

French Imperialism

A French Catholic missionary, Bishop Pigneau de Behaine, had raised a mercenary force to help Nguyen Anh seize the Vietnamese throne. The bishop hoped the new emperor would provide France with trading and missionary privileges, but Nguyen Anh was suspicious of French influence. Under his rule and that of his successors, any resistance to the absolute power of the government was dealt with harshly. The Nguyen regime persecuted religious followers, including Christians, Buddhists, Daoists (Taoists), and followers of traditional beliefs. The persecution of French Christian missionaries and their Vietnamese converts, in particular, received the attention of French Catholics. Religious groups in France demanded retaliatory action from the government in Paris. When commercial and military interests also urged a decisive move to protect French interests in Southeast Asia, the French emperor Napoleon III approved the launching of a naval expedition to punish the Vietnamese and force the court to accept a French presence in the country. The first attack at Da Nang in 1858 failed to achieve its objectives. A second attack farther south the following year was more successful, however, and in 1862 Emperor Tu Duc agreed to cede several provinces in the Mekong Delta to France as the colony of Cochinchina. In the 1880s the French resumed their advance, launching an attack on the Red River Delta on the pretext of protecting French citizens there. After severe defeats, the Vietnamese court accepted French rule over the remaining territory of Vietnam, which was divided into two protectorates—Tonkin in the Red River Delta and Annam along the central coast. In 1887, after France had established a third protectorate over Cambodia, it consolidated the administration of its Southeast Asian territories, creating the Indochinese Union, or French Indochina. Laos was incorporated into the union in 1893.

The imposition of French colonial rule met with little organized resistance. Emperor Tu Duc himself hoped that by adopting a conciliatory attitude toward French demands in the southern provinces, the invaders might eventually be brought to reason and persuaded to give up their new conquests. He therefore prohibited his subjects from openly resisting French actions. But the sense of national identity was not extinguished, and anticolonial sentiment soon began to emerge. Poor living conditions, worsened by French economic exploitation, contributed to growing Vietnamese hostility to foreign rule. French occupation did bring some improvements in the area of transport and communications and also contributed modestly to the growth of a commercial and manufacturing sector. However, as a whole, colonialism brought little improvement in the lives of the Vietnamese. In the countryside, peasants struggled under heavy taxes and high rents. Workers in factories, in coal mines, and on rubber plantations labored in abysmal working conditions for paltry wages. By the early 1920s nationalist parties began to demand reform or independence. In 1930 the Moscow-trained revolutionary Ho Chi Minh (real name Nguyen Tat Thanh) established the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).

Until the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945), the ICP and other revolutionary groups labored with little success. In 1940, however, Japan demanded the right to place northern Vietnam under military occupation. Japan planned to use the area as a base from which to launch a future invasion of the rest of Southeast Asia. The French viceroy, the senior government official in French Indochina, lacked sufficient armed forces to resist.

He agreed to Japanese demands and was reduced to a figurehead authority. Seizing the opportunity, Ho Chi Minh organized a broad national front group called the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or Viet Minh for short) and built up guerrilla forces in preparation for an uprising at war's end. To win wide popular support, the Viet Minh program emphasized national independence and moderate reform rather than openly Communist aims. When Japan surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, Viet Minh forces rose throughout the country and, in what is known as the August Revolution, declared the establishment of an independent republic with its capital at Hanoi.

The French, however, were unwilling to concede independence, and in late 1945 they seized control over the southern provinces from retreating Viet Minh and other nationalist forces. Negotiations to seek a compromise solution were held in France in the summer of 1946, but they failed to resolve differences. War broke out in December when Viet Minh military units attacked French positions in Hanoi and then retreated to the mountains north of the Red River Delta.

The Franco-Viet Minh conflict (now often called the First Indochina War) lasted nearly eight years. The Viet Minh set up their headquarters in the mountainous area between the Red River valley and the Chinese border and built up their forces for a major counter-offensive. After failing to capture Ho Chi Minh and destroy the guerrilla movement, the French formed a rival Vietnamese government under Bao Dai, the last emperor of the Nguyen dynasty. In August 1945 Bao Dai had abdicated the throne in favor of Ho Chi Minh's republic, which was formally declared in September. Viet Minh forces lacked the strength to defeat the French, but the movement had earned sufficient popularity among the Vietnamese people to prevent French victory. In 1950 the United States—increasingly concerned about Communist advances in Asia—recognized Bao Dai's government and began to provide military and economic aid to the French. In turn, the Viet Minh (still dominated by Ho Chi Minh's ICP) sought assistance from the new Communist government in China.

The war was a virtual stalemate for three years. In France, however, the public grew weary of the war in Indochina. In March 1954 Viet Minh forces attacked Dien Bien Phu, the French military outpost in the isolated town of Dien Bien. The dispirited government in France agreed to hold negotiations on a peace agreement at Geneva, Switzerland. The French outpost fell to a Viet Minh assault on May 7, the night before