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The Colonial Experience

THE FRENCH "MISSION CIVILISATRICE"

By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial edifice in Indochina was firmly in place. The Indochinese Union comprised five separate territories: protectorates in North Vietnam (known as Tonkin, from the Vietnamese phrase "eastern capital"), Central Vietnam (known as Annam, a Chinese historical term for Vietnam and translated as the "the pacified South"), Cambodia, and Laos, and the colony of Cochin China. At the top of the administrative hierarchy in the new union was a governor-general appointed from Paris to make policy for the entire region. To assist him were lower-ranking officials responsible for each of the five territories—French *résidents supérieurs* in each of the protectorates and a governor in Cochin China. In addition, French *résidents* were placed at the provincial level in the protectorates to provide advice to native administrators. In the central provinces of Annam, the emperor and his bureaucracy were permitted to retain a modicum of their quondam administrative authority. But in the North, the authority of the emperor was emasculated by making the *résident supérieur* the official representative of the court.

From the beginning, there was little question that the primary objectives of French colonial policy in Indochina were economic. For commercial interests, of course, the main purpose of colonialism was simply to register economic gain—to exploit the natural resources of the area and to open up new markets for the manufactured goods of the home country. For government officials in Paris, Hanoi, or Saigon, the perspective was somewhat more complicated, but not markedly at variance with the mercantile view. Although they were not blind to the seductive lure of commercial profit, for officials in Paris the main purpose of the French colonial venture in Southeast Asia could only be to enhance national security and prestige. There was no necessary contradiction between such objectives. In the prevailing wisdom of the day, nations, like living species, operated by the law of natural selection. Only the fittest nations survived, and those

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that could not adapt to changing conditions would be left behind in the brutal struggle for survival. For turn-of-the-century Europeans, national survival was directly linked to the possession of a colonial empire, which provided not only political and military power and influence but also the economic wealth that was itself the foundation of national strength.

But if there was no question of the ultimate objectives behind the French colonial effort, the purpose of the colonial enterprise that was presented to the public was quite another matter. Like most other contemporary practitioners of the colonial experiment, the French placed considerable emphasis on the moral aspect of colonialism—what in English-language countries was often summed up in the well-known phrase the "white man's burden." The lure of economic profit was, all things considered, the most crucial factor in provoking the French imperialist effort in Asia, but for millions of ordinary French citizens the primary justification for colonial rule was the civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*)—the obligation of the advanced peoples of the world to bring the benefits of modern civilization to the primitive peoples of Asia and Africa. In an earlier age, this sentiment had usually been cloaked in religious terms—to bring the word of the one true God to the heathen. By the end of the nineteenth century, the civilizing mission of French colonial rule could as easily be couched in secular terms: Commercial exploitation would bring Asian societies into the world market. This would lead not only to their economic enrichment but ultimately to the development of a modern society based on the concepts of representative government and individual freedom. The fact that such beliefs were smug and self-serving did not necessarily diminish the conviction with which they were held.

It was one thing to proclaim the existence of a French civilizing mission in Indochina. It was quite another to know how to carry it out. What were the responsibilities of the colonial power in Indochina? Were the colonial peoples to be exposed to the full panoply of Western values and institutions? Or should they be allowed to pick and choose in order to produce a viable synthesis of foreign and indigenous concepts? Could, indeed, the Vietnamese be transformed into—in the picturesque French phrase—"français de couleur"? Such questions were of more than academic interest. They went to the heart of the question of the nature of man. Was human nature universal? Were Asian peoples destined to repeat the path to industrial development and democracy now being trod in the West? Or, as Rudyard Kipling had proclaimed, were East and West divided by irreconcilable cultural and philosophical cleavages?

Moreover, there were potentially serious contradictions between the publicized goal of the white man's burden and the more pragmatic objective of exploiting the economic resources of the colonial territories for the benefit of the home country. How could the interests of the colonial peo-

ples be adequately protected when the primary objective of the colonial regime was to serve the commercial needs of the metropole? Would the colonial government promote the growth of an indigenous manufacturing and commercial sector in Indochina when the products of such a sector might compete against manufactured goods imported from France? Could the social and economic welfare of Indochinese workers and peasants be served when it was clearly in the interests of the French economy that prices of raw materials imported from Indochina be kept to a minimum? Finally, why should the French promote the capacity of the peoples of Indochina to create and operate democratic institutions when, in the end, such a society must inevitably wish to restore its independence?

Such questions underlined the ambiguities in French colonial policy and ultimately caused its undoing. From the beginning, French colonial strategy was marked by ambivalence and a coherent statement of political and social objectives in Indochina was never realized. From the outset, too, the civilizing mission was subordinated to the more immediate goal of commercial profit. The result was that most explosive of political combinations: heightened expectations followed by disillusionment.

Early colonial administrators in Cochín China, motivated primarily by the practical objective of facilitating the economic exploitation of the area, had attempted to minimize the impact of the French presence on the native population of Indochina. Where possible, the support of local elites was solicited to create the necessary conditions for efficient exploitation of the economic resources of the colony.

By the early years of the twentieth century, this policy, known in French colonial parlance as the philosophy of "association," had come increasingly under criticism. The attack came from diverse sources. In part it came from France, where liberal elements contended that the policy of association simply milked the colonies for their economic resources without in turn providing them with the benefits of Western civilization. A similar charge came from within Vietnam, where some intellectuals complained that the French were not living up to their promise to bring the benefits of Western civilization to the native population. The most vocal of such critics was probably the Confucian intellectual Phan Chu Trinh, who in a highly publicized letter to the French Governor-general Paul Beau called on the colonial government to live up to its civilizing mission and introduce Western institutions and values to Vietnamese society. Unfortunately, Trinh was arrested shortly afterward for taking part in peasant antitax riots in Central Vietnam. After a short period in prison, he was sent to live in exile in France.¹

Ultimately, such criticism led to a change in colonial policy. In the early twentieth century, the position of governor-general was occupied by a number of progressive colonial administrators who expressed French

determination to carry through its *mission civilisatrice* in Indochina. Under the guiding hand of such enlightened governors-general as Beau and Albert Sarraut, the French government began to devise reforms designed to introduce the local population to the benefits of Western civilization and to establish, as one of them declared in a moment of exuberance, a "politics of collaboration." The results were somewhat less than the early promise. The colonial regime set up legislative assemblies at the provincial level in Annam and Tonkin (a Colonial Council, dominated by French *colons* and limited in its authority, had already been established in Cochín China before the end of the century). These bodies, however, were only consultative and restricted in their membership and franchise and hardly represented a serious effort to initiate the Vietnamese people into democratic practices. Although some consideration was given to setting up a legislative body to provide political representation for the entire population of the Indochinese Union, the proposal never left the drawing board.

Similar problems plagued French policy in the field of education. Although liberal administrators attempted to set up a new system to introduce the native population to the values and institutions of the modern West, the system was haphazard and often contradictory in both theory and practice. The small colonial elite received an education in the French language and based roughly on the Western model, but the mass of the population received only a rudimentary exposure to Western culture and institutions, and for lack of funds, many young Vietnamese in rural areas received virtually no education at all. If education was a measure of the seriousness of the colonial effort, French practice fell far short of promise. According to historian Huê-Tam Hô Tai, during the mid-1920s there were slightly less than 200,000 Vietnamese students in the school system, with only about 17,000 of these in secondary schools. There were an additional 3,000 students registered in *lycées* and a handful at the University of Hanoi, created by Governor-general Paul Beau in 1902. According to her estimates, that meant that only about 10 percent of school-age children actually attended school.

