Viet Minh disputed during their negotiations demonstrate clearly that the conflict in Vietnam

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>51</sup> Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam*, p. 472.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Robert M. Blum, *The United States and Vietnam: 1944-1947*, a staff study for the U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 92nd Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, D.C., 1972), p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Hoang Nguyen, *U. S. Aggressive Activities Against Viet-Nam* (Peking, 1950), p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

was not originally one of communist forces versus anticommunist ones, but of contending nationalisms instead. What the French disputed with Ho Chi Minh they also disputed with Bao Dai and other nationalists. The difference between the Viet Minh and the other nationalists was that whereas Ho had the option to fight the French due to the independence of his organization, Bao Dai was chosen by the French precisely because he had no such option and could only obtain his goals via the French. What the French never understood, and later the Americans, was that a leader who was unable to meet the most basic nationalist demand of achieving independence through getting rid of the foreigners could not, by virtue of being the creature of the foreigners, command much domestic political support especially when there was a truly nationalist alternative in the Viet Minh.

This is not to deny that Ho and the Viet Minh were communists. Indeed, their policy of redistributing the land alienated almost the entire class of landlords who did form what domestic support that did exist for the successive governments in Saigon. However, it was the alienation of the landlords and the redistribution of land that resulted in increasing even more the support for the Viet Minh, for the overwhelming mass of the peasantry was given an incentive to fight against the landlords' return where the Viet Minh had driven them out.

Yet despite this socialist aspect to the Viet Minh's program, Ho had strongly hoped for American support against the French and did not expect any from the Soviet Union. Like the Chinese Communist party, the Viet Minh was an independent communist movement, and the Soviets were not desirous of communist parties coming to power that they did not control. With the Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948, the Soviets were even less willing for independent communists to rise and so even though the United States was aiding the French military effort by then, the Russians continued to ignore Ho. While the U.S. government had been more favorable to the Viet Minh in 1945 and 1946, the onset of the Cold War and Mao's victories in China led the United States to mistakenly equate Ho's independent communist movement with Soviet power, and that the success of Ho would mean the extension of Soviet power in the same way as in Eastern Europe. Thus it was the United States that had rejected Ho, and by aiding the French, forced him to seek other sources of external support. It was not until Mao came to power, though, that this was possi-

ble. Chinese support of the Viet Minh forced the Soviets to compete with them, for even though the Soviets did not want another independent communist power to appear, they wanted even less one controlled by China.

The United States opposed the Viet Minh because the Americans feared that the Viet Minh was controlled by Moscow and Peking. Had the United States recognized that Ho was more a nationalist than a communist, the United States could have helped Ho to be independent not only of the French, but also of the Soviets and the Chinese. Now that the Western powers have completely withdrawn from Indochina, Vietnam appears to act independently of both the USSR and the PRC, despite what the United States claimed throughout the duration of the conflict. But while the Soviet Union and, until recently, China both retain some influence in Vietnam, the United States retains none. Even now, this is because the United States refuses to; Vietnam would undoubtedly prefer to play three great powers against each other and achieve an even greater degree of independence than from playing off only the two weaker ones. United States' interests could only be enhanced by such a situation in which a region were open for our influence to compete with our rivals' instead of being closed only to theirs.

However, the early years of the Vietnam conflict are not only significant for what might have happened in Vietnam, but also wherever a colonial power decided to fight to retain its position in the Third World. For similar situations have occurred, and are still occurring, elsewhere in which a colonial power, usually allied to the United States, faces a nationalist movement. The nationalist movement, unable to obtain support from the United States, has turned to the USSR or China. The colonial power has claimed that the struggle is an anticommunist one, and the United States has supported the colonial power to some extent. This situation has occurred in Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, and is even now occurring in Western Sahara and Namibia. The result has been that when these nationalist movements have come to power, the USSR has some degree of influence with them and the United States does not. Such a situation could have been avoided had the United States actively supported these nationalist movements to begin with. The colonial power involved could hardly have turned to the USSR for support, and the nationalist movement coming to power would have

been more amenable to American influence and less to that of the Soviets, despite the ideology it purported. This same situation can still be avoided in the colonial conflicts that exist now.

Above all, what an examination of the early years of the Vietnam conflict should demonstrate is that the United States should not equate independent communist movements fighting for national independence with the spread of Soviet influence. Whenever the United States has done this, it has forced the basically nationalist movement to turn to the Soviets. While such a mistake may have been understandable in 1946 or 1947 after Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, it is no longer so after thirty years of experience with these situations in the Third World. The victory of an indigenous communist movement fighting for independence from a colonial power in what is basically a clash of contending nationalisms need not automatically heighten Soviet influence in the Third World but instead can provide an opportunity for the United States to achieve both the ideals and the interests of American foreign policy.