

THE
VIETNAM
WAR

THE VIETNAM WAR

A CONCISE INTERNATIONAL HISTORY

MARK ATWOOD LAWRENCE

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INTRODUCTION

AMERICANS AND OTHER WESTERNERS CALL IT SIMPLY “the Vietnam War,” but the fighting that took place in Vietnam between 1961 and 1975 has many names. The Vietnamese call it the “American War” to distinguish it from confrontations with other foreign enemies during their country’s bloody twentieth century. Scholars and others striving for greater detachment prefer the “Second Indochina War” to mark it off from earlier and later conflicts and to emphasize that the fighting engulfed not just Vietnam but Cambodia and Laos as well. During the war, still other names prevailed. The Vietnamese communists labeled it grandly the “War of Liberation” or the “Anti-U.S. War of National Salvation.” American leaders, eager to downplay its significance, often called it merely the “Vietnam conflict.”¹

War or conflict? The Vietnam war or just one of many? War of liberation or something less heroic? Merely an episode in Vietnamese history or part of regional, perhaps even global, processes? It depends, of course, on one’s point of view. Since journalists, memoirists, historians, and other commentators started writing about the war in the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of books and articles have examined it from the standpoint of the United States. They have, that is, relied on American sources and analyzed the war as an episode in American history. This tendency is hardly surprising. Of the major participants in the war, the United States has gone furthest in allowing researchers access to once-secret documentation. It is therefore simply more feasible to write authoritatively about U.S. behavior than that of other countries. Moreover, by far the most intense controversies have swirled around the American role in the war. It has therefore seemed especially urgent to understand why Americans acted as they did.

Only in recent years have the outlooks and experiences of the other belligerents received detailed attention. In part, this trend grows from a mounting desire among scholars to move beyond old polemical battles and to understand the war in all its complexity. More than anything, though, it reflects the availability of new source material since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the opening of Vietnam to the outside world during the same period. Before these developments, documentary records reflecting North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Chinese, Soviet, and East European calculations were off-limits to historians, kept secret by authoritarian governments with no desire to open their national security decisions to scrutiny. The end of the Cold War altered the situation by decreasing sensitivities in many countries about recent history. For the first time, scholars gained access, albeit incomplete and sometimes temporary, to archival collections that enabled them to penetrate old walls of secrecy.

The resulting wave of scholarship has revolutionized the study of the Vietnam War—the term this book will employ because of its familiarity to Western readers—in various ways. Most simply, new research has begun exposing the motives and calculations that drove policymakers in Hanoi and Saigon as well as in Beijing, Moscow, and other capitals around the world. At the same time, scholars working with Vietnamese sources have gone further than ever before toward understanding the attitudes of ordinary Vietnamese who fought on both sides of the conflict. On a more conceptual level, sources from around the world have enabled historians to view the war more fully than before as an episode in global history—an expression of phenomena such as decolonization and the rise of international communism. The new scholarship has also brought new subtlety to the study of the American role in the war. Documentation from other countries has revealed the considerable extent t

which decisions made elsewhere shaped, constrained, and sometimes determined U.S. choices. Moreover, the new studies have informed the debates that continue to preoccupy Americans. Was the war winnable in any meaningful sense? Was there ever a realistic chance for a negotiated settlement? Was the Vietnamese revolution fundamentally communist or nationalist in character? Deep knowledge of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet behavior is essential to answer these questions persuasively.

This book aims to take account of this new scholarship in a brief, accessible narrative of the Vietnam War. It is, as the subtitle suggests, an international history. More specifically, it places the war within the long flow of Vietnamese history and then captures the goals and experiences of various governments that became deeply embroiled in the country during the second half of the twentieth century. The book does not, however, displace the United States from the center of the story. In fact, it examines the American side of the war in considerable detail. Emphasis on the U.S. role makes sense given the significance of the controversies centering on American decision making—controversies that, if anything, only grew more intense in the early twenty-first century as the U.S. entanglement in the Middle East stoked new debate about the lessons of the Vietnam War. Careful examination of the U.S. role is also appropriate given the remarkable richness of recent scholarship on American behavior. While internationally minded historians have exploited archives in Hanoi, Moscow, and elsewhere, American historians have achieved unprecedented depth in their explorations of U.S. policymaking, politics, public opinion, and the experiences of U.S. soldiers.

The goal of this book, then, is to strike a balance by examining the American role within a broadly international context. To make the task manageable and to ensure thematic coherence, the following pages focus on answering four questions that have attracted intense scholarly and popular debate. The aim is not so much to answer these questions explicitly and exhaustively as to embed answers within an engaging narrative. But each question deserves brief introduction here.

