

Conflict in **INDOCHINA**

A Struggle for Freedom

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Introduction

When questioned by Joseph Stalin as to whether he would rather sit on the nationalist ‘chair’ or the ‘chair’ of internationalist communism, Ho Chi Minh replied that he would like to sit on both. The Indian MN Roy concluded in 1951 that communism in Asia was ‘nationalism painted red.’ The driving force through 30 years of conflict for decolonisation was nationalism, but communism provided the vehicle or means to national liberation and unification. Over almost half a century, however, nationalism had been so welded to communism that they became for the North Vietnamese a single revolutionary instrument. Studies of Indochina in the 20th century, therefore, involve analysis of many of the key historical concepts of modern times: imperialism, nationalism, decolonisation, political self-determination, liberal democracy, communism, revolution.

Vietnam, for a thousand years independent of foreign rule, had developed a system of government similar to that of China. The centre of power was in an emperor and the administration was by scholars or mandarins. Ninety per cent of the population were peasants living in closely-knit villages.

From the 1860s Vietnam began to come under French power until by 1885 it became part of the French colonial empire. For almost a century the influences of European culture, and of European events and ideologies, gradually changed the lives of the people and the aspirations of the educated classes. It was in Vietnam, rather than in Cambodia or Laos, that opposition to French rule emerged. Traditional differences between

North and South Vietnam were reflected in the forms that opposition took.

Opposition to colonial rule took a number of guises but it was the life-experience of Ho Chi Minh, and the ideas he and his followers espoused, which eventually provided a meaningful leadership. Through 30 years of war the predominantly peasant population was guided to gain national independence, unification and social and economic ‘justice’ in the form of a communist revolution.

Ho Chi Minh began to develop his strategies after his countrymen were engaged in the French war effort in World War I. His party won vital support during World War II, when Vietnam was under Japanese occupation. But it was after a First Indochina War against the French, and during the Cold War, that there was great debate about the ideology and intentions of Ho Chi Minh. Were they nationalist freedom fighters or communists intent on a communist Indochina Federation and world revolution? Ho Chi Minh managed to steer his country through the 1966 Sino-Soviet split, receiving aid from both powers through the Second Indochina War against the Americans and their allies. Although he did not live to see the 1975 victory, his lifelong goal of a unified, independent Vietnam was achieved. By then a communist revolution had become an integral part of that goal for the now ‘professional’ revolutionaries. Communist revolutions in Cambodia and Laos and a Third Indochina War among the three ‘red-painted’ Indochinese nations would prolong the struggle for the duration of the Cold War and until 1989.



Part 1

Decolonisation in Indochina



1 Indochina from Ancient Times

Traditional Indochina

Greater Indochina includes the territories that lie between India and China. For purposes of this study, however, Indochina includes only Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These three were the territories of Greater Indochina that became part of the French Empire in the late 19th

century and were known as French Indochina. In the 1970s, they all came under communist governments and were known as Communist Indochina.

Traditional Indochina needs to be studied carefully because events in the past 100 years have been as much a result of ancient political, religious and social values and structures as of modern foreign intervention.



Figure 1.1 Looking down on rice terraces. Slopes were terraced to maximise crop production.



Geographical influences

Like other areas with a tropical climate and jungle vegetation, Indochina is ecologically vulnerable. The soil layer is thin and, if exposed, is easily washed away by heavy monsoon rains. Inhabitants rely on those rains and the silt deposits on the flood plains of the Mekong and Red rivers for food production. Traditionally wet-rice cultivation was practised in such areas, whereas slash-and-burn cultivation occurred in the highlands.

Peasant farming

Ninety per cent of the population were peasant farmers, living in villages. They grew rice to feed their families and to pay tax. Simple ploughs, waterwheels and grain mills were made of wood. Water buffalo were used as draft animals. Canals, dikes, ditches and ponds were constructed for irrigation, and fruit, vegetables, poultry, pigs and fish kept peasants self-sufficient in food.

Handicrafts provided clothing and utensils, and local timber, palms and bamboo were used for housing. Different villages, depending on location, specialised in providing salt (by evaporation), weapons, metalwork, pottery, medical help, religious devotion or astrological advice.

Peasants had a strong attachment to their kin, to their community and to the fields. They were often more closely related, through rituals, to the spirits of seeds, crops, water, forest and landform, than they were to distant rulers.

Traders

Outsiders – Indians, Chinese, Arabs and, eventually, Europeans – were the most common traders in Indochina. It was through these traders that the major religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity entered Indochina. Cultural and artistic influences also came through them.



Figure 1.2 Traditional farming in Indochina.



Figure 1.3 French Indochina, 1907-1918.



There were no ‘nations’ or boundaries between centres of power. A feature of Indochina over the centuries had been a movement of population from north to south and from highlands to lowlands and deltas. The Thai moved south from China to Laos, Thailand and the Mekong Valley. The Vietnamese moved south from China to the Red River Valley and eventually, in the 15th and 16th centuries, further south, displacing the Chams from their kingdom based on Hué and the Khmer from Kampuchea Krom in the Mekong Delta.

Traditional Vietnam

Vietnamese culture has its origin in the Bronze Age Dong Son culture of southern China from 2879 BCE. Tribal groups, known as Lac Viet, inhabited the Red River region and the coastal plain. They practised wet-rice agriculture and foreign trade.

1000 years of Chinese rule

From 258 BCE the Han Chinese annexed the region, calling it Nam Viet, Kingdom of the Southern People. It was ruled as a province of China with mandarins or scholar officials. Chinese migrated south and established Mahayana Buddhism. Vietnam’s culture was Sinicised by China’s value and government system – Confucianism.



Figure 1.4 The Nguyen family ruled Vietnam from the Imperial City at Hué.

A pattern of rebellion developed, beginning in 40 CE with the Trung sisters’ rebellion. Rebellions occurred in the 3rd and 6th centuries. In the 7th century the T’ang Dynasty called the province Annam, ‘protectorate of the pacified south.’



Figure 1.5 Part of the modern-day Imperial City at Hué.