The results were hardly what the apostles of the *mission civilisatrice* would have wished. As the patriotic Confucian intellectual Duong Ba Trac wrote in the journal *Nam Phong*, those students who failed to graduate from elementary school became the "shock troops of rebellion," while their counterparts at the secondary level became "frustrated talents" angry with the status quo.²

Above all, performance of the colonial regime was judged in the area of economic and social progress. The primary objective of colonialism, of course, was to provide financial profit to the home country and to its citizens operating in Indochina. On the other hand, one of the major justifications of French colonial rule was that it would improve the standard of

living of the local population and thus increase the productive capacity of society and its ability to compete effectively within the international economic order. As one French colonial administrator, Paul Reynaud, remarked in the early 1930s, it was quite obvious that most Vietnamese would prefer independence. The best way for the French to justify their presence was to demonstrate that economic and social benefits resulted from colonial rule.

The centerpiece of the colonial argument was that French colonial rule would create a modernized commercial and manufacturing sector, improve transport and communications, and generally improve the local standard of living. Along these lines, apologists for the colonial regime pointed out that under French rule there was general economic progress in Vietnam. In the big cities of Hanoi, Haiphong, Saigon, and Da Nang, as well as in smaller provincial capitals and market towns like Vinh, Nam Dinh, and Qui Nhon in the Center and My Tho and Can Tho in the Mekong delta, a young and vigorous commercial and manufacturing sector gradually emerged. Most of this activity was in the area of light industry: textiles, paper, sugar, matches, bicycle assembly, and food processing. There was little in the way of heavy industry, although the coal mines along the coast north of Haiphong are worthy of note. Defenders of the regime also pointed with pride to progress in transport and communications. Under French rule, bridges were built over the major waterways, railroads were constructed from Hanoi to Saigon and from Hanoi north to the Chinese border and thence on to Kunming, and what many described as the best system of metalled roads in all of Southeast Asia was established.

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the French in rural areas was the expansion of the amount of land under cultivation. Swampy and frequently inundated by salt water, the lower Mekong delta was generally unfit for the cultivation of wet rice during the precolonial period. The French drained many of the marshlands and built a series of canals that put thousands of acres under cultivation for the first time. They were also active in piedmont areas and in the *terre rouge* (red lands) along the Cambodian border. Here new cash crops for the export market, like coffee, tea, and rubber were cultivated in plantations owned by the French but worked by Vietnamese laborers hired from the crowded villages of the North. In the early years of the twentieth century, rubber became, after rice, the second major source of export earnings in Indochina.

How effective such measures were in increasing the productive potential of the economy and raising the standard of living of the native population is a matter of dispute. Defenders of the colonial regime frequently pointed to the steady growth in rice exports as an indication that the French presence had a beneficial impact on the living standard of the mass

of the rural population. At the height of the export boom, in the mid-1930s, as much as 300,000 metric tons of milled rice were exported from Vietnamese ports each year. Critics charged, however, that such statistics were seriously misleading and that in actuality living conditions in rural areas may have declined during the period of colonial rule. Higher taxes, French monopolies on the production and sale of salt, alcohol, and opium, and the creation of a market economy that led to rising land concentration and rural tenancy all combined to make life more difficult for many peasants and to drive many below the level of subsistence.

This is not the place to attempt a definitive assessment of the question, for statistics can often be misleading. There are indications that rural standards of living, at least in Cochin China, may have risen between 1900 and 1930 but then declined during and after the Great Depression in the 1930s.³ And although thousands of acres of new land were opened up by drainage of the marshy areas in the Mekong delta, much of this land was held by absentee landlords who leased out small parcels of land to poor peasants from Annam and Tonkin for high rents, sometimes as much as 50 percent of the annual harvest. For those who left their lands to seek employment in the cities, on the plantations in southern Indochina, or in French colonies abroad, a new environment often did not bring an improvement in circumstances. For many it was undoubtedly far worse. Living conditions on the rubber plantations in Cochin China were harsh, and frequently led to disease or even to the death of the worker. Although in principle recruitment was voluntary, in practice it was often coercive and accompanied by violence. The situation for workers in factories or in the coal mines was little better. Working hours were long, and pay scales were low and housing was abysmal.⁴

This, of course, is a pattern familiar to all societies in an early stage of capital and industrial advancement. The commercialization of agriculture forces excess laborers from the villages into the cities in a desperate search for jobs. The fortunate ones obtain employment in factories or in plantations or coal mines. Others, living adjacent to the cities, keep one foot in the village, the other in the factory, working the fields at harvest time and seeking jobs in the cities during the off-season.

This process had occurred during the early stages of the industrial revolution in Europe and has been repeated in other parts of the world recently. In Europe, the process of agricultural modernization, although tragic enough in its consequences for those who suffered personal hardship as a result of it, eventually led to the rise of industrial societies based on the concepts of representative democracy. Land concentration and capital investment in rural areas led to a more efficient system of agriculture. Surplus workers in the cities provided the cheap labor that, combined with the increase in capital and technological advancement, fueled the

emergence of modern capitalism. Unfortunately, in Vietnam the consequences were not so beneficial. In good part, this was a direct result of colonial policy. The French did not encourage the development of an indigenous commercial and manufacturing sector. To the contrary, commerce and manufacturing in colonial Vietnam tended to be dominated by European interests or by foreign immigrants such as the Chinese and Indians. Moreover, government policy attempted to discourage the development of local industries that might compete with French goods by a tariff policy that encouraged French imports. In effect, Vietnam was forced to undergo the painful stresses of agricultural modernization without the benefit of rapid industrial growth in the cities.

Here, of course, was one of the fundamental weaknesses of colonialism as a vehicle for the modernization of preindustrial societies. The implied or stated promise of colonial policy was to undertake needed measures to bring about social and economic change and political democracy, but such objectives frequently conflicted with the economic priorities of the ruling power and its citizens. When such conflicts took place, of course, the latter normally took precedence. France, like most colonial powers, was a democracy that was ultimately responsible to its domestic constituency in France and the European population in Indochina. Because the interests of the Vietnamese were inadequately represented in Paris, these interests tended to be ignored.

SOURCES OF NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM

The Vietnamese response to the French conquest had been surprisingly weak in view of the long tradition of national resistance to foreign aggression. That is not to say, however, that resistance to foreign rule was totally lacking. In fact, a relatively substantial movement of opposition to the French emerged at the grass-roots level, among civilian and military officials, urban residents, and even among peasants in the village. Much of this was disorganized and sporadic, however, and suffered from lack of support from the court. Indeed, after the Treaty of Saigon, the emperor, fearful of French wrath, expressly forbade resistance activities and attempted to quell them in areas under his control. In some instances, local elite groups raised the flag of rebellion despite lack of approval from the court. The most worthy of mention was the guerrilla movement organized by the patriot leader Phan Dinh Phung in the hills of central Vietnam, a movement that was not finally quelled until Phung's death in 1896. In general, however, such spontaneous resistance was ineffectual and, lacking either organization or the capacity to counter the technological superiority of French firepower, was put down by the French with relatively little difficulty.