First, what were the basic motives of the Vietnamese who fought against the United States? This problem has proved enormously difficult for historians, just as it was for U.S. policymakers during the war. Unquestionably, many Vietnamese leaders were dedicated communists who hoped that victory over South Vietnam and the United States would serve the larger interests of international communism. Yet the communists clearly drew a great deal of strength from their ability to harness and manipulate nationalist sentiment that stretched far back into Vietnamese history. French imperial domination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played an especially crucial role in fueling anticolonial ambitions that helped sustain the communist cause in later years. To elucidate the complex intertwining of communism and nationalism, this book devotes considerable attention to the evolution of Vietnamese revolutionary politics in the decades leading up to the American war. It then attempts to explore the complicated and shifting array of motives that kept Vietnamese revolutionaries fighting for so many years.

Second, why did Vietnam become a focus of dispute among the world's mightiest nations following the Second World War and then remain a major point of conflict for the next half century? Why, in short, did powerful nations invest so much in such a small and impoverished country? Before 1949 or so, governments around the world viewed political turmoil in Vietnam as a matter of minor significance. But the coming of the Cold War changed everything. As the globe split into rival blocs headed by Washington and Moscow, conflict in Vietnam increasingly appeared to be connected to the worldwide struggle between democratic capitalism and international communism. American, Soviet, and Chinese policymakers came to see Vietnam, a resource-rich nation occupying a vital geographic position, as crucial to their chances of prevailing in the global struggle. Vietnam's economic and geo-

strategic importance does not, however, fully explain the behavior of the great powers. It is also essential to explore how internal political rivalries and pressures—operating within the U.S., Soviet, and Chinese governments as well as within each of the Cold War alliances—drove the major nations to escalate their involvement in Vietnam. The aim here is to capture all of these factors.

Third, why did the Vietnam War turn out the way it did? From the outset of the struggle against French colonialism, Vietnamese revolutionaries faced enemies possessing vast technological and material superiority. And yet they were able to persevere and ultimately prevail over France and, later, the United States. Explaining the U.S. defeat has generated perhaps the single bitterest controversy surrounding the Vietnam War. Some commentators blame weakness and irresolution on the American home front, embodied variously in the antiwar movement, the media, or liberal politicians, for sapping the nation's will and thereby preventing the U.S. military from making the all-out effort that would have brought victory. Others blame American military commanders for pursuing flawed strategies in fighting the war. Still others blame civilian leaders—and, in some formulations, the larger American culture from which they came—for failing to recognize the impossibility of establishing a stable, Western-oriented Vietnamese state that would genuinely command the support of its people. The war was, in this view, unwinnable no matter what methods Americans used to fight it because the United States never won Vietnamese "hearts and minds." This book emphasizes the last explanation but also suggests that examination of U.S. policymaking does not yield all the answers. The Vietnamese communists prevailed in part because of their own political and military strategies and their success in obtaining material assistance from abroad.

Fourth, what are the legacies of the Vietnam War? The book's final chapter attempts to answer this question with reference to both Southeast Asia and the United States. In Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the war left intense political rivalries that fueled a new round of internal and international conflict during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Over the longer term, the war left a trail of bitterness, suffering, and environmental devastation that continued to reverberate in the twenty-first century. Many thousands of Americans struggled with the physical impact of war, but, for the United States as a whole, the most enduring legacy was psychological. Defeat bitterly divided Americans according to the lessons they drew from it. Some viewed the lost war as evidence of fundamental national failings and urged a thorough reappraisal of the way the government made decisions and wielded power abroad. Others drew the opposite conclusion, arguing that the United States must proceed with greater boldness and certainty to avoid similar setbacks in the future.

No book—certainly not such a slim one as this—can do full justice to all of these themes. Yet this introductory study can play a vital role in bridging the gap that too often separates scholars, with their deep knowledge of small slices of the past, from general readers interested in understanding the broad flow of history. If the book brings greater awareness to ongoing debates over the Vietnam War, its mission will be accomplished. If it sparks interest in further reading about the war and its meaning, so much the better.

THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION

“HOW DID THE AGONY BEGIN?” A *NEW YORK TIMES* reporter posed the question on July 6, 1971, a few weeks after the paper began publishing excerpts of a U.S. government study on the origins of the war raging in Vietnam.¹ The top-secret report, leaked by a disgruntled Defense Department aide, promised answers. But not even seven thousand pages of analysis offered clarity. Indeed, decades of subsequent scholarly inquiry have failed to resolve many uncertainties and controversies surrounding the war’s origins.

Among the conundrums is a deceptively simple question: How far back into the past do the roots of the Vietnam War extend? When, in other words, should a history of the war begin? Some commentators locate the causes of the war in relatively recent times—in the 1940s, for example, when the conflict in Vietnam became enmeshed in the Cold War, or in the early 1960s, when the United States dramatically expanded its military role in the country. Others reach much further back, tracing the origins of the war to Vietnamese struggles against foreign domination many decades or even centuries before Americans took interest in Southeast Asia.

