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Echoes from the Past:
An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Vietnam War

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Nearly forty years after the fall of Saigon, despite extensive academic literature on the Vietnam War, there has been no scholarly consensus in its nature and causes. What is the origin of the war? Is it a civil war or Vietnamese resistance against foreign domination? This paper addresses the roots of U.S.-Vietnamese conflict with an emphasis on the Vietnamese side. It is primarily concerned with the progress of Vietnamese opposition to foreign rule before 1956 and the question of who was responsible for the Vietnam War. A careful examination of historical documents from both Vietnam and the United States reveals that the Vietnam War functioned as an American war against Communists but at the same time represented the Vietnamese quest for national independence. It also supports the further claim that the Vietnam War was an international conflict rather than a civil war.

There are two main schools of thought in the U.S. historiography of the Vietnam War.¹ While the first school is strongly critical of America's intervention and views Vietnam as a bad war, the second praises the U.S. efforts in Indochina and considers the war a necessary one.² In

¹ This paper's historiography takes into account only American interpretations of the war due to limited access to Vietnamese scholarship.

² Phillip E. Catton, "Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (October 2004), 7–11.

fact, in *The Bitter Heritage*, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. argues that the roots of U.S. involvement lay in the illusion of American omnipotence and omniscience. Moreover, extreme anti-Communism prevented Washington from realizing the difference between Nationalism and Communism.³ In a similar fashion, in *Fire in the Lake*, Frances FitzGerald criticizes American officials for their ignorance of Vietnamese politics and culture. By conducting the war against Communism, the United States paralyzed a peasant revolution against the rule of corrupt foreigners and Vietnamese landlords.⁴ However, in *Why We Were in Vietnam*, Norman Podhoretz justifies American intervention by asserting that Communism was the source of heinous crimes against humankind and the war was a moral mission to save Vietnam from that dangerous ideology.⁵ Like Podhoretz, Michael Lind considers the war a necessary conflict in his *Vietnam, the Necessary War*. According to Lind, Ho Chi Minh was actually an evil tyrant like Stalin or Mao. Therefore, the purpose of the U.S. intervention was to stop the Communist expansion and to preserve America's international prestige. The war, notes Lind, was only one of the Cold War conflicts, in which Americans finally achieved victory over the Communists.⁶

These conflicting viewpoints demonstrate the complexity and multifaceted nature of the topic. Recently, an increasing number of scholarly sources like Qiang Zhai's *China and the Vietnam Wars* deal with the international context of the war. Qiang Zhai argues that China's substantial support for the Vietnamese Communists in the 1950s and 1960s served to fuel the conflict in Vietnam and precipitate the U.S. escalation of war in Indochina.⁷ Recent scholarship has not only broadened people's view of the war, but also enhanced the understanding of the

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967).

⁴ Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972).

⁵ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

⁶ Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

⁷ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

long-neglected Vietnamese side of the story.⁸ However, not many scholarly sources were concerned with the development of Vietnam's national independence movement, which was probably the origin of U.S.-Vietnamese conflicts. Therefore, this paper analyzes the roots of the Vietnamese revolution and gives considerable attention to Vietnamese traditions and culture because such understanding of Vietnamese society is necessary to understand the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese history is actually full of interactions between the Vietnamese and foreigners. After a Vietnamese kingdom first emerged in the Red River Delta over two millennia ago, the Chinese quickly conquered and occupied Vietnam for nearly one thousand years. However, the Vietnamese neither lost their identity nor abandoned their hope of regaining independence. They pushed the Chinese out in the tenth century and successfully protected national sovereignty afterwards. The tenacious resistance against northern invaders forms a heroic theme in the history of Vietnam. It has not only instilled fierce patriotism in the Vietnamese people, but also persuaded them to believe in the eternal indomitability of the nation.⁹

In the fifteenth century, the Vietnamese began to march south. Three centuries later, Vietnam annexed the whole southern region. Afterwards, because of dense population in the Red River Delta, more and more northern Vietnamese migrated south. Thus, Vietnam appeared to have two major regions: the North and the South, which evolved differently. The Mekong River flowed more gently and predictably than the Red River. It was more likely to produce abundant rice crops in the South than in the North. Therefore, Southerners were more prosperous than Northerners. People of two regions also behaved differently. While Northerners tended to be sophisticated, urbane, and communalistic, Southerners tended to be rural, simple, and

⁸ Catton, "Refighting Vietnam," 10.

⁹ George D. Moss, *Vietnam, an American Ordeal*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 4–9.

individualistic. While northern families lived close together, southern families lived apart.¹⁰ Despite these differences, people of both regions strongly believed in national unity because they all considered themselves descendants of the first Vietnamese.

However, besides the Vietnamese, there were a number of indigenous peoples living in the Vietnamese territory. Because they primarily inhabited the highlands in the Vietnamese territory, they were usually called highlanders. The Vietnamese lowland people considered the mountains to be dangerous places so they occupied the deltas and left the highlands for the indigenous peoples. Moreover, under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945), the lowlanders always attempted to contain and civilize the highlanders because the indigenous people were considered barbarians. Thus, there were tensions between the Nguyen and the highlander authorities, which caused frequent highlander revolts.¹¹ The disharmonious relations between the Vietnamese and the indigenous peoples made them side with the French when they invaded Vietnam.

