

August Revolution, 1945-46

Japan surrendered in August 1945. Its control of Indochina was ended. Who would fill the power vacuum? Would the French return or would the Indochinese themselves take power?

Death by starvation had spread through Vietnam during the last months of Japanese occupation. With the Viet Minh slogan 'Break open the rice stores to avert famine', a general uprising of the people erupted in August 1945. The Viet Minh were in a strong position to benefit from this discontent. They recruited large numbers of peasants in northern and central Vietnam. The food crisis unified the country.

The Viet Minh in control

With the news of the Japanese surrender on 10 August, millions of people filled Vietnam's main cities. Ho Chi Minh called for a general uprising. Giap and his Viet Minh troops entered Hanoi on 17 August. Bao Dai (the puppet emperor of the Japanese) abdicated and asked the Viet Minh to form a government. On 25 August in Saigon the Viet Minh took over the government of Cochinchina. Within ten days of the Japanese surrender the Viet Minh controlled Vietnam.

REVOLUTION IN SAIGON

... Saigon too was seething. The August Revolution (1945) was erupting all around me in a constant stream of meetings and street demonstrations. The air was charged with excitement and anticipation, fuelled by leaflets proclaiming 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese', banners, flags, and inflammatory speeches.

... chanting their feelings 'Down with the Imperialists, Down with the French Colonialists.' Scattered knots of French were set on and beaten. In a few places the mass hysteria broke out into lynchings.

(A) Truong Nhu Trang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, 1985

On 2 September 1945 Ho Chi Minh proclaimed, in Hanoi, the independence of a new state known as the *Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (DRV). His words on that day have a familiar ring: 'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

TIEN QUANG CA (Marching to the Front)

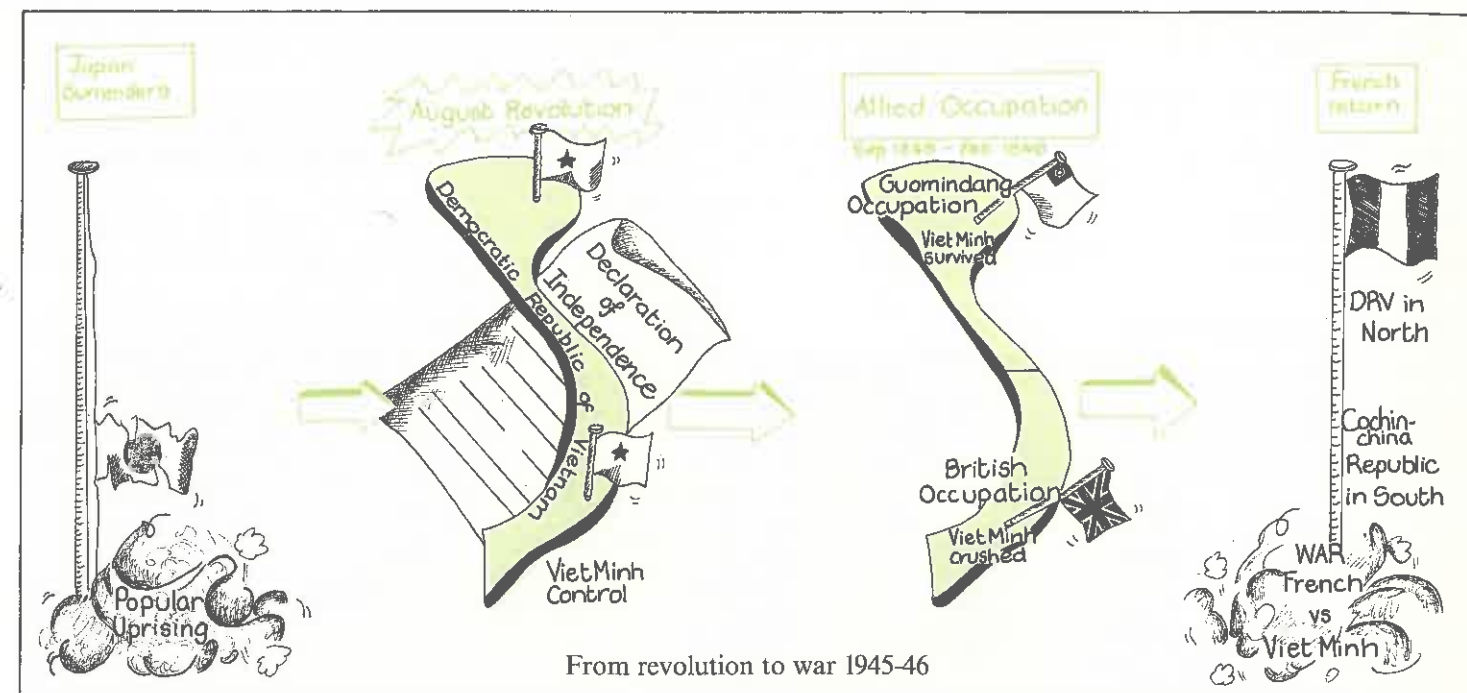
*Soldiers of Vietnam, we go forward!
With the one will to save our Fatherland.
Our hurried steps are sounding on the long and arduous road
Our flag, red with the blood of victory, bears the spirit of our country.
The distant rumbling of the gun mingles with our marching song.
The path to glory passes over the bodies of our foes.
Overcoming all hardships, together we build our resistance bases.
Ceaselessly for the people's cause we struggle.
Hastening to the battlefield!
Forward! All together advancing!
Our Vietnam is strong, eternal.*