Those who insist on a comparatively recent starting date unquestionably have a point. Contrary to the claims of Vietnamese communists, the war was no simple extension of Vietnam’s independence struggles in earlier eras. Rather, it resulted from specific decisions made in the mid-twentieth century by leaders in Vietnam, the United States, and other countries. Yet to begin the story of the war in the 1940s or 1960s risks repeating the errors of U.S. policymakers by ignoring the deep roots of the social and political turmoil that made Vietnam an arena of international conflict during the Cold War. Only by examining the long flow of Vietnamese history is it possible to grasp the nature of the revolutionary movement against which the United States went to war in 1965.

IMPERIAL ENCOUNTERS

Powerful outsiders had shaped Vietnamese life for two thousand years by the time American troops arrived in Southeast Asia. The earliest and most persistent foreign power to play this role was China, which conquered the “Viet” ethnic group in 111 B.C. and ruled its territory as a province of the Chinese empire for the next millennium. During that epoch, the Vietnamese developed a complicated relationship with their Chinese overlords. On the one hand, they drew heavily on Chinese culture, adapting the religious practices, technology, art, architecture, music, and language of their northern neighbors to Vietnamese conditions. Perhaps most striking, they embraced China’s form of government, a hierarchical system administered by mandarins steeped in Confucian ethics and philosophy.

On the other hand, Chinese domination spurred Vietnamese elites to launch a series of bloody revolts against the empire—David-versus-Goliath uprisings celebrated in the twentieth century as manifestations of an allegedly timeless nationalist spirit and resourcefulness in battling mighty enemies. In 39 A.D., Trung Trac and her sister Trung Nhi led the most fabled rebellion of all,

vanquishing a superior Chinese force and establishing an independent Viet kingdom. When China quashed the rebellion three years later, the Trung sisters drowned themselves in a river, assuring their status as martyrs for twentieth-century nationalists.

Only the crumbling of China's T'ang dynasty in the tenth century opened the way for lasting Vietnamese independence. As in later periods, Vietnam's political development owed much to a shift in the larger geopolitical environment. Beset by corruption and unrest at home, the Chinese could no longer muster the resources to maintain colonial control. The decisive moment came in 939, when a Vietnamese army destroyed a much larger Chinese force by cleverly ambushing it near modern-day Haiphong. Thereafter, China periodically threatened to restore its rule over Vietnam, and it succeeded in doing so for a brief period in the fifteenth century. For the most part, however, the new state of "Đại Việt" ("Great Việt") kept the Chinese behemoth at bay through skillful diplomacy, tribute payments to the Chinese court, and periodic military campaigns against invading armies.

Independence brought greater stability and prosperity, but it ultimately produced new kinds of conflict that left a deep imprint on modern Vietnam. First the Vietnamese, showing new expansionist desires of their own, vanquished their southern neighbors, the Cham and Khmer kingdoms, in a series of wars starting in the fifteenth century. Previously, the Vietnamese had been confined to the region around the Red River Delta, hemmed in on three sides by mountains and the sea. Population growth and economic ambition led them to covet the fertile coastal plain to their south and the vast Mekong Delta beyond, areas controlled for centuries by the Cham and Khmer peoples. By about 1700, Vietnam's expansion was complete. The S-shaped country—regarded by its Southeast Asian neighbors as a fearsome imperial power—stretched along eight hundred miles of coast from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Thailand.

As it grew, however, Vietnam fell victim to a new problem: internal dissension. Spread over a much larger area, the Vietnamese lost much of the political and social cohesion that had bound them together. Rulers in Hanoi found it difficult to exert influence over long distances. Meanwhile southerners, benefiting from readily available land and higher crop yields, developed a more entrepreneurial and individualistic ethos than prevailed in the tradition-bound north—a cultural gap that persisted for centuries to come. Combined with antagonisms between Vietnamese princes, these centrifugal forces led in 1613 to a civil war that resulted in the division of Vietnam into two parts headed by rival warrior families, the Nguyen in the south and the Trinh in the north.

Civil strife continued off and on for two hundred years until the leader of the southern family succeeded in imposing precarious unity in the early nineteenth century and established the Nguyen dynasty. The Nguyen emperors named their domain "Nam Việt" ("Southern Việt") and sought to consolidate their state through the invigoration of Confucian practices. Within a few decades, however, they faced a new challenge to the unity and independence of their territories. Starting in the 1860s, France gradually colonized Vietnam and its western neighbors, Cambodia and Laos. As in so much of the world that fell under European domination around the same time, the process transformed the region and set the stage for turmoil in the twentieth century.