The French colonial conquest of Vietnam began in 1858 and ended in 1883. Afterwards, they brutally began to exploit Vietnamese natural resources and people. In their eyes, Vietnam was the source of valuable raw materials. Although the Vietnamese economy was primarily agricultural, the French gradually increased their investment in rubber and coal.¹² Therefore, in the early twentieth century, a small but steadily increasing proportion of the population became contract workers in plantations, factories, and mines. By the end of the 1920s, there were about one hundred thousand laborers in Vietnam. A new class, the proletariat, was formed.¹³

French colonialism disrupted the Vietnamese society. Since French colonialists and

¹⁰ Ibid., 6–8.

¹¹ Mark W. McLeod, “Indigenous peoples and the Vietnamese Revolution, 1930–1975,” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 355–359.

¹² Moss, *Vietnam*, 11–12.

¹³ Melanie Beresford and Chris Nyland, “The Labor Movement of Vietnam,” *Labor History*, no. 75 (November 1998), 57–58.

Vietnamese landlords held the lands, most of Vietnamese peasants became bankrupt and fled their villages.¹⁴ The bankrupt farmers later became contract laborers, which partly explained the emergence of the proletariat in Vietnamese society. In addition, industrialization had negative impacts on the indigenous peoples. Many plantations and mines were established in the highlands. Because many highlanders refused to work as industrial workers, many lowland Vietnamese migrated to the highlands to work. The immigration of the lowlanders, along with the harsh French rule, enraged the highlanders and instilled an anti-French sentiment in them.¹⁵

Despite being brutally suppressed, the Vietnamese continuously resisted French rule. In the early twentieth century, a new trend of nationalism emerged in Vietnam. The new Nationalists were passionate about modernization and independence. Among them, Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) was the most prominent individual. Strongly influenced by his family’s anti-French attitude and his witness of the poverty of the common people and the corruption of the Nguyen Dynasty, Ho abhorred French colonialism and Vietnamese feudalism. In 1911, he left Vietnam to travel the world. After visiting many countries, including the United States, he ended up in Paris working mainly as a photographer. During his time living here, he ran across Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* and some essays of Vladimir Lenin, which converted him to Communism. Because Ho always read with application and enthusiasm, he believed Marxism-Leninism showed the road to Vietnam’s independence from colonial rule. However, while Ho was a Communist, he was also a Nationalist. For him, Communism was not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. That end was the absolute independence of Vietnam from France.¹⁶

Thanks to his passion and talent, Ho became a leader of Vietnamese Nationalists living in

¹⁴ Moss, *Vietnam*, 14.

¹⁵ McLeod, “The Indigenous Peoples,” 362. The highlanders had to pay high taxes and provide free services for the French as well.

¹⁶ Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir* (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, 1970), 12–20.

Paris. He first protested imperialism in the international community in 1919 at the Versailles Conference, and then tried to meet with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. However, he failed to achieve his goals because he was not a legitimate official of the Nguyen Dynasty and he did not have a prestigious social status in France. Furthermore, President Wilson actually knew nothing about Vietnam. He valued U.S. relations with European nations more than anything happening in Asia. Wilson's indifference to Vietnamese affairs caused most of U.S. officials to lack substantial knowledge about Vietnamese history and politics. As a consequence, they were not able to comprehend the difficulties they would face in Vietnam.¹⁷ The failure to meet with Wilson caused Ho's first disappointment with the United States. His disappointment was later expressed in his article "Lynching" in the French newspaper *La Correspondence Internationale* in 1924. In the article, Ho described a scene of lynching that took place in America in the early twentieth century. By recounting the painful death of an American black and providing appalling statistics about American lynching, Ho strongly criticized American hypocrisy. He stated that, among the crimes of American civilization, "lynching has a place of honor."¹⁸

After joining the French Socialist Party in 1920, Ho Chi Minh realized that the Socialists preferred theoretical discussions to direct support for decolonization of French colonies. He then traveled to Hong Kong in 1929 to join other Vietnamese Nationalists. In 1930, they created the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), which unified all the Communist parties in Vietnam and aimed at a Communist revolution to liberate Indochina from the French, to end feudalism and capitalism, and to provide basic human rights for the common people. Ho also promised an agrarian reform and the building of an egalitarian society ruled by worker-peasants.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 17–18.

¹⁸ "Lynching: A Little Known Aspect of American Civilization," in *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Articles and Speeches, 1920–1967*, ed. Jack Woddis (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 20–25.

¹⁹ Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 22–24.

The Communist idea of class struggle attracted wide attention from peasants as well as workers. Thus, the ICP formed a complicated web of underground cells throughout the country. But it was not the only major party in Vietnam. Nguyen Thai Hoc, a student, created the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP) in 1927. This party, modeled on the Chinese Kuomintang, was mainly composed of young teachers and low-rank military officers.²⁰ It was primarily concerned about national salvation and social transformation. Unlike Ho Chi Minh, Nguyen Thai Hoc believed the idea of setting class against class was too extreme. Thus, the two parties could not merge together. They even competed intensely with each other for the loyalty of the northern Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the VNP did not have any sort of mass base. It neither resolved tensions over gender relations nor overcame the limitation set by family ties and kinship.²¹ The VNP was also unable to mobilize indigenous peoples. Nguyen Thai Hoc and his followers never concealed their traditionalist contempt for the highlanders. But the ICP successfully devised a nationalities policy. Being aware of the highlander mistrust of lowland Vietnamese, the ICP promised them the right to self-determination in an independent Vietnam and call for the abolition of colonial taxation, forced labor service, and other obligations.²²

In 1930, both parties attempted to overthrow French rule through general uprisings. While the VNP was responsible for the Yen Bai mutiny and the associated revolts in Tonkin, the ICP led the Soviet movement in central Vietnam. The Yen Bai mutiny was quickly suppressed and Nguyen Thai Hoc and many other leaders of the party were beheaded. The VNP collapsed afterwards. However, it demonstrated the Vietnamese determination to ward off foreign invaders. The uprising started a wave of demonstrations, which dominated anti-colonial politics

²⁰ Martin Bernal, "The Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement 1930-1931," *Past & Present*, no. 92 (August 1981), 151.