By the opening of the twentieth century, then, the French colonial regime was firmly in place. Some Vietnamese managed with few compunctions to live with the new situation. A new class of native "collaborators" sprang up to cooperate with the foreigners and facilitate the operations of their new regime. Some became low-level functionaries of the bureaucracy—clerks, translators, village officials, and mandarins in areas still ruled by the imperial court. Others became members of a new class of economic middlemen—local employees of the colonial enterprises, foremen in the rubber plantations and coal mines. Others, while not directly tied to the regime or to the enterprises of the Europeans, nevertheless benefited directly from their presence—lawyers, agronomists, engineers, architects, and the members of that small but vocal group, the affluent commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie.

For such elements, of course, the colonial presence represented their livelihood. Many of them were attracted to the glittering quality of Western civilization and adapted quickly to it, learning the French language, dressing in French clothes, eating French food, and if they could afford it, living in French-style houses. Collectively, this class would perform the role of middlemen between the French colonial regime and the mass of the population and would be the most visible evidence to apologists of colonialism that the *mission civilisatrice* was succeeding.

Although some members of the small but influential Vietnamese elite came to terms with the new circumstances, others did not and attempted to carry on the struggle of Phan Dinh Phung and other opponents of the French conquest, albeit by different means. Most prominent of this new generation of patriots was the well-known scholar Phan Boi Chau. Born in Central Vietnam in 1867, Chau was exposed to classical learning as a child and later gained local renown for his achievement in the Confucian civil service examinations. But even as a boy, he had ardently opposed the French conquest, and after early attempts to organize resistance in his village had failed, he was quick to conclude that new methods were required in new conditions. After reading a number of books by leading progressive intellectuals like K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, he formed the Modernization Society (Duy Tan Hoi) in 1903 to evict the French and build a new Vietnamese society based on the Western model. Then he went to Japan to establish a training institute for Vietnamese patriots and write propaganda for the cause of national independence.

Some scholars have pointed out that Phan Boi Chau, like so many Asian intellectuals of his generation, was not truly a modern man. It is true that Chau was strongly influenced by Confucian ethics and the Confucian worldview, and even his arguments for reform were often couched in Confucian teachings. The expressed goal of his Modernization Society was to create a constitutional monarchy, and he selected a member of the

royal family, Prince Cuong De, as the titular head of his movement. But in many ways Phan Boi Chau broke sharply with the past, and there was nothing insincere or contrived about his conversion to modern values and modern ways. In *New Vietnam (Tan Viet Nam)*, a short pamphlet that he wrote while living in Japan, he sketched an outline of a new society strikingly modern in its characteristics.

Phan Boi Chau also had a surprisingly modern understanding of the concept of a nation. On one occasion he remarked: "When I read the books of Asian Confucian scholars I learned the words 'loyalty to the king' (*trung quan*). But later I read many foreign books and discovered that the word 'patriotism' (*ai quoc*) was stronger than the phrase 'loyalty to the king.'" Chau had obviously read a number of Western books on the subject. In *An Outline History of the Vietnamese Nation (Viet Nam Quoc Su Khao)*, he noted that a nation must have three things: people, territory, and a government. Of the three, he emphasized, the people are the most important. Only with people can a nation (*nuoc*) exist, and if the power of the people is lost, then the nation itself is lost.⁵

Phan Boi Chau heeded these words in his efforts to organize a popular movement to evict the French. In his writings from Japan and later from China, he called for all Vietnamese, regardless of age, sex, ethnic origins, or religious preference, to rise up in a common effort against the invader. He was refreshingly free from gender or class prejudice, and appeared to give as much weight to the participation of women and the poor as to that of his own class of scholar-patriots. It was to the latter, however, that he turned for leadership of the movement, and most of the leading members of his organization were members of the scholar-gentry class.

Although Phan Boi Chau spent much of his active life writing tracts in defense of his cause, his approach to the task of evicting the French was essentially activist. "To know and not to do," he remarked, "is the same as not knowing." By his own admission he was possessed of a passionate temperament, and during his long life he frequently vacillated between periods of optimism and deep despair. "I feel," he once said, "like a blind boy riding a blind horse."⁶

Indeed, his disappointments were many. Efforts at revolt by his followers inside Vietnam were pitilessly crushed by the French. When in 1908 he was ordered to leave Japan because of a change of policy in Tokyo, he sought support from Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement in China. Sun had told him when the two had met in Japan in 1905 that after the Manchus were overthrown, all the efforts of the Chinese people would be utilized to help other nations of Asia achieve their own independence. To Phan Boi Chau, the 1911 revolution that brought an end to the Ch'ing dynasty and the establishment of the first Chinese republic must have seen like an act of deliverance. The Chinese revolution, he remarked, was like

"an explosion and an echo vibrating among the people of many nations." An explosion it was, but its shock waves did not reach Indochina. Preoccupied with their own problems, Sun Yat-sen and his followers paid little attention to Phan Boi Chau's appeals, and in 1914, his efforts to promote rebellion in Vietnam aborted, he was arrested by Chinese authorities. Although he was released a few years later, he had lost much of his rebellious spirit and most of his followers.⁷

While Phan Boi Chau was breaking his lance on the solid rock of the French colonial edifice, others took a longer view and focused their attention on the ineluctable fact that national liberation would signify little unless the Vietnamese people were introduced to the changing realities of the new century. It was this conviction that had inspired Phan Chu Trinh to appeal to Governor-general Paul Beau in his public letter of 1906, and a similar view had motivated a number of Trinh's contemporaries when they founded the famous Tonkin Free School (*Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc*) in Hanoi on 1907. The founders of the school were Confucian scholars who, like Phan Boi Chau, had been influenced by the reformist writings of progressive intellectuals in China and hoped to introduce young Vietnamese to the ideas of the modern West. Classes at the school taught practical subjects such as mathematics and the social sciences and introduced students to *quoc ngu*, Alexander of Rhodes' transliteration of the Vietnamese language in the Roman alphabet that was now being popularized as a replacement for the cumbersome Chinese characters.

The distinction between reformists and revolutionaries was a classical example of a pattern that was seen in anticolonialist parties throughout early-twentieth-century Asia, and would later present a major obstacle to cooperative efforts to drive out the French. But at the beginning of the century the differences between the two approaches were somewhat blurred. Phan Boi Chau encouraged the work of the founders of the school, and they in turn often spoke and wrote favorably about his activities. One reason for this collaborative attitude was that leading elements of both factions were Confucian intellectuals who had been influenced by reformist writings in China as well as the Meiji Restoration in Japan. All shared the common goal of building a modern and independent Vietnam. Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh were childhood friends whose exchanged letters, some of which have been published, offer a personal flavor to the political debate.⁸

Ultimately, the reformist approach had no more success than had Phan Boi Chau in shaking the foundations of the colonial regime. The Free School was closed down by the French after only eight months in operation, and Phan Chu Trinh, one of the school's most prominent supporters, was arrested on charges of sedition and later exiled to France. The first stage in the rise of modern nationalism in Vietnam had thus achieved few

concrete results. But Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chu Trinh, and their scholarly collaborators had aroused the sympathy of much of the nation. When Trinh died of cancer shortly after his return to Vietnam in 1925, his funeral became the occasion of mass mourning throughout the country. Phan Boi Chau had been arrested and returned to Hanoi for trial the same year, and his conviction had aroused widespread outrage and sympathy from his compatriots.