European missionaries had been active in Vietnam since the seventeenth century and ultimately succeeded in converting roughly 7 percent of the population to Catholicism. But the country, lacking the profitable commodities that drew European interest elsewhere, escaped colonization during the early years of Western expansion into Asia. Only a new set of political, geostrategic, and economic calculations drove France in the second half of the nineteenth century to claim the territories it dubbed Indochina. Emperor Napoléon III hoped that colonies in Asia would bathe his regime in imperial glory. Moreover, French leaders wished to keep pace with Great Britain, which had already

established control of India, Burma, and Malaya and seemed poised for further growth.

Above all, though, French imperialism sprang from material motives. As the Industrial Revolution transformed the French economy, political and business elites looked abroad for raw materials and consumer markets necessary to keep French factories humming. By colonizing Indochina, they hoped not only to profit from the area but also to open a southern gateway to the even vaster resources and markets of China. All of these motives were suffused with the same conviction that had colored European forays into Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere for centuries. As they tightened their grip, French colonizers declared that they were serving the Indochinese peoples by bringing material advancement and moral uplift—by performing, in short, a “civilizing mission.”

France opened its bid to control Vietnam in 1858 and four years later scored its first major success. With no hope of resisting European military technology, the Vietnamese court in Hue ceded Saigon and three surrounding provinces to French rule. The colonizers soon gained control over the rest of southern Vietnam and in 1867 established the colony of Cochin China, which would become the most profitable part of Indochina. In the 1880s, the French forced the emperor to yield the rest of Vietnam and established the protectorates of Tonkin in the north and Annam along the central coast. Nominally, the emperor remained in charge in these areas, but colonial authorities wielded real power. The French government followed a similar approach to the west, establishing protectorates over Cambodia in 1863 and Laos in 1893.



Colonization profoundly altered life in Vietnam. A small number of Vietnamese benefited by serving the colonial authorities or by cashing in on the economic opportunities the French created. A new class of landlords, bankers, and merchants flourished, especially in the south, where the availability of land created a booming frontier economy for those with the resources to exploit it. As they amassed wealth, these privileged Vietnamese helped develop an opulent, Westernized lifestyle in the cities. They dressed in European clothes, drank wine, went bicycling, and sent their children to French schools.

For other Vietnamese, colonization brought hardship. To one small but influential group—the intellectuals, teachers, and imperial bureaucrats rooted in the old system of Confucian governance—the setback was more psychological than material. The subjugation of their nation by a vigorously confident, technologically advanced France caused Vietnamese elites to question the traditional political and philosophical underpinnings of their society. All that had once seemed sacred had been delegitimated, yielding what one Vietnamese author would later call a “national mood of pessimism.”² Some of these elites, often benefiting from educational opportunities created by the French, began to consider ways of remaking Vietnamese society and overthrowing French control.

The peasantry, comprising more than 90 percent of the population, faced much more tangible problems. Colonial authorities frequently boasted of the roads, canals, bridges, and irrigation systems that they built in Indochina. But these developments served mainly to enrich French investors eager to transform Vietnam into an exporter of raw materials for the global market. The old system of subsistence farming, though hardly egalitarian, had provided most peasants with a secure existence by assuring access to small plots of lands. The new system imposed by France prized efficiency and profitability—objectives that could best be achieved by concentrating land in the hands of a small number of technologically advanced producers. French laws helped attain this goal by enabling wealthy entrepreneurs to claim land long cultivated by Vietnamese peasants and to purchase newly opened areas. New taxes imposed by colonial authorities, along with the establishment of French-controlled monopolies on salt, alcohol, and opium, also hurt small farmers. Unable to earn sufficient cash, many went into debt and ultimately were forced to sell their plots to wealthy speculators or planters.



The wealth and splendor of central Saigon, depicted in this 1925 photograph, were a world apart from living conditions endured by many Vietnamese. (Postcard Collection, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, VAPC0354)

Vietnam became one of the world's top exporters of rice, but this accomplishment came at a heavy cost. A majority of peasants became tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or agricultural wage laborers—workers, in other words, who farmed parcels owned by rich landowners. The disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished multitude grew ever larger as a vicious cycle of indebtedness, desperation, and dependency took hold, often exacerbated by rampant corruption among the moneylenders and bureaucrats who milked the system for personal advantage. By the early twentieth century, less than 5 percent of the population of Cochin China, where the economic transformation was most extreme, owned more than half of the arable land.³ Sketchy evidence suggests that per capita food consumption declined as production for the global market increased. “We had always had enough to eat, but then we got poorer every day,” one peasant from central Vietnam remembered of French colonial rule.⁴