²¹ Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 218.

²² McLeod, "The Indigenous Peoples," 363.

throughout Vietnam in the 1930s. Six weeks before the execution of Nguyen Thai Hoc, in May 1930, peasants in Nghe An and Ha Tinh began to protest against the colonial regime.²³

Factors such as absolute poverty, the shortage of land, and the tradition of anti-French resistance helped the Communists dominate central Vietnam, particularly Nghe-Tinh. The economic recessions not only increased tax demands, but also exaggerated the regressive nature of taxation. Nearly all aspects of peasant life were taxed. Forced rural destitution was a frequent phenomenon during the years after 1929, particularly 1930. Disparate protests began in 1929, but they were small and loosely organized. The ICP successfully unified and coordinated those protests. It also linked the traditional resistance movements to internationalism and tied social justice with national independence. Over all, the ICP persuaded peasants that they could change their lives through actions. Thus, the Communist activities in Nghe-Tinh increased steadily in spite of economic and political repression.²⁴

The Soviet movement in Nghe-Tinh, modeled on the Russian October Revolution, started with three major demonstrations in Nghe An. They were all dispersed when the French-led guards fired on the crowds killing many men, women, and children. Such brutal mass killings and arrests caused resentment in the demonstrators and caused mass violence to erupt. Nevertheless, increasing famine and French pressure caused the Soviet movement to wane. By early 1932, nearly all of Communist cadres were either imprisoned or killed. Thousands of peasants were confined to concentration camps. The Soviet movement came to an end.²⁵

However, the ICP did not collapse after the Soviet movement. The mass protests of 1930-1931 played an important role in Vietnam's national independence movement. It was a critical point of transition from traditional anti-French resistance to modern Communist-led

²³ Bernal, "Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement," 151, 222–223.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151–155.

Nationalism. The Soviet movement actually mobilized an extraordinary number of Vietnamese. Besides peasants, a significant number of industrial workers joined the movement, which linked small trade unions with massive peasant organizations.²⁶ For the first time, uneducated people were taking important roles in an anti-colonial movement. The Soviet movement helped the Vietnamese envision a life of freedom and an era of national independence. It also provided many valuable lessons and experiences for the ICP. Therefore, the defeat in 1931 was not lasting. It was only one of the necessary failures. Moreover, the Soviet movement publicized “the language of Marxism.”²⁷ After 1931, the ICP remained the most influential of underground revolutionary groups in Vietnam, particularly the North.²⁸

Thus, the French were determined to eliminate the ICP. Ho Chi Minh and many other key leaders were captured and imprisoned. However, Ho successfully escaped to Russia, studying at the Lenin Institute and teaching Vietnamese history from 1934 to 1938.²⁹ From 1936 to 1939, because the French government allowed more freedom for peaceful political activity in France and Indochina, French pressure on the Communists decreased. Moreover, during these years, Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union advocated more cooperation between the Communists and non-Communists all over the world to check the rise of fascism and militarism. Therefore, the ICP moderated its revolutionary programs and sought alliances with liberal and socialist parties. By emphasizing democratic reform rather than revolution, the ICP attracted many non-Communist Vietnamese Nationalists.³⁰ In early 1940, Ho returned to southern China and rejoined the ICP. His return consolidated the retreat from class warfare that had begun in his absence. A policy of unitary Nationalism was proposed and the slogan of national liberation was

²⁶ Ibid, 148–166.

²⁷ Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 223.

²⁸ Moss, *Vietnam*, 20.

²⁹ Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 26–29.

³⁰ Moss, *Vietnam*, 19.

shelved. The ICP decided to deemphasize class struggle and postpone the agrarian revolution.³¹

By 1940, Germany occupied France. Japan exploited the weakened defense in French colonies and successfully conquered Indochina in 1941. However, Japan and France agreed to joint control of Vietnam. While the French bore the costs of administering territories, the Japanese received the riches of all Vietnam's exports. The Japanese, who promoted Pan-Asianism, aided Vietnamese Nationalist groups in their resistance against French colonialism. But the Japanese neither wanted to grant the Vietnamese their independence nor favored the Communist activities.³² Therefore, most Vietnamese Communists chose to remain in China. Nevertheless, Ho Chi Minh foresaw that the Japanese peril would give him the opportunity to unite and mobilize all Vietnamese to achieve national independence.³³ Moreover, China, which had been at war with Japan since 1937, was determined to help Vietnamese expatriates in southern China form a front organization. The Chinese leaders, particularly the Communists, hoped that this organization would carry out sabotage and espionage activities against the Japanese in Vietnam.³⁴

In January 1941, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam after more than thirty years of absence. After his return, the ICP decided to create the League for the Independence of Vietnam, better known as the Vietminh. The Vietminh was a non-Communist, broad-based coalition front of all anti-colonial forces dedicated to ending the foreign occupation of Vietnam. It benefited from the mass organizations of workers, peasants, students, and merchants that had already existed. Top Vietminh leaders were Ho and other key members of the ICP. The Vietminh was

³¹ Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 255.

³² Moss, *Vietnam*, 20–21.