In particular, the writings and activities of the generation of scholar-patriots had touched the hearts and minds of young intellectuals who had been raised in the shadow of colonial rule.

The quickening pace of commerce and industry in the cities led to the rise of a new urban class. Composing this new petty bourgeoisie were shop clerks, petty functionaries in the bureaucracy, schoolteachers, journalists and students. Throughout the colonial world it has characteristically been among this class of urban intelligentsia that the first signs of serious resistance to colonial rule have begun to appear. Such was the case in Vietnam. Living in the cities, educated in the new Franco-Vietnamese school system, this class made up the first generation of Vietnamese to have a first-hand understanding of the nature of Western culture and its impact on Vietnamese society. Having absorbed the doctrine of progress, certainly one of the primary attributes of the modern Western outlook on life, many of them had developed rising expectations about their personal futures and were quick to discern the yawning gap between the promise and the realities of the colonial experiment. Many, indeed, had come from families of elite status within the traditional society and soon sensed the frustration of blocked access to positions of wealth, prestige, and influence.⁹

For most, the Western concepts of democracy, science and technology, and material affluence had considerable appeal. Few indeed wished to return to the now discredited doctrines and practices of traditional Sino-Vietnamese society. Their reaction to Western culture was thus inevitably somewhat ambivalent. Admiration for the progressive aspects of Western society, and a firm desire that the future of Vietnam should follow a similar path, were colored by the conviction that the path to that bright future (in both personal and national terms) was obstructed by the colonial presence.

The emotional and intellectual outlet for the frustrations and aspirations of Vietnamese educated youth was thus focused on a new and heightened sense of nationhood based on the vision of a democratic and economically advanced society. The first clear sign of this new sense of nationalism began to appear during and immediately following World War I. In all three regions of Vietnam, small factions dedicated to the eviction of the colonial regime began to appear among radical youth in the cities.

In some cases, such groups were little more than student organizations agitating for economic or political reforms, or small coteries of urban intellectuals vacillating between reformist agitation and violent revolution.

The French authorities were quick to respond to such agitation, and demonstrations in Saigon and other major cities were broken up and their perpetrators placed in jail. When student riots took place, schools were closed. Publications considered hostile to the regime were shut down, and all others were exposed to vigorous official censorship. For a while, such preventive efforts appeared to take the heart out of the opposition. But in the last years of the 1920s a sense of professional commitment began to emerge with the formation of political organizations dedicated to the achievement of total independence. Even at this early stage, however, the nascent nationalist movement showed signs of incipient weakness. Most nationalist organizations were factions rather than parties; often they were identified with a region or an individual rather than imbued with a sense of common national interest. Some, like the sects in the South, sought regional autonomy more than the eviction of the French. There was disagreement, too, over ultimate goals. Although the majority of participants undoubtedly sought independence, some were dedicated to violent revolution while others hoped to achieve their goals through reformist measures. A few would tolerate or even seek a continuing tie with France.

Perhaps a more serious obstacle to the effectiveness of the nationalist movement was its inability to build a base among the mass of the population. Whereas the generation of scholar patriots like Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh had their roots in the village, the nationalist parties in the 1920s were composed primarily of radical urban youths, with a sprinkling of older patriotic figures; few had close ties with peasants and workers. As a result, such parties suffered from the typical weaknesses of elite groups. For the most part, their goals reflected the aspirations of the educated middle class—increased political rights, equal pay for equal work, democratic freedoms, female emancipation, and so on. Although not unsympathetic to the poor—many of their programs called for lower taxes, equality of landholding, and the right of collective bargaining—they tended to concentrate on political issues that had little meaning to the average Vietnamese. And in the tradition of fledgling revolutionary organizations, they tended to see the final uprising as an affair of a few rather than the result of a patient mobilization of the force of the mass of the population.

The failure of the nationalist parties to prepare for a mass struggle to overthrow the colonial regime was not simply a consequence of inadequate understanding or execution by patriotic intellectuals. Until the late 1920s, neither peasants nor workers had become politically aroused in the nationalist cause. Rural discontent had broken out sporadically in the

years since the French conquest—notably a series of peasant riots against high taxes and mandarin corruption in the provinces south of Huê in 1908—but on the whole peasant discontent had been focused on economic rather than on political issues. The situation was similar with the small Vietnamese working class. A Vietnamese proletariat had begun to appear early in the century in the factories, the shipyards, and the coal mines run by the French and by the decade following World War I numbered nearly 200,000 men and women. The first signs of worker organization appeared in the early 1920s when Ton Duc Thang, a radical nationalist recently returned from France, began to organize secret labor unions in the factories and on the docks in Saigon. For a few years overt activity was quelled, but with the onset of the Depression in the late 1920s, worker strikes became increasingly frequent. Most were staged primarily for economic objectives—higher salaries, shorter hours, paid vacations, and improved working conditions—but they were a sign of increasing activism within the growing laboring class.

It was in these conditions that the Indochinese Communist party (ICP) made its appearance in Vietnam. The founder of the party was the young patriot Ho Chi Minh, then known under the earlier pseudonym of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot). Son of a patriotic official in Nghe An province in Central Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh was educated at the prestigious National Academy in Huê but apparently left school before graduation and took employment on a French ocean liner as a cook's helper. After several years at sea, he settled in Paris after the end of World War I and became active in radical circles. In 1920 he joined the French Communist party (FCP) and three years later was summoned to Moscow to receive training as an agent of the Comintern. In late 1924, he returned to South China and formed a proto-communist organization among Vietnamese radicals in exile called the Revolutionary Youth League. Fiercely dedicated, an astute organizer with a seductive and charismatic personality, Ho Cho Minh had good success in winning support from the radical youth in Vietnam, and by the end of the decade, membership in the organization had reached more than one thousand. In 1930, after a brief split caused by policy disagreements, the league was transformed into the ICP.

The party appeared at a significant juncture in the colonial era. After several decades of relatively peaceful conditions, in 1930 serious disturbances took place in both urban and rural areas. The immediate cause of the unrest was the Great Depression. Plant closings exacerbated existing anger over salaries and working conditions and led to strikes in several factories in cities throughout Vietnam. Similar unrest broke out at rubber plantations near Bien Hoa in Cochinchina. By midsummer, the agitation had spread to rural areas in the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. In September, rioting peasants seized power in local villages, terror-

ized local officials, and, incited by Communist activists, set up so-called soviets and in some cases distributed commune land to the poor. The French reacted swiftly, dispatching a unit of legionnaires to the rebellious districts and bombing a procession of angry peasants marching toward the provincial capital of Vinh. By the spring and summer of 1931, the revolt had been quelled, and thousands of participants, including most of the leadership of the ICP, were in prison. To the Comintern leadership in Moscow, the so-called Nghe-Tinh revolt must have seemed the harbinger of revolution throughout Asia, as the impoverished masses rose to overthrow their colonial masters. If so, the hope was to be seriously disappointed. With most of their leadership dead or in prison and their apparatus within Vietnam a shambles due to government repression, the ICP and other radical nationalist parties were unable to pose a serious threat to French rule for a decade. The masses were quiet if sullen. For several years, the resistance movement in Vietnam came to a virtual standstill.

THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II

The suddenly precarious stability of the French colonial regime was further shattered by the Pacific crisis and the expansion of Japanese power into Southeast Asia at the end of the 1930s. Since early in the century, many Japanese politicians had felt a mild proprietary interest in the anticolonial movements in Southeast Asia and particularly in Vietnam. Between 1905 and 1908, Japan had permitted Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian radical groups to establish headquarters in exile in Japan, and some politicians had implied that Tokyo might encourage revolutionary struggles for independence in colonial areas. In 1908, however, Japanese policy shifted when Tokyo reached an agreement with France and the United States on mutual spheres of influence in Asia, and radical anticolonialists such as Phan Boi Chau were ordered to leave Japan.

In the late 1930s, Japanese interest in Southeast Asia revived. Expansion into Soviet Siberia had been thwarted by the pact signed by Tokyo's ally Germany with the Soviet Union in August 1939. Plans for domination of China had been sidetracked by unexpectedly strong resistance from Chiang Kai-shek and his government, now holed up in its mountain capital of Chungking. Anxious to put the "China incident" to an end and lured by the promise of rich mineral resources in colonial Southeast Asia, Japanese military strategists in 1940 adopted a new southward strategy directed at incorporating the European colonies in Southeast Asia into a new Japanese-directed "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere."

The first impact of the new policy was felt in Indochina in the summer of 1940, when Tokyo demanded that the French government prohibit the shipment of goods to China from Tonkin and provide Japan with mili-

tary and economic privileges in the northern provinces of Indochina. After some hesitation, during which time Governor-general Georges Catroux sought in vain the promise of military assistance from the United States to counter a possible Japanese invasion of the area, the colonial regime eventually acceded to the Japanese demands. By the summer of 1941, Japan had expanded its presence into Cochín China and, under the cover of the now intimidated French Vichy government, seized control of the area. The fiction of French sovereignty was temporarily retained, but in fact the Japanese had become masters of Indochina.

In the last analysis, the primary benefactors of the Japanese occupation of Indochina were the Communists. The nationalist parties were divided over how to respond to the new situation. A few, like the Vietnamese Nationalist party (VNQDD), which had been a significant force in Tonkin since 1927, declared their hostility to both the Japanese and to the French and maintained their headquarters for the duration in South China. Others, including several smaller nonviolent parties in Saigon and the Cao Dai sect, accepted Japanese promises to bestow independence on colonial peoples in Asia and decided to cooperate with the new rulers. For the Communists, there was no question that the Japanese, along with the French, were to be treated like an enemy. Indeed, to Ho Chi Minh, recently returned to the area after several years in the Soviet Union, the war and its consequences in Indochina represented a great opportunity. If, as Ho predicted, Japan went to war with the United States and eventually lost, its defeat could create a vacuum in Vietnam at the end of the war that the ICP might hope to fill before the arrival of Allied occupation forces to accept the surrender of Japanese troops.

In the spring of 1941, the ICP Central Committee met in a small mountain village near the Chinese border and inaugurated a new revolutionary strategy to seize power at the end of the Pacific war. The political centerpiece of the new approach was the establishment of a new united front, called the League for the Independence of Vietnam, Vietminh for short. In order to attract patriotic elements from all social classes the Communist direction of the new front would be disguised. Radical social measures, such as the nationalization of industry and the collectivization of agriculture, would be avoided, and a moderate program would be adopted calling for social reforms and democratic freedoms. The primary focus of the new front would be on the struggle for independence.

Supplementing the new political approach was a new military strategy. Borrowing from the experience of its fraternal party in China, the ICP turned to the strategy of people's war to mobilize support from peasants and workers, set up liberated base areas in isolated areas of the country, and then, through a combination of guerrilla tactics and popular uprisings, seize power in both rural and urban areas at the end of the war. For

the next four years, the Communists painstakingly built up the new Vietminh Front in villages throughout North Vietnam. Guerrilla forces were created in the mountains adjacent to the Chinese border and, in 1944, the Vietminh leadership set up the first units of what would eventually become the Vietnamese Liberation Army.

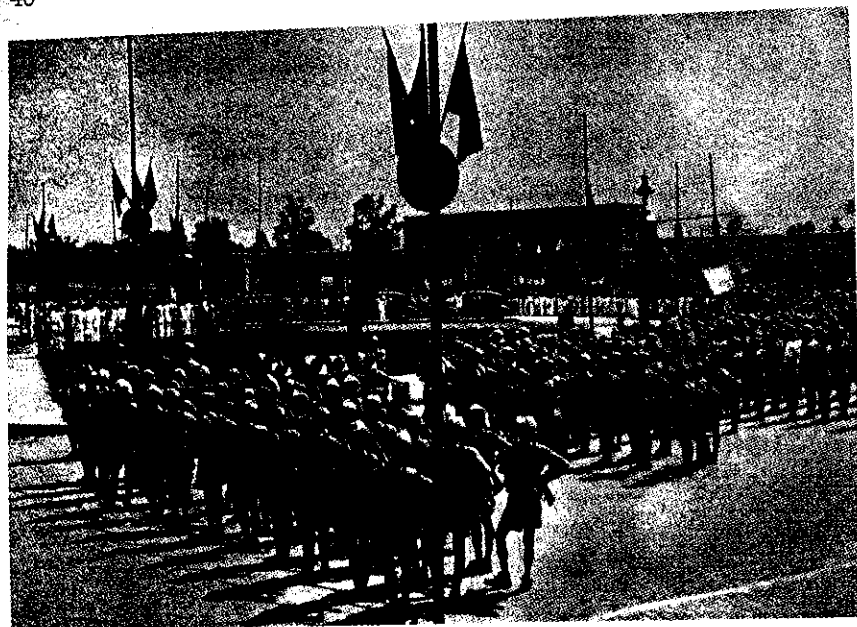
In March 1945, the Japanese occupation authorities, suspicious of growing support for the Gaullist Free French movement among French civilian and military officials in Indochina, deposed the French colonial regime and granted a spurious independence to a pro-Japanese puppet government under the puppet emperor Bao Dai. The Japanese coup improved Communist prospects for victory at war's end. Not only was the French regime now dismantled, but the Japanese did not bother to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the French administrative apparatus in rural areas. Into that vacuum, the Vietminh would be free to move.

THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

On August 14, 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allies. At approximately that moment, the Communists appealed to their supporters to rise and seize power in Vietnam. Within two weeks, forces under the Vietminh Front had seized control of most rural villages and cities throughout the North, including Hanoi, where President Ho Chi Minh announced the formation of the Provisional Democratic Republic. In the Center, forces under Communist direction seized the imperial capital of Huế and compelled the abdication of Bao Dai. In Cochín China, the Vietminh combined with other nationalist parties in forming a Committee of the South, which claimed to voice the legitimate aspirations of the population.

It had been a masterful performance. With an army of only a few thousand poorly armed guerrillas, the Communists had seized control of most of the country under the noses of the Japanese occupation authorities. The keys to success, as Ho Chi Minh had pointed out to his colleagues, were the elements of initiative and surprise. Power would have to be seized in the interval between the surrender of the Japanese and the arrival of Allied expeditionary forces (the British in the South, the Nationalist Chinese in the North) as called for by the Potsdam conference in August. If the Vietminh could present the Allies with a *fait accompli*, the new provisional republican government might obtain recognition as the legitimate representative of the wishes of the Vietnamese people.