A few peasants managed to find jobs in the tiny new industrial sector set up by the French, but conditions there were no better. As miners, stevedores, factory hands, or rubber workers, Vietnamese faced long hours, miserable pay, and brutal discipline. So horrendous were conditions on Cochin Chinese rubber plantations that managers had to recruit workers in Tonkin and Annam, where potential laborers were less likely to know about the cruelty, disease, and malnourishment that awaited them. More than one in four rubber workers died on the harshest plantations. Runaways faced execution by torture, hanging, or stabbing. Life as a rubber worker was, according to a rough

THE RISE OF VIETNAMESE NATIONALISM

If colonialism brought humiliation and deprivation, it also sowed the seeds of decolonization by giving rise to the vigorous nationalist movement that would shape Vietnamese politics in the twentieth century. The movement did not arise in a sudden, unified, or vigorous way. On the contrary, it showed little promise at first. The French military suppressed sporadic resistance, while anticolonial leaders lacked an agenda beyond restoration of the very social and political practices that the French conquest had discredited. By the turn of the century, little active opposition remained. Yet conditions were favorable for a powerful movement to take shape over time. The destruction of the old order left patriotic elites—self-conscious heirs to a tradition of struggle against foreign invaders—lacking a clear program and eager for new approaches to restore national independence and vigor. Meanwhile, the accumulation of grievances among ordinary Vietnamese meant that any appeal to establish a more just social order would likely resonate across the society as a whole. Over the decades leading up to 1945, this revolutionary potential slowly became reality.

The first crucial step came in the early twentieth century, when a new generation of nationalists began to look abroad for inspiration. The most influential was Phan Boi Chau, a scholar from central Vietnam who embraced Western rationalism and science as the keys to creating a robust, modern Vietnam. He questioned the old system of government based on loyalty to the monarch and imagined his homeland instead as a Western-style nation-state. In a stream of publications written from exile, Phan Boi Chau and his Modernization Society agitated tirelessly for the overthrow of French colonialism and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy or, as he came to prefer later in life, a republic. Another westward-looking nationalist, Phan Chu Trinh, considered such ideas impractical because, he believed, the Vietnamese were not yet ready to govern themselves. He contended that the best hope lay in demanding that France live up to its supposedly benevolent intentions by preparing Vietnam for independence over the long term.

Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh had some success in rallying compatriots to support these new visions. During the First World War, a group of Saigon intellectuals inspired by Phan Chu Trinh's relatively moderate agenda launched the first openly nationalist organization in French-controlled Vietnam, the Constitutionalist Party, which demanded that colonial authorities grant greater economic and political opportunities for the indigenous population. A few years later, another group of elites dedicated to Phan Boi Chau's more radical ideas formed the clandestine Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang), which advocated violent revolution against the French. But profound shortcomings ultimately prevented either group from seriously challenging French domination. For one thing, the two groups failed to overcome their differences and form a unified movement. Still more debilitating, they failed to extend their appeal beyond the narrow urban middle classes from which they sprang. Lacking sensitivity to rural conditions, these organizations did little to harness simmering peasant discontent. The narrowness of their social base also made it easy for the French police to monitor and suppress their activities.

These problems would be overcome only with the rise of yet another strand of nationalism—the one led by the most influential Vietnamese leader of all, the gaunt, ascetic firebrand best known as Ho Chi Minh. Over the course of his long career as nationalist agitator and then national leader, Ho showed a remarkable ideological flexibility and tactical genius that enabled him to succeed where earlier nationalists had failed. He celebrated Vietnam's history of resistance to foreigners even as he

embraced foreign ideas and assistance. He created a sternly disciplined movement able to withstand French repression and crush his rivals even as he exuded personal warmth that inspired supporters to call him “Uncle Ho.” Most important, he appealed to educated nationalists and urban radicals even as he mobilized the peasantry.

Born in a central Vietnamese village in 1890, Ho, then known as Nguyen Tat Thanh, imbibed fierce nationalism from his father, a mandarin who had resigned from the Confucian bureaucracy to protest the French takeover. Ho’s boyhood home reverberated with patriotism and a yearning for new ideas about how to attain independence. His solution—to forge bonds between elites and peasants opposed to colonial domination—started to become clear in 1908, when he took action for the first time against French authorities. Early that year, peasants in several provinces demonstrated against rising taxes and coercive labor policies. As unrest spread, Ho jumped into the fray, eager to interact with the peasants and to translate their demands for local officials. Colonial police cracked down on the protest and ordered Ho’s school to dismiss the “tall dark student” who had taken part.⁶ Ho briefly found work as a teacher, but in 1911, harassed by French authorities and determined to see the world, he signed on to the crew of a freighter bound for Europe.