³³ Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 32.

³⁴ Moss, *Vietnam*, 20.

actually the strongest and most popular anti-colonial party in Indochina.³⁵ In June 1941, Ho issued a public letter to all Vietnamese to inspire them to revolt against foreign rule. In the letter, he revived Vietnamese Nationalism and anti-Imperialism, guaranteed the final triumph of the Vietnamese revolution, and linked the Vietnamese revolt with the world revolution.³⁶

Learning from the failure of the Nghe-Tinh Soviet movement, the Vietminh leaders realized that nonviolence could not force foreign rule out. In September 1941, Truong Chinh, ICP Secretary General and leading theoretician, wrote a detailed program for the Vietnamese leaders to prepare for the revolution at a proper moment. In his paper, Truong Chinh asserted that one extremely urgent mission of the party was to prepare for the armed uprising. According to him, the preparation would create a favorable opportunity for the Indochinese revolution in the unpredictably changing world situation.³⁷ Accordingly, the Vietminh established a revolutionary base in Cao Bang. Adopting Maoist strategies, it liberated the highlanders from French rule and placed them under the party apparatus.³⁸ Realizing the important role of the Vietminh in anti-Japanese activities in Indochina, the Communist Party of China promised Ho Chi Minh support and supplies with which to resist Japan. Granted Chinese sponsorship, Ho Chi Minh swiftly unified Vietnamese Nationalist movements not to the benefit of the Chinese but to the benefit of his own party.³⁹

In December 1941, Japan suddenly attacked Pearl Harbor. Enraged by the Japanese aggression, Americans entered World War II and quickly became involved in the wars in China and Indochina. In fact, the United States had been aware of the economy and geography of

³⁵ Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 253–254.

³⁶ “Letter by Ho Chi Minh from Abroad, June 6, 1941,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 1–2.

³⁷ “Study Document by Secretary General of the Indochinese Communist Party Truong Chinh, September 23–24, 1941,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 2–5.

³⁸ Moss, *Vietnam*, 22.

³⁹ Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 36–37.

Indochina long before the 1940s but had not taken any action toward the region. Under French colonial rule, Vietnam was one of the world's leading rubber exporting countries. In addition, Vietnam was naturally a major source of raw materials, especially rice and rubber, and a strategic base of military operations in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰

In an attempt to win the Pacific War, the United States began its military operation in Vietnam only a month after Pearl Harbor. From the U.S. headquarters in southern China, American pilots were ordered to attack Japanese airfields in northern Vietnam. Being aware of the U.S. presence in China, Ho Chi Minh went to meet American officials in Kunming and obtained from them the weapons and instructors he needed to fight against the Japanese. With American aids, Ho and his associates secretly prepared for a resistance movement in Thai Nguyen, a province in the Viet Bac Mountains. The French discovered this extensive activity and ordered a military campaign against the Vietminh. However, they failed to destroy it.⁴¹

On December 22, 1944, in Cao Bang, the Vietminh created the Vietnamese Liberation Army. At first, this army was made up of northern highlanders, which demonstrated the Communist influence among the indigenous peoples. Under the leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietminh guerrillas conducted limited operations against the Japanese and French, established a liberated area in the Viet Bac, and built up their own forces.⁴² On March 9, 1945, the Japanese suddenly carried out a coup that toppled the French authority in Vietnam, ending the French eighty-year colonial regime in Indochina. By this time, the Vietminh had acquired firm control of the Viet Bac. Therefore, the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) arrived in late March 1945 at Dien Bien Phu and established contacts with the Vietminh. Since Ho Chi Minh agreed to cooperate with the OSS, American intelligence operatives resided with the Vietminh and

⁴⁰ Moss, *Vietnam*, 23.

⁴¹ Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 38.

⁴² McLeod, "The Indigenous Peoples," 364.

provided it with radios and weapons. Although Ho was a Communist, these Americans did not show any hostility to him. Through the OSS, the Vietminh leaders were able to develop a relationship with the United States that might help them in their task of liberating the country.⁴³

The Japanese coup created a political vacuum in Vietnam even though they established a new Vietnamese government immediately afterwards. This government, headed by Emperor Bao Dai, had neither resources nor power. In fact, Japan was already defeated in military terms by the Allied forces in early 1945. The March 9 coup was only one of the Japanese desperate efforts to retain control of Indochina.⁴⁴ Thanks to the new situation, by June 1945, the Vietminh had begun to spread their influence throughout Tonkin and central Vietnam. It seemed that nothing could prevent Ho Chi Minh from achieving his goals. Moreover, the great famine of 1944-1945 contributed greatly to the Vietminh's popularity. The famine was the worst human tragedy in Vietnamese modern history. Nearly two million Vietnamese starved to death. Most of them lived in northern Vietnam. The famine has long been slighted in historical studies. However, it was actually one of the underwritten tragedies stemming from the Pacific War.⁴⁵

Although coastal Vietnam had frequently suffered from droughts, floods, and typhoons, the great famine of 1944–1945 was primarily caused by the Japanese occupation of Indochina. In a commercial arrangement with Vichy France in 1941, Japan bought over one million tons of rice produced in Indochina a year. The figure would increase as the Pacific war progressed. Thus, more and more rice was extracted from the markets and local storages. Moreover, the cost of living skyrocketed and the profits from rice production plummeted because the Japanese did

⁴³ John Prados, *Vietnam: the History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 16.