The Communists came within an eyelash of succeeding. The August Revolution was a brilliant success. In less than two weeks, the North and Center were almost entirely in Communist hands, in a virtually bloodless takeover. The Japanese were lured into taking a neutral attitude toward the situation, and the noncommunist nationalists, for the most part, were



Crowds listening to Ho Chi Minh declare Vietnamese independence in September 1945. (Source: *Ho Chu Tich Song Mai Trong Su Nghiep Chung Ta.*)

ineffective or still in South China. Only in Cochin China was the Vietminh forced to share power. Here, where the influence of moderate nationalism and the sects had been high since before the war, the Vietminh played an influential but not a dominant role in the Committee of the South.

In September, Allied occupation troops began to arrive in Vietnam. In the North, the Chinese military command had relatively little interest in the political situation and proved willing to deal with Ho Chi Minh's new government, although it pressed Ho to broaden its base by including in the cabinet members of rival nationalist parties. This Ho Chi Minh was willing to do, and in late autumn an agreement was reached calling for the formation of a coalition government with Ho as president and a prominent nationalist, Nguyen Hai Than, as vice-president. National elections were scheduled to be held in January 1946. A constitution for the new state, to be known formally as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was promulgated early in 1946. In the meantime, at Ho Chi Minh's insistence the social and economic policies of the new government were basically moderate—only major industries and utilities were nationalized, taxes were reduced, and a mild program of land reform was instituted.¹⁰

The Communists were less successful in the South. Not only did local nationalist groups and French residents pose greater resistance to Viet-

minh domination of the new Committee of the South, but the commander of the British expeditionary forces, General Douglas Gracey, was sympathetic to the restoration of French colonial rule and, in defiance of the agreement at Potsdam to avoid intervention in the local political situation, disarmed the Vietminh and other nationalist groups and turned power over to the French, whose military units began to arrive in October. During the fall, the Vietminh were driven forcibly from the city into the countryside, where French troops gradually pacified most of the area and returned the villages to French administration. For the moment, local Vietminh forces were unable to counter French moves and were reduced to sporadic guerrilla action. In effect, within three months of the end of the war, Vietnam had been divided into two hostile zones—a Communist North and a French South. The ultimate shape of a generation of conflict had begun to take form.¹¹

For several months, the French and the Communist-dominated government in Hanoi attempted to avoid full-scale war. In March, Ho Chi Minh signed a preliminary agreement with the French representative in Indochina, Jean Sainteny, calling for French recognition of Vietnam as a "free state," with its own army, parliament, and finances. In return, the Vietnamese government would agree to accept a continuing French cultural, economic, and political presence in Vietnam and to join the projected French Union. French troops could be stationed in the North to protect French interests and residents. Because the two negotiators could not agree on whether to include Cochin China in the new free state, a plebiscite was called for to allow the local population to determine the future status of the colony. Ho Chi Minh had only with difficulty persuaded the ICP Central Committee and the cabinet (which included a number of militantly anti-French nationalists) of the need for a compromise. In the end, however, Ho's arguments were undoubtedly persuasive. The Vietnamese government in Hanoi was now isolated on the global scene (the United States, which had earlier expressed some reservations about the return of the French, had now moved perceptibly toward the French position, while the Soviet Union, the Vietminh's major potential supporter, was preoccupied with events in Europe and inclined to counsel the ICP to moderation) and not yet strong enough to achieve its ultimate goal of independence by armed force. While a free state was considerably less than the Communists wanted, it would give them time to consolidate their strength and prepare for a further advance in the near future.

In June, full-scale negotiations began at Fontainebleau, outside of Paris, to work out remaining differences and reach a final settlement. By then, however, the preliminary agreement itself was in peril. Each side accused the other of bad faith, but the major source of difficulty emanated from Saigon, where pro-French elements within the colonial community,

encouraged by the new high commissioner for Indochina, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu (the new title replaced the prewar position of governor-general) set out to sabotage the Ho-Sainteny Agreement, which d'Argenlieu had publicly labeled a "Munich." In April, d'Argenlieu convened a separate conference consisting of pro-French and anticommunist elements in Cochin China in the mountain resort town of Dalat. Predictably, the conference rejected membership in the projected free state governed from Hanoi and declared its preference for the establishment of a separate republic of Cochin China that would make its own arrangements with Paris.

In the meantime, a new government had taken office in France that showed itself less receptive to a compromise in Indochina. When formal negotiations got under way at Fontainebleau in June, the French position had hardened. Despite pleas from Ho Chi Minh, who warned that failure to achieve an agreement would only strengthen the hand of militants in the Hanoi government, French delegates took a hard-line position at the talks, and in late summer the negotiations broke down and the Vietnamese delegation returned to Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh, convinced that the Vietminh was not yet strong enough to risk war, remained in Paris and in September signed a "modus vivendi" that called for a cease-fire and a resumption of talks early the following year.

During the fall it became increasingly apparent that war could not be avoided. As tensions rose, bloody clashes broke out in the North between local Vietnamese forces and French troops stationed in the area. Ho Chi Minh, who had returned to Hanoi in October, attempted to keep the channels of negotiation open while strengthening the Communist role in the government and ordering preparations for military conflict. In November, disagreement over control of customs authority led to a brutal French bombing of the native quarter at Haiphong. As incidents increased in December, the French military and command in the North demanded that French troops be given responsibility for law and order. Convinced that war was unavoidable, the Vietminh launched a surprise attack on French installations in Hanoi on December 19. While local forces engaged in a holding operation, main force Vietminh units gradually withdrew to prepared base areas in the countryside and prepared to resume guerrilla war.¹²

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR BEGINS

As the Franco-Vietminh conflict began, the Communists were not in an enviable position. Their military forces were small and lacked the firepower to pose a serious challenge to the French. Aid from their socialist allies would be limited. The U.S.S.R. was distant and more concerned over

the prospects of a Communist government in Paris than those of a successful revolutionary struggle in far-off Indochina. The Chinese Communist party (CCP) was fully occupied in North China with its own civil war against the forces of Chiang Kai-shek. Even within Vietnam, the situation was ambiguous. Increasing evidence that the Communists were the dominant force behind the Vietminh Front and the DRV had alienated many moderates and made them reluctant to support the front in its struggle against French colonialism. In an effort to take advantage of this situation, the French negotiated with former Emperor Bao Dai (in late summer 1945, he had, with some reluctance, caved in to Vietminh pressure and abdicated the throne, accepting in its stead the sinecure of supreme political adviser to the provisional republican government) to accept the position of chief of state in a new French-supported "Associated State of Vietnam." In 1949, Bao Dai accepted this arrangement, although, according to the Elysée Accords, the new state possessed only limited powers. Vital issues dealing with both internal and foreign policy remained in the hands of the French. The "Bao Dai solution" did provide an alternative to Ho Chi Minh's government, but most nationalists viewed it as simply a creation of French colonialism.