Ho Chi Minh spent the next three decades outside his native country, studying foreign societies, agitating for Vietnamese independence, and developing the ideas he would ultimately take back to Vietnam. His early travels took him to the United States, where he worked briefly as a pastry chef in Boston and a domestic servant in New York. He then relocated to Britain, where he became involved in labor union activities and probably learned about Karl Marx for the first time. Only after moving to France near the end of the First World War, however, did Ho Chi Minh step fully into the role of expatriate spokesman for Vietnamese anticolonialism. His breakthrough came in 1919, when leaders of the victorious Western powers gathered outside Paris to craft a new international order. Under the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), Ho Chi Minh led a group of Vietnamese exiles who petitioned the great powers to honor the principle of self-determination that U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had repeatedly avowed during the war. The relatively modest demands called not for immediate independence but for reforms including recognition of equal rights for Vietnamese and French people living in Vietnam and the inclusion of Vietnamese representatives in the French parliament.

The assembled presidents and prime ministers ignored the appeal, just as they ignored similar demands from groups representing other colonized peoples. Despite their florid liberal rhetoric, the great powers showed no interest in disbanding colonial empires. The whole episode catapulted Ho Chi Minh to the forefront of the Vietnamese nationalist movement but left him badly disappointed. For a brief moment, the Allied victory had seemed to herald a new era of democratization and self-determination around the globe. By 1920, this promise had come to nothing. The setback had a profound effect on Ho Chi Minh. Initially inspired by the liberal West, he now lamented its hypocrisy. Increasingly he looked for an alternative set of ideas to guide the fight against colonialism.

He found it in Leninism. Ho Chi Minh’s leftward drift became clear in 1919, when he joined the French socialist party. He quickly grew discouraged by the party’s lack of interest in colonial problems, however, and gravitated toward the more radical program of V. I. Lenin, mastermind of the Bolshevik Revolution that had established communist rule in Russia in 1917. Lenin wrote at great length about colonialism and even laid out a strategy for abolishing it. Like Marx, Lenin argued that full-fledged communist revolution could occur only in the most highly industrialized nations. Yet Lenin nonetheless saw anticolonial movements as crucial allies in the struggle to overthrow global capitalism and theorized that they could carry out revolutions of a particular kind. In peasant societies

Lenin called for the establishment of communist parties led by tiny groups of industrial workers and radical intellectuals. The parties would then carry out revolutions in two stages. First they would form alliances with disgruntled peasants and patriotic elites to overthrow colonial rule. Later they would break with their noncommunist allies and seize power in the name of international communism.

This was a revolutionary roadmap of the sort that Ho Chi Minh had been seeking. Lenin's vision not only endowed anticolonialism with transcendent historical importance but also meshed neatly with Ho's belief in the revolutionary potential of peasants. Captivated by Lenin's ideas, Ho helped found the French Communist Party in 1920 and over the next three years became its leading voice on colonial matters. He established an organization to promote cooperation among nationalists from different parts of the world and, having given up all hope of achieving progress through reformed colonial rule, for the first time published biting attacks on the French. All this work inevitably caught the attention of Soviet officials, who invited Ho to relocate to Moscow. He arrived in the capital of world communism in 1923.

Ho Chi Minh had a mixed experience in the Soviet Union—the start of an ambivalent relationship with communist powers that would continue over the rest of his life. On the one hand, Ho found golden opportunities to advance his study of Marxism-Leninism and to work for the Comintern, the bureaucracy established in 1919 to promote communist revolution globally. On the other, he encountered pervasive scorn among Soviet leaders for agricultural societies such as Vietnam. Marx's well-known dismissal of peasants as hopeless reactionaries, rather than Lenin's more optimistic view, prevailed among the communist functionaries with whom Ho interacted. At one Comintern meeting, Ho pledged to take “every opportunity” to remind his colleagues of colonial concerns. He confided to a friend, however, that he was just a “voice crying in the wilderness.”⁷



Ho Chi Minh at a meeting of the French socialist party in 1920. (Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-62808)

Disappointed by attitudes in Moscow and aware of growing nationalist agitation in Indochina, Ho Chi Minh asked permission to return to Asia. The Comintern approved his request in mid-1924, dispatching him to the city of Guangzhou (Canton) in southeastern China. He wrote articles for a Soviet news agency and served as an interpreter for local Comintern representatives. But his primary mission was to establish a revolutionary organization among expatriate Vietnamese nationalists who had fled colonial repression in their home country. From these efforts arose Vietnam's first communist-oriented body, the Revolutionary Youth League. Although he took care to set up a small subgroup that might eventually form the kernel of a communist party, Ho Chi Minh saw no hope of inculcating the league's unsophisticated membership with full-fledged communist doctrine. Rather, and so often over the course of his life, he seamlessly blended communist notions of social revolution with nationalist themes likely to resonate with a broad range of Vietnamese motivated mainly by anti-French anger. Under Ho's charismatic leadership, the organization, founded in 1925, flourished and quickly extended its reach into Vietnam itself. More than any other anticolonial group, its appeal cut across socioeconomic and regional divides.