⁴⁴ Moss, *Vietnam*, 26.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Gun, "The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944-45 Revisited," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 9, no. 4 (January 2011), <http://japanfocus.org/>—Geoffrey-Gunn/3483 (accessed April 26, 2011).

not pay the standard market price to the farmers and merchants.⁴⁶

The crop failures of 1943–1945, the U.S. bombing of the North, and the catastrophic rainfall of August–September 1944 worsened the lack of foodstuffs in Vietnam. After 1943, the Japanese economy demanded an increasing number of gunny bags because of military necessity. Therefore, Vietnamese peasants were forced to uproot rice and plant jute. In 1944, the French and Japanese began to use rice and maize as fuel for power stations in the South after the U.S. bombing cut off supplies of coal from the North. The drought and pervasive insects reduced the harvests while typhoons damaged the crops. The famine actually began in 1943 when farmers across northern Vietnam could neither pay taxes nor feed their families. While peasants were starving, the French and Japanese continued stockpiling rice. American submarine operations also decreased the amount of rice shipped from the South to the North. By March 1945, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, especially rural people, were dying.⁴⁷

The Vietminh strongly blamed the French and Japanese for the tragedy. In fact, the great famine gave it an important political advantage. The Vietminh seizure of paddy stocks and delivery of rice to the needy alleviated the misery, united people against foreign rule, called for organized resistance, and recruited a large number of new members for the party.⁴⁸ In August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied forces. Immediately, the August Revolution occurred throughout Vietnam. The Vietminh quickly took over the entire country. Emperor Bao Dai abdicated the throne in favor of the Vietminh, ending the Nguyen Dynasty.⁴⁹ On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi addressing the *Vietnamese Declaration of Independence*. He began his speech with two famous quotations: ““We hold truths that all men

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Prados, *Vietnam*, 16.

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ This immortal statement is extracted from *The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America* in 1776. ... *The Declaration of Human and Civil Rights* proclaimed by the French Revolution in 1791 likewise propounds: ‘Every man is born equal and enjoys free and equal rights.’ These are undeniable truths.”⁵⁰

Historian George Moss argues that, Ho Chi Minh cited words from the U.S. Declaration of Independence because he admired the United States and hoped to court American support.⁵¹ However, Ho also cited the French Declaration of Human and Civil Rights. Therefore, it was more likely that Ho used these quotations as a means to indirectly criticize the hypocrisy of the West and legitimize the sovereignty of Vietnam. Throughout his address, Ho condemned French colonial rule in Vietnam, blamed both the French and Japanese for Vietnamese misery, and declared the complete independence of the Vietnamese people.⁵² Since September 2, Ho referred to himself by an appellation which became famous worldwide: Uncle Ho. By implying kinship and solidarity with his people, Ho Chi Minh extolled intergenerational harmony and put the evocative language of the family at the service of the nation.⁵³

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was not favored by the great powers. In fact, the political status of Indochina had been a controversial issue among the Allies before 1945. In a private conversation with President Roosevelt at the Teheran Conference in 1943, Marshal Stalin held that France, which collaborated with Germany during World War II, should not be allowed to return to Indochina.⁵⁴ Similarly, in one of his conversations with Secretary

⁵⁰ “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, September 2, 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 29.

⁵¹ Moss, *Vietnam*, 28.

⁵² “Declaration of Independence,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, 29–30.

⁵³ Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 257.

⁵⁴ “Memorandum of Conversation between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Marshal Joseph Stalin at the Teheran Conference, November 28, 1943,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New

Hull, Roosevelt—an anti-imperialist—criticized the French for their brutal colonialism, claimed his support of international trusteeship for Indochina, and implied his idea of future independence for the Indochinese people. Roosevelt said, “France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.”⁵⁵ Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader of China, also opposed imperialism. He was afraid that, if the oppressed Asian peoples were not granted freedom and equality, a Third World War would break out. He stated, “When the war ends, imperialism must also be ended, because imperialism is the cause of war.”⁵⁶ However, Great Britain, which had the largest empire of all time, was committed to preserving colonial empires. Sir Winston Churchill realized that it was difficult to dismantle the French empire while maintaining Britain’s. Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French government-in-exile, joined with Churchill to prevent the loss of Indochina after World War II.⁵⁷

In April 1945, Roosevelt passed away. Before his death, Roosevelt ceased to support the independence of the Indochinese people. In his conversation with adviser Charles Taussig in March 1945, Roosevelt expressed his fear of diplomatic tensions between the United States and France, an important European ally. Although he still wanted Indochina to be put under a trusteeship, he did not oppose the French reclaiming their colonies if France guaranteed independence for the Indochinese people as its ultimate goal.⁵⁸

Harry S. Truman, Roosevelt’s successor, did not protest the unconditional restoration of French rule in Indochina. On May 6, 1945, Secretary of State James Byrnes told French Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault that the United States did not question French

American Library, 1981), 5.

⁵⁵ “Memorandum by Roosevelt to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, January 24, 1944,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 6.

⁵⁶ “Speech by Giap, September 2, 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 31.

⁵⁷ Moss, *Vietnam*, 24–25.

⁵⁸ “Memorandum of Conversation with Roosevelt by Charles Taussig, Adviser on Caribbean Affairs, March 15, 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 11–12.

sovereignty over Indochina. According to Byrnes, Bidault immediately cabled Paris that he received “renewed assurances of the U.S. recognition of French sovereignty over that area.”⁵⁹ Finally, at the Potsdam Conference in August 1945, the United States and other Allied Powers together came to a decision that Indochina would be divided into two portions at the Sixteenth Parallel. While the area north of the latitude was under Chiang Kai-shek of China, the area south of the latitude was under Admiral Louis Mountbatten of Britain. Truman expected China and Britain to “facilitate operations against the common enemy, Japan.”⁶⁰ The Potsdam agreement on the division of Indochina was the first formal division of Vietnam after World War II.