During 1947, the Vietminh were reduced to a struggle for sheer survival. Guerrilla units hid in the mountains of the Viet Bac, or in the Central Highlands or the Plain of Reeds further to the south, while the party leadership urgently concentrated on building up the strength of the revolutionary forces. By 1948, Vietminh strategists felt sufficiently confident to move cautiously into highly populated lowland areas, to intensify recruitment efforts, and to launch sporadic attacks on French military outposts and exposed villages and district towns. Gradually, Vietminh forces were beginning to approach parity in numbers with the French.¹³

VIETNAM ENTERS THE COLD WAR

The year 1949 was of pivotal significance for the future course for the war. On the battlefield, signs of stalemate were beginning to appear. The momentum of French military attacks on Vietminh strongholds was beginning to ebb, and French military strategy increasingly concentrated on protecting populated areas from Communist attacks. Public support for the war in France was beginning to slacken, and voices calling for an end to the war were on the increase. On the other hand, the Vietminh, although undoubtedly stronger than at the beginning of the conflict, still lacked the firepower to pose a significant military threat to French rule in Vietnam. Moreover the formation of the Bao Dai government had weakened the Vietminh claim to represent the legitimate national interest of the Vietnamese people. While the Associated State hardly attracted enthusi-

astic support in nationalist circles, it did provide a potential alternative to Ho Chi Minh's movement, which was now increasingly viewed as dominated by the Communists.

Under such circumstances, both sides groped for a breakthrough that would give them an advantage in the lengthening conflict. For the Vietminh, the communist victory in China in the fall of 1949 brought a surge of optimism through the ranks. Since before the Pacific war, the CCP had given some assistance to its Vietnamese comrades. During the civil war in China, however, ties were limited. But the victory of the forces of Mao Tse-tung in the fall of 1949 raised hopes for a vast increase in Chinese support for the Communist cause in Vietnam. The following January, Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of Vietminh forces and a top party member, traveled secretly to Peking for arms aid talks with the new People's Republic of China (PRC), and two months later Ho Chi Minh signed a formal agreement providing for Chinese military assistance to the Vietminh. The PRC formally recognized the DRV as the sole legitimate government in Vietnam. A few days later, the Soviet Union followed suit.

Preparations to take advantage of the new opportunity were soon in evidence. During the summer of 1950, French intelligence reported an ominous buildup of Vietminh forces along the Chinese border. In the fall, the insurgents launched a major offensive against French border posts in the area. The attack resulted in the first major French defeat of the war. The French decided to abandon a string of bases along the frontier and concede Vietminh control over the entire Viet Bac, thus giving the Vietminh easy access to China and possession of a liberated base area adjacent to the densely populated and strategically critical Red River delta. Any hopes that the French had of destroying Vietminh power were now virtually eliminated.

The French response to the communist victory in China and the heightened threat from the Vietminh was to seek increased aid from the United States. Since the end of World War II, the Truman administration had stayed aloof from the conflict in Vietnam. At first, admiration for Ho Chi Minh and for the Vietminh as an anti-Japanese guerrilla force and traditional antipathy to French colonialism had made some Americans (including a number of military officials on the spot) sympathetic to the Vietminh cause. The Truman administration was unwilling to risk antagonizing or weakening the French, however, and refrained from placing pressure on Paris to abandon its claim to Indochina. By 1947, the communist complexion of Ho's government had become increasingly apparent, and sympathy gradually gave way to hostility in Washington. Still, it was viewed as a French, not an American, problem.

The rise of the Cold War in Europe and concern over the regional impact of a communist victory in China began to change minds in Washing-

ton. In 1950, the administration approved a military assistance program for Indochina. Although the bulk of the aid was designed to go to the Vietnamese National Army, recently created by Paris as a means of transferring some of the burden of the war from France to the Vietnamese, at French insistence U.S. aid was channeled through the French. U.S. officials expressed some vocal criticism of the French failure to perfect Vietnamese independence under the Bao Dai government but refrained from exerting strong pressure on Paris for fear that the French would abandon what was now increasingly viewed as a Cold War struggle between the forces of communism and those of the free world.

The indirect entry of China and the United States into the Franco-Vietminh conflict not only brought the struggle into the vortex of the Cold War but also led to an increasing militarization of the war. In early 1951, Vietminh forces, now strengthened by rising quantities of arms from China, launched a major military offensive against French posts on the fringes of the Red River delta with the apparent hope of breaking through to Hanoi. Vo Nguyen Giap, however, had underestimated the resourcefulness and determination of the new French military commander in Indochina, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. De Lattre, who had won respect for his military prowess during World War II, had been appointed high commissioner and commander in chief of French military forces in Indochina in December 1950. Newly arrived when the Vietminh offensive broke, de Lattre reacted quickly, ordering air strikes against advancing Vietminh troops and transferring units from other areas to the beleaguered city of Vinh Yen, in the upper Red River delta. De Lattre's action salvaged the situation for the French and blunted the force of the Vietminh attack. Later offensives north and south of Hanoi had no greater success, and by spring, the Vietminh had abandoned their campaign.

NEGOTIATIONS AT GENEVA

For the next two years, Vietminh strategists avoided the risk of open confrontation with French units in Indochina, preferring instead to launch small-scale attacks on isolated French posts in the Northwest, in Laos, and in the Central Highlands. Such tactics were hardly a recipe for total victory, but they enabled Vietminh leaders to build up their forces for a future offensive in lowland areas. Moreover, by maintaining pressure on the battlefield, Vietminh strategists hoped to provoke growing public discontent in France with the war. The logjam began to break in the fall of 1953. For years, the French had spurned Ho Chi Minh's offer of peace talks. Now officials in Paris sought not to win the war but to find an honorable way to end it. When government sources in Paris suggested a negotiated settlement to end the conflict, Ho Chi Minh responded. In a November in-

interview with the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, he declared a willingness to explore proposals for peace with the French. Early the following year, the two sides agreed to discuss the Indochina issue at an international conference to be held at Geneva in May. Joining the French, the Bao Dai government, and the DRV at the conference table would be representatives of the great powers, including the PRC, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States, as well as representatives from Vietnam's neighbor states in Indochina, the kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia.

The DRV attitude toward a negotiated settlement has long been a matter of dispute. It has frequently been asserted that the Vietnamese were pressured to come to the conference table by the Soviets and the Chinese, each anxious for its own reasons to end the conflict. There is probably some truth to this contention, since information from several sources confirms that many party officials were unhappy at the decision to accept a compromise settlement. Realism, however, prevailed. Not only would the Vietminh find it difficult to achieve a military victory without active Soviet and Chinese diplomatic and material support, but without a settlement, U.S. military intervention was likely. The ever practical Ho Chi Minh probably persuaded his colleagues that a compromise settlement was the best that could be hoped for at the moment. The Vietminh did not enter the negotiations from a position of military weakness; on the eve of the conference, after a six-week siege, the French post at Dien Bien Phu in the mountainous Northwest fell to a Communist assault. The Vietminh attack had been made possible by massive shipments of arms from China; it is probable that such aid was Ho Chi Minh's price for accepting negotiations.

With their morale drained by the long conflict and the tragic fall of Dien Bien Phu on the eve of the conference, the French had no heart for continuing the war, and in June Pierre Mendès-France became prime minister on a pledge to bring the conflict to an end within thirty days. A month later, French and DRV representatives agreed on a cease-fire dividing Vietnam into two separate regroupment zones, the Vietminh in the North, the French and the supporters of the Bao Dai government in the South, with the two zones divided at the Ben Hai River, on the seventeenth parallel. Vietnam was to be neutralized, and neither zone was permitted to join a military alliance. The size of the military forces in the two zones was to be restricted to existing levels, and an International Control Commission (ICC), composed of Canada, India, and Poland, was to supervise the provisions of the agreement.