Within a few years, however, the organization fell into disarray. The trouble began in 1927, when the Comintern made an abrupt ideological shift, abandoning its support for broad coalitions of the type Ho Chi Minh preferred. Moscow ordered communist movements to pursue more doctrinaire agendas rooted narrowly in the interests of industrial workers and the poorest peasants. The move fractured the Revolutionary Youth League and marginalized Ho, who fell into deep disgrace in

Moscow. In 1930, new Vietnamese leaders freshly trained in the Soviet Union established a new body, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), dedicated to the Comintern's policy.

An even bigger challenge for the communist movement quickly ensued. Peasants throughout central Vietnam began rioting against increasingly bleak economic conditions caused by the Great Depression. For a moment, this seemed a promising development for Vietnamese revolutionaries. In one province, Nghe Tinh, radical peasants overthrew the local administration in 1930 and established governing committees they called "soviets" in imitation of the workers' committees formed during the Bolshevik Revolution. But the episode quickly turned to disaster for the revolutionaries. With fierce efficiency, French authorities put down the rebellion and rounded up communists who had abetted it. Ultimately the French executed or imprisoned 90 percent of party leaders. The communist apparatus that had been painstakingly assembled over half a decade lay in ruins. Even Ho Chi Minh, then living in the relative safety of British-controlled Hong Kong, fell victim to European repression in 1931. Arrested during a crackdown on political agitators, Ho spent several months in prison before being released and returning to Moscow.

WAR AND REVOLUTION

Communist fortunes in Vietnam improved only with the approach of the Second World War. The first step came in 1935 with a new shift by the Comintern. Alarmed by the rise of fascism in Germany and Japan, the Soviet government reverted to its policy of promoting alliances between communists and non-communists around the world. The move not only re-legitimized Ho Chi Minh, who had clung to his vision of a broad revolutionary alliance of communists and nationalists, but also generated unprecedented opportunities for communists to expand their influence in Vietnam. Under instruction from a leftist coalition that had come to power in France, the colonial government permitted the ICP to take part openly in Vietnamese political life. The party took full advantage, running candidates for local offices, forming self-help societies among industrial workers, and organizing intensively among the peasantry.

The outbreak of global war created still greater opportunities for Ho Chi Minh and his allies. Germany's crushing invasion of France in May 1940 badly weakened French power and prestige globally. In Indochina, this feebleness enabled Germany's ally, Japan, to extract humiliating military and economic concessions from the French colonial government. Although Tokyo permitted French authorities to maintain day-to-day administration, Japanese troops occupied all of Indochina by the end of 1941, making it part of the expanding Japanese empire in Southeast Asia. Many Vietnamese worried that they had merely exchanged one colonial master for another, but some saw a silver lining: the era of unchallenged European supremacy appeared to be at an end. Nationalist prospects brightened further in December 1941, when the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war against Japan. The addition of vast American resources to the Allied side improved the odds that Japan would one day be defeated. Bold American declarations of self-determination and anticolonialism as key war aims also raised hopes among Vietnamese nationalists, many of whom continued to sympathize strongly with Western liberalism, that a U.S. victory would bring independence for Vietnam and other colonial territories.

It was clear, however, that none of this would come easy. In November 1941, French authorities demonstrated that they still had considerable fight left in them, decimating a communist-led rebellion in Cochin China. Communists fared little better in fighting the Japanese occupation. In Tonkin, Vietnamese guerrillas resisted briefly before fleeing into the mountains. Facing two powerful

enemies, the ICP decided against direct confrontation, choosing instead to focus on political organizing while waiting for a propitious moment to resume military action.

Key strategic decisions came in May 1941 at an ICP Central Committee meeting in the secluded mountainside village of Pac Bo, near the Chinese border. Led by Ho Chi Minh, back in his homeland for the first time in three decades, the delegates submerged their party within a broad patriotic front called the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh). The new organization, better known as the Viet Minh, was designed to garner support from a wide swath of the Vietnamese population by downplaying communist aims such as land redistribution and emphasizing instead patriotic themes that would appeal to radicals and moderates alike. This approach probably had another aim as well—to heighten the Viet Minh’s appeal to the United States and other anticommunist powers that seemed likely to play a major role in determining who would govern postwar Vietnam. Still, the ICP sought to give the Viet Minh some capacity to shape that outcome through its own action. Delegates embraced guerrilla warfare as the means by which the Vietnamese, when conditions allowed, would claim their independence.