In early September 1945, Chinese troops poured into northern Vietnam to pillage, rape, and loot. Then, on September 13, 1945, the first British troops under the command of Douglas D. Gracey arrived in southern Vietnam. Ten days later, Gracey removed control of Saigon's main buildings from the Vietminh. This action was meant to facilitate the eventual French reoccupation of southern Indochina. Thus, chaos broke out in Saigon with continuous fights between the Vietminh and the British and French troops. After the French reinforcements came in October 1945, the British government under Clement Attlee quickly recognized full French sovereignty over southern Vietnam and ordered the withdrawal of British forces.⁶¹

Enraged by the French aggression, Ho Chi Minh gave a speech in November 1945 calling for a resistance war in the South. In his address, Ho emphasized the unity of Vietnam and condemned the treachery of the French, who undermined their own principles of human rights and the peace the Allied powers had proclaimed. He insisted that the Vietnamese were willing to

⁵⁹ “Telegram from Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew to Ambassador Jefferson Caffery in France, May 6, 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 23.

⁶⁰ “Telegram from President Harry Truman for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Transmitted via Ambassador Hurley, August 1, 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 27.

⁶¹ John Springhall, “Kicking out the Vietminh: How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indochina, 1945–46,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 1 (January 2005), 115–127.

fight a long-term war against the invaders. “Long live independent Vietnam,” proclaimed Ho.⁶² He also wrote a series of letters to Truman appealing for his support of Vietnamese independence. With this act, Ho gave Truman an opportunity to prevent the conflict between the DRV and France. However, like Wilson in 1919, Truman ignored these letters and refused to assist the Vietminh. Truman not only abhorred Communism, but also favored Europeans himself. He considered the U.S. relations with European countries to be of much more importance than the fate of Vietnam. In his eyes, Ho was an international Communist and a follower of Stalin, a prime enemy of the United States.⁶³

The DRV could have avoided war if Ho Chi Minh could have persuaded Truman that he was actually a Nationalist. Although Ho referred to himself as a Communist, he subordinated Communist revolution to national independence. In addition, his speeches and writings always stressed the theme of freedom rather than equality, which symbolized class conflict and national disunity.⁶⁴ In fact, Stalin did not support Ho because he believed this Vietnamese leader was a Vietnamese Nationalist first, and a Communist second. Thus, Stalin backed the French Communists, who advocated the French reassertion of colonialism in Indochina.⁶⁵

By February 1946, the French had successfully occupied southern Vietnam. Then, Chiang Kai-shek permitted them to replace Chinese troops north of the Sixteenth Parallel. Fearing the French return, Ho Chi Minh tried to negotiate Franco-Vietminh agreements that would preserve Vietnamese sovereignty. However, the French were determined to reestablish their rule in Vietnam. War was unavoidable. On December 19, 1946, the Franco-Vietminh War

⁶² “Speech by Ho Chi Minh, on the Resistance War in South Vietnam, November 1945,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 40.

⁶³ Prados, *Vietnam*, 19–21. The French regarded the DRV as the Vietminh.

⁶⁴ Ho Tai, *Radicalism*, 256.

⁶⁵ Moss, *Vietnam*, 39.

began.⁶⁶ France quickly realized that it was locked in a war it could not win. The Vietminh successfully planned for a protracted war against the French, a war that could last for years. It also controlled most of the countryside and had the support of most of the people. Marshall Leclerc stated that France needed half a million troops—an impossible number—to conquer Vietnam.⁶⁷ Thus, the French looked to the United States for assistance. By this time, Washington had increasing fear of the spread of Communism. The 1948 State Department Policy Statement on Indochina acknowledged that France was apparently losing its war in Indochina. The Statement called for support of the French in every way possible to defeat the Vietminh and establish a truly Nationalist government in Indochina. It claimed that revolutionary movements in former European colonies created anti-Western sentiments benefiting the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁶⁸ However, U.S. officials still limited themselves to providing the French army with airborne equipment and some naval vessels.⁶⁹

After the victory of the Chinese Communists over Nationalists in 1949, the United States became more committed to eliminating the Communist influence in Indochina. In 1950, Truman recognized the State of Vietnam (SVN), a Vietnamese puppet government created by the French and headed by Bao Dai. Several months later, the United States began to pay for the cost of the French war. Afterwards, Washington only increased aid, not ordering military intervention, but deepening American involvement in Indochina. At that time, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union had also begun to support the DRV.⁷⁰ The Franco-Vietminh War became an international conflict, in which nearly all the great powers of the world were involved.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁷ Prados, *Vietnam*, 22.

⁶⁸ "Department of State Policy Statement on Indochina, September 27, 1948," in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 73–76.

⁶⁹ Prados, *Vietnam*, 22.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 22–23.