Neither the DRV nor the Bao Dai government, however, was willing to accept a permanent division of the country into two separate states divided by ideology. To resolve that problem, the conference delegates drew up a political declaration declaring that the cease-fire line was a pro-

visional one and "should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The declaration called for general elections to be held in both zones in July 1956 in order to obtain an expression of the national popular will on the issue of the future of Vietnam. Consultations on such elections were to be held between representatives of the two zones in July 1955. The DRV delegation agreed to these arrangements, but that of the Bao Dai government did not.

The Geneva Conference settlement was designed to permit an honorable withdrawal of the French from Indochina, to remove the area from the arena of great power competition, and to permit a political settlement of the crisis. Only the first goal was attained. One reason for this was the attitude of the United States. The Eisenhower administration had been reluctant to take part in the negotiations from the beginning. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had attempted to persuade Great Britain and France to join with the United States in a grand alliance to fight and win the war, but London and Paris preferred to await the results of the Geneva Conference. Washington had then agreed to participate in the talks with some reluctance. At Geneva, Dulles reluctantly acceded to the division of Vietnam into separate zones but made it clear that the United States could not accept a solution that provided for the possibility of a total takeover of Vietnam by the Communists. Unhappy with the provisions of the political declaration, Secretary Dulles indicated that Washington could take no more responsibility for the conference. In the end, the United States refused to sign, or even verbally consent to, the political declaration, and the U.S. delegation merely "took note" of it and promised "to refrain from the use of force to disturb" it. It reiterated its position that the unity of Vietnam should be sought through elections supervised by the United States.¹⁴

Agreements on Laos and Cambodia settled the conflicts in those areas and established the independence of the new royal governments in those countries. In Laos, the Communist Pathet Lao movement, a front group allied with the Vietminh, was granted two provinces in northeastern Laos as a regroupment zone, and the two sides were instructed to negotiate a political settlement to integrate the Pathet Lao area into the royal Lao administration. The small Communist movement in Cambodia, popularly named the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer), received no recognition or regroupment zone, and final agreement simply called for the departure of foreign troops from Cambodian soil.

In later years, the failure to activate the political provisions of the Geneva Agreements was the source of considerable controversy with respect to the issue of responsibility for the later resumption of the conflict. Some blamed the agreement itself for its vagueness and legal ambiguity. Did the agreement specifically require that national elections promised by

the ICC be carried out? Was the Bao Dai government, which had publicly indicated its disagreement with several of the provisions and would later refuse to be held to them, legally bound to carry out the political protocol? Had in fact the conference really intended elections to take place, or was the political declaration merely a polite fiction (as some U.S. observers contended) to save the face of the DRV? To what degree was the United States bound by the agreement? Indeed, if the United States was not bound by them, how could the area be isolated from the Cold War?

This is not the place for a definitive evaluation of the agreement and its legal standing, but a few brief points are in order. There is no doubt that the ambiguity of the agreement sowed the seeds of future disagreements and ultimately led to renewed conflict. Under the circumstances, however, it may well have been the only way to end the war and indeed to avoid a widening conflict. It is often the essence of diplomacy to use ambiguity in order to obtain an agreement that otherwise would not be possible. The French were willing to depart but would not have been willing to accept a total defeat. The Communists were willing to accept a compromise but not to give up all their objectives. The United States had threatened to take matters into its own hands if not satisfied that the negotiations provided an opportunity for the development of a Vietnam free from Communist control. Although the results, from Washington's standpoint, were not entirely satisfactory, the Eisenhower administration appeared willing to live with them. In such circumstances, the agreement was a gamble that with the removal of foreign troops and the establishment of cease-fire, political factors would take effect and lead to an internal solution. That they did not is less an indication of the failure of the delegates than a measure of the depth of the ideological and political bitterness that had marked the conflict from its earliest years and would continue to fan the fire of discontent well into the future.

NOTES

1. Phan Chu Trinh's letter to Paul Beau was printed in the *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* (March-June 1907).

2. Duong Ba Trac, *Nam Phong*, no. 167 (November 12, 1931), quoted in Nguyen Anh, "Vai net ve giao duc o Viet Nam tu sau dai chien the gioi lan thu I den truoc cach mang thang tam" (Vietnamese education from the end of World War I to the August Revolution), in *Nghien Cuu Lich Su*, no. 102 (September 1967), pp. 38-39 (hereafter NCLS). Also see Huê-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 34-35.

3. Robert L. Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 41-42. Sansom contradicts the prevailing wisdom that farm income dropped steadily under the French, but remarks that the

government paid little attention to improving rice yields and tended to favor large landholders. See p. 57.

4. The French author Paul Monet, in *Les Jauniers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), was only one of many of his compatriots who reported critically on conditions on the plantations. French officials tended to deflect such charges as exaggerated, although Governor-general Pierre Pasquier, in a speech to the French-sponsored Council of Economic and Financial Interests of Indochina in October 1929, conceded that if there was a problem in regard to the plantations, it was in the "methods of recruitment." See *ibid.*, p. 279. For an extended discussion of the problem by a contemporary historian, see Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973).

5. Phan Boi Chau, *Viet Nam Quoc Su Khao*, in *Van Tho Phan Boi Chau Chon Loc* (Collected Writings of Phan Boi Chau) (Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1967), p. 121. The word "nuoc" is a native Vietnamese word for the country and appears to be etymologically related to the same word "nuoc," meaning water. The previous quote is from Dang Thai Mai, *Van Tho Phan Boi Chau* (Hanoi: Van Hoa, 1960), p. 33.

6. Nguyen Duc Su, "Chu nghia yeu nuoc cua Phan Boi Chau" (The Patriotism of Phan Boi Chau), in NCLS, no. 83 (January 1966), pp. 28-36.

7. The quote is from Chuong Thau, "Moi quan he giua Ton Trong Son va Phan Boi Chau," (the relations between Sun Yat-sen and Phan Boi Chau), in NCLS, no. 93 (October 1966), p. 21. Phan Boi Chau's early relations with Sun are also briefly mentioned in S. L. Tikhvinskii, "The foreign policies and views of Sun Yat-sen from 1905-1912," in *Sin'khaikaya Revoliutsia v Kitae* (The 1911 Revolution in China) (Moscow, 1962), pp. 246-271.

8. There have been a number of studies on the Tonkin Free School. For a lengthy treatment in English, see Vu Duc Bang, "The Dong Kinh Free School Movement," in Walter F. Vella (ed.), *Aspects of Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973), pp. 30-93.

9. John T. McAlister, Jr., in his *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), has provided a provocative analysis of the personal and emotional motivations of early revolutionaries in Vietnam.

10. The most comprehensive account of this period is King C. Chen's *China and Vietnam, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). For a more recent view, see Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: Sage Publications, 1991).

11. For a recent defense of General Gracey's role in Vietnam, cf. Peter M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Dunn points out that Gracey's actions provided the South Vietnamese people with three decades of independent existence. See the preface, vii.

12. The debate over which side was primarily responsible for the outbreak of war has never been resolved. Stein Tønnesson, in his 1946: *Déclenchement de la Guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1987), speculates that hard-line elements within the ICP or other anti-French parties may have forced Ho's hand, but solid evidence is lacking.

13. For an extensive discussion of the buildup of Vietminh forces during the early stages of the Franco-Vietminh conflict, see Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms:*

The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), Chapter 6.

14. A copy of the Geneva Accords is available in George Mct. Kahin and John Wilson Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, revised edition (New York: Delta, 1969), appendix 2.