The Viet Minh rapidly put this program into practice. Operating from its remote mountain headquarters in northern Vietnam, the new organization extended its influence southward from the Chinese border. True to the Pac Bo decisions, Viet Minh propaganda connected the forthcoming liberation struggle with the country’s long patriotic traditions. “The sacred call of the fatherland is resounding in our ears, the ardent blood of our heroic predecessors is seething in our hearts,” wrote Ho Chi Minh in one widely distributed declaration.⁸ Ho also tended to the Viet Minh’s diplomatic priorities. In 1943, he contacted U.S. intelligence operatives in southern China in hopes of forming an anti-Japanese partnership. Meanwhile, Vo Nguyen Giap, a history teacher turned military strategist, supervised the creation of guerrilla units, the nucleus of what Viet Minh leaders hoped would one day become a Vietnamese army.

All this preparation paid off in 1945, when rapid shifts in the global military balance created precisely the sort of opportunity that the Viet Minh had been seeking. In March, the Japanese government, alarmed by Allied advances in the Pacific, overthrew the French administration in Indochina. Japan established a nominally independent regime in Vietnam under the reigning emperor Bao Dai. These events worked strongly in favor of the Viet Minh, however, because the disappearance of the French apparatus in the countryside enabled it to expand its influence as never before. The Japanese, facing imminent defeat, showed little interest in interfering. Greatly emboldened, revolutionary leaders decided that the moment had come to begin planning a popular uprising to coincide with Japan’s final collapse. In its bid to win over the population, the Viet Minh benefited tremendously from its efforts to relieve a famine that killed more than one million Vietnamese in 1944 and 1945. Alone among the claimants to power, the Viet Minh sprang into action to make food available to starving peasants.

When Japan surrendered in early August, Vietnamese across the country rallied behind calls for insurrection and the establishment of an independent republic. “The decisive hour has struck for the destiny of our people,” proclaimed Ho Chi Minh.⁹ Although the Viet Minh enjoyed more support in northern and central Vietnam than in the south, it encountered little resistance as its influence spread village by village—the outpouring of nationalist fervor later dubbed the “August Revolution.” Communist officials directed the proceedings in some places, but in others, despite later claims by communist historians, they struggled to keep up with the burgeoning insurrection and confronted challenges from rival nationalist organizations. Amid massive flag-waving demonstrations, the Viet Minh took charge in Hanoi on August 19, in Hué on August 23, and in Saigon on August 25. Five days

later, Bao Dai reluctantly abdicated to the Viet Minh, thus conferring the “mandate of heaven”—the traditional notion of political legitimacy—onto Ho Chi Minh’s movement. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh, the new president of the Vietnamese provisional government, climbed a hastily constructed platform in Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square to declare his nation’s independence.

COLONIALISM AND COLD WAR

HO CHI MINH'S DECLARATION OF VIETNAMESE independence was a peculiar piece of oratory. Ho began not by proclaiming the establishment of his new government. That came only in the closing sentence. Rather, he started by quoting the American Declaration of Independence. "All men are created equal," Ho Chi Minh stated. "They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."¹ Ho's choice of words reflected his calculation that the fate of his new nation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), depended crucially on the United States, which had almost single-handedly defeated Japan and seemed in 1945 to control the destiny of Asia. By invoking the principles that Americans ostensibly held dear, he hoped to persuade U.S. leaders to embrace the newly proclaimed Vietnamese state.

The gambit failed miserably. Washington ignored the appeal and then stood aside as France launched efforts to resubjugate Indochina. But Ho Chi Minh was correct in his larger judgment: foreign nations would play decisive roles in determining what became of the DRV. Between 1945 and 1954, the mightiest countries in the world, spurred by the intensification of the Cold War, intervened powerfully in Vietnam to destroy—or sustain—Ho Chi Minh's government. The United States, the Soviet Union, and communist China came to see fighting between France and the Viet Minh, at root a renewed struggle over colonialism, as a vital front in the global confrontation between democratic capitalism and international communism. For their part, meanwhile, DRV leaders, no mere bystanders as their nation's fate was determined by others, learned to exploit international tensions to advance their cause.

THE PATH TO WAR

As it attempted to consolidate its authority in the fall of 1945, the Vietnamese government confronted serious challenges. Its control was shaky in the south, where much of the population opposed the DRV and the communist movement had yet to recover from French repression during the Second World War. The government also faced a severe economic crisis. But the biggest threat came from abroad. In the near term, two new occupiers, Britain and China, seemed to pose the most serious dangers. By agreement among the Allied powers, British forces entered southern Vietnam at the end of World War II to disarm Japanese soldiers, while Chinese forces performed the same function in the north. The occupiers were not supposed to interfere in local politics, but both Britain and China—the latter controlled by the vigorously anticommunist Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek—seemed certain to create problems for the DRV.

In the longer term, the main danger came from France. Despite debilitating weaknesses caused by four years of war and occupation by Germany, the French government was determined to restore colonial rule over Indochina. Across the political spectrum, French leaders believed that their country could recover its power and prestige only by reclaiming its empire. Indochina held particular

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