In 1953, Dwight Eisenhower became American president. By then, France was losing while the DRV had become stronger. Thus, Eisenhower increased aid but he forced the French to fight the war more aggressively. Unwilling to abandon Indochina, General Henri Navarre proposed the Navarre Plan as a new military strategy to defeat the Vietminh. Navarre hoped to lure the Vietminh into a battle in Dien Bien Phu, a broad valley surrounded by hills in the Viet Bac, and destroy its army. Although Eisenhower doubted the possibility of the plan's success, he still supported France. In March 1953, the DRV forces under Giap successfully laid sieges around Dien Bien Phu and cut off French supply sources. Fearing that U.S. involvement would provoke the Chinese intervention, Navarre first did not ask Eisenhower for help. However, he finally realized the necessity of American military assistance. Therefore, the United States decided to bomb the Vietminh forces. Despite its efforts, Dien Bien Phu fell to the Vietminh on May 7, 1953. Eisenhower refused to further American intervention in Vietnam. His decision showed that in the 1950s America did not favor the escalation of war in Indochina and that there were insurmountable disagreements between the United States and France.⁷¹

Following Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference was held to solve the political and military conflicts in Indochina. Finally, the Geneva Accords imposed a cease-fire between France and the DRV, created two regrouping zones separated by the Seventeenth Parallel, and arranged general elections in July 1956 under the supervision of an international commission. French troops were required to withdraw from Indochina and the Vietnamese were free to live in any zone they wished.⁷² Geneva actually did not create two separate nations in Vietnam. The two regrouping zones did not have national status. They were to be reunited in 1956 by a

⁷¹ George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: "The Day We Didn't Go to War" Revisited," *The Journal of American History*, no. 2 (September 1984), 344–347.

⁷² "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on the Problem of Restoring Peace in Indochina, July 1954," in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 159–161.

political process in order to become a nation.⁷³ Had the Conference not taken place, the Vietminh might have continued fighting the war and destroyed the French. In the spring of 1954, it controlled most of the country.⁷⁴ However, both the Soviet Union and the PRC wanted to promote world peace in order to prevent further conflicts with the United States. In addition, the Vietminh leaders were not certain about the possibility of winning the war if America intervened militarily. Thus, the Vietnamese liberation of the entire country was postponed.⁷⁵

Geneva was a result of the U.S. efforts to prevent Ho Chi Minh from unifying Vietnam. Eisenhower strongly believed in the “Domino Theory,” which warned against the unstoppable spread of Communism throughout the world. Eisenhower said, “You have a row of dominos, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty it will go over very quickly.”⁷⁶ Moreover, since Republicans had criticized the Truman administration for losing China to the Communists, Eisenhower was determined not to lose Indochina. Geneva would give the United States an opportunity to impose its will on South Vietnam. Because Washington refused to sign the Geneva Accords, it was not bound by the agreements.⁷⁷

Geneva significantly disappointed the Vietminh leaders. However, they were prepared for a long struggle for independence. In his report to the Labor Party before Geneva, Ho Chi Minh asserted that the United States had become the “main and direct enemy of the Indochinese peoples.”⁷⁸ He advised the Vietnamese to direct their spearhead at the United States and not to underrate it. According to Ho, after 1954, the party would strongly oppose the U.S. direct intervention in Indochina and seek reunification of the country through nationwide elections. He

⁷³ Prados, *Vietnam*, 36.

⁷⁴ Moss, *Vietnam*, 70.

⁷⁵ King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 16.

⁷⁶ Prados, *Vietnam*, 29.

⁷⁷ Moss, *Vietnam*, 68.

⁷⁸ “Report by Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee, July 15, 1954,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 156–157.

encouraged all Vietnamese to endure for the sake of the nation, prepare for whatever might happen, and believe in the final independence of Vietnam. With this report, Ho demonstrated his mistrust of the United States and acknowledged that the Vietnamese struggle for independence had not succeeded. Although he had been willing to bow to Soviet and Chinese pressure and accepted the Geneva Accords, he was determined to achieve his goals at any cost.

Before the Geneva agreements were reached, Bao Dai dismissed his government's cabinet and appointed Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic Western-educated Nationalist, as his new prime minister. Diem was strongly anti-French and anti-Communist. Like Ho, Diem was born into a Confucian family and lived most of his early life abroad. However, he considered the Communists the enemies of Vietnamese nationalism. Therefore, he refused to join the Vietminh and decided to serve the State of Vietnam. The United States backed Diem to become the new leader of southern Vietnam in an attempt to replace the French and save South Vietnam from Communism. Diem's hatred of France, anti-Communism, religious background, and patriotism appealed to U.S. officials. In actuality, Diem had neither popular support nor political experience. U.S. officials just viewed him as the least bad choice.⁷⁹

In 1954, besides Diem, many French-backed political leaders in southern Vietnam also competed for the leadership of the SVN. Each of them had far more followers than Diem. Thanks to American economic and military assistance, Diem was able to overcome all of his political rivals and build an army.⁸⁰ In addition, Washington helped Diem plan the post-Geneva evacuations from the North. By maximizing the use of propaganda, Operation Passage to Freedom successfully moved nearly one million northern civilians, most of whom were Catholic, to the South. The refugees had several reasons to leave: first, they were afraid that the Vietminh

⁷⁹ Moss, *Vietnam*, 81–82.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

would not allow the practice of religion; second, they feared the Communist agrarian revolution and reprisals; and third, they believed in the U.S. description of South Vietnam as a country of prosperity and democracy.⁸¹ In retrospect, Ho Chi Minh had always guaranteed the freedom of religion. In his public letter to Catholic Vietnamese in 1949, Ho clearly stated that the Vietminh would protect them from the French invaders and linked the love of God with patriotism. He encouraged them “to serve God, to serve the Fatherland.”⁸²

Nonetheless, the DRV actually conducted a massive land reform campaign in the 1950s. In 1955, the campaign intensified with more emphasis on class struggle against the landlords. In fact, Ho Chi Minh was afraid that northern landlords might support Diem if war broke out. While the land reform law had sought to limit violent action, the actual situation often developed beyond the control of Ho and his associates. Thousands of innocent deaths were claimed. Not only rich peasants, but also small land renters were executed. In 1956, realizing extensive popular hostility toward government, Ho publicly admitted that serious mistakes had been made. He even made a self-criticism of his failure to supervise the land reform program.⁸³ Despite Ho’s apology, the program tainted the image of the Vietnamese Communists in the eyes of many northerners. Therefore, Diem had an opportunity to criticize North Vietnam for suppressing democracy and persuading a number of northern civilians to migrate south.⁸⁴

Despite the presence of the Catholic newcomers in the South, Diem needed more popular support to become the actual leader of South Vietnam. In 1955, he challenged two powerful Buddhist sects, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, and waged war against the Binh Xuyen, the crime lords of Saigon. By using swift tactics, Diem defeated the Binh Xuyen and integrated the Hoa

⁸¹ Prados, *Vietnam*, 41–42.

⁸² “Letter to Catholic Compatriots,” in *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Articles and Speeches, 1920–1967*, ed. Jack Woddis (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 45.

⁸³ Zhai, *China*, 75.

⁸⁴ Duiker, *Sacred War*, 99.

Hao and Cao Dai into his army. This victory helped Diem acquire more backing from the United States and secure his position. After 1955, Eisenhower committed himself to retaining the U.S. involvement in southern Vietnam. Finally, the United States and Diem supplanted Bao Dai and forced the French out of South Vietnam. Diem officially became the President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).⁸⁵

Both U.S. officials, affected by American idealism, and Diem considered the RVN a completely new modern state, which emerged out of a former colony of the French in southern Vietnam. However, the RVN was totally dependent on U.S. economic aid. The U.S. Commodity Import Program, which rapidly injected large sums of money into the small South Vietnamese economy, helped Diem fund the costs of his government. More importantly, American taxpayers had to endure the costs of the Diem regime. If the United States withdrew its support, the RVN would definitely cease to exist.⁸⁶ Thus, the RVN could be considered a dependency because it was actually a puppet government of the United States. In fact, the RVN was more or less another version of the State of Vietnam.

Based on the idea that the RVN was a new state, Diem denounced the Geneva Accords which Bao Dai signed in 1954. In his statement on the reunification of Vietnam in 1955, Diem even claimed that, as long as the Communist regime remained in power in North Vietnam, there could be no negotiations of any kind.⁸⁷ He ignored all communications with the DRV. In a similar fashion, neither the Soviet Union nor the PRC backed North Vietnam in its efforts to reunify the country under the Geneva terms. At that time, neither the Soviet Union nor the PRC had abandoned their world peace campaign. The United States threatened Ho with American

⁸⁵ Prados, *Vietnam*, 45–57.

⁸⁶ Moss, *Vietnam*, 87.

⁸⁷ “Declaration of the Government of the State of Vietnam on Reunification, August 9, 1955,” in *Vietnam, a History in Documents*, ed. Gareth Porter (New York: New American Library, 1981), 181–182.

military intervention if he sent troops south of the Seventeenth Parallel. Therefore, there was no national election in the summer of 1956, as provided for the Geneva Accords. Diem's refusal to hold nationwide elections was actually an unofficial declaration of war with North Vietnam. While Ho still hoped to achieve another election, North Vietnam realized that the United States and Diem were determined to undermine the unification of the country. In fact, Eisenhower acknowledged that if elections had been held in 1956, Ho would have certainly won.⁸⁸

After 1956, North Vietnam, under Ho Chi Minh, and South Vietnam, under Ngo Dinh Diem, could never find a way to compromise with each other. The Geneva Accords were eventually unable to unify Vietnam. The Vietnamese people still did not achieve the final independence of their country after nearly one hundred years struggling for that goal. Several years after 1956, war continued in Vietnam. U.S. leaders, who were ignorant of Vietnamese history, politics, and cultures, became deeply committed to the so-called Vietnam War. They believed that they were preventing Communism and building a modern democratic state in South Vietnam. In reality, they were suppressing the independence of the Vietnamese, who had already suffered from French colonialism for a century. The United States became responsible for the Vietnam War, which claimed millions of deaths and devastated Indochina. In fact, for nearly twenty years, Americans continuously carpet bombed Vietnam, polluted many rivers, denuded many forests, and destroyed millions of hectares of fertile farmland.⁸⁹

The war could have been avoided if American presidents had not been too anti-Communist and pro-Europe. While Ho Chi Minh was actually a Nationalist, U.S. leaders always assumed that there was a direct link between him and Moscow. Yet, Ho and his associates also held some responsibility for the Vietnam War. They underestimated American hatred of

⁸⁸ Moss, *Vietnam*, 88.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 453.

Communism and committed severe mistakes in conducting the land reform program, which made Diem's rise to power more likely. The Vietnam War was a result of the mutual misunderstanding between the DRV and the United States, American determination to intervene in Vietnamese affairs, and Soviet and Chinese schemes to postpone the reunification of Vietnam. During the war, northern and southern Vietnamese fought fiercely against each other. The Vietnamese people were actually victims of the political and diplomatic disagreements between the DRV and great powers. Accordingly, the Vietnam War was an international conflict rather than a civil war. Nearly forty years after the war's end, both Vietnamese and Americans should remember the grief and sadness of the war. Thus, they will not be likely to drag themselves into such an unnecessary and brutal war again.

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