Unfortunately for Ho Chi Minh the situation was more complicated. The Allies (Britain, USA, USSR, China) had agreed that when the Japanese were defeated, Indochina should be temporarily occupied by the Chinese Nationalists (non-Communists) north of the sixteenth parallel and by British troops to the south.

The Viet Minh are crushed

The Viet Minh arranged a friendly reception for the British General, Gracey, when he arrived in Saigon on 13 September 1945. However Gracey refused to deal with the Viet Minh and set about arranging the return of the French. The Viet Minh organised boycotts and demonstrations against the British but could not prevent a group of French troops, on 23 September, staging a brutal crackdown on the Viet Minh headquarters. About 200 European civilians were killed in the suburbs of Saigon in a revenge attack on 25 September. Gracey launched an all out effort to crush the Viet Minh, even using the remaining troops and soldiers from India. By early 1946, despite widespread condemnation of British brutality:

- Gracey's forces had at least temporarily destroyed the Viet Minh in the south of Vietnam.
- The British had secured southern Vietnam for the return of French rule.



In the north the Chinese Nationalists (or **Guomindang**) had an army of up to 185 000 men in occupation. The Guomindang were waging a civil war in China against Mao Zedong's Communists. It was hardly likely they would favour a Communist regime in Vietnam. However Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic was allowed to survive in the north. Ho was determined to see the end of the Chinese. He feared a revival of Chinese domination of Vietnam which had controlled that country for a thousand years of its history. 'It is better', Ho is reported as saying, 'to sniff France's dung for a while than eat China's all our lives'.

However in February 1946 the Chinese Nationalists recognised French sovereignty over Indochina and withdrew their forces.

An unhappy compromise

Ho Chi Minh began bargaining with the hated French. In the Gulf of Tonkin shiploads of General Leclerc's troops waited to land in Hanoi if the talks failed. A compromise was reached on 6 March 1946:

- Ho's Vietnam would be recognised as a free state within the French Union of all of the Indochinese states.
- Cochinchina would be separate and its future decided by a referendum at some later date.
- Ho would permit the presence of 25 000 French troops in Vietnam for the next five years.

This agreement was unsatisfactory to Ho who wanted a united, independent Vietnam, but it allowed him time to strengthen the Viet Minh. He left for Paris in May 1946 for

further talks, just as the French proclaimed the Republic of Cochinchina. Ho had to bargain with lower level officials at Fontainebleau. He claimed Cochinchina as 'the flesh of our flesh, the blood of our blood'.

Finally another unsatisfactory agreement was thrashed out. Ho's Democratic Republic was allowed to run its own economy but the Cochinchina issue remained unresolved. Ho returned to Vietnam muttering 'I've signed my death warrant'.

By late 1946 two hostile forces, unhappy with each other's existence, were prepared to strike. France was determined to hold on to her colonial empire in Indochina.

Throughout 1946 the French and the Viet Minh built up their armed forces to 50 000 and 60 000 respectively. Frequent clashes took place between the two armies. Finally, French troops entered Hanoi.

HO CHI MINH IN PARIS

I visited Ho Chi Minh in Paris during his negotiations with the French in 1946. . . . When Ho realised that among our group there were students from the North, South and Central Vietnam, he said gently. . . . 'Voila! the youth of our great family in Vietnam. Our Vietnam is one, our nation is one. You must remember, though the rivers may run dry and the mountains erode, the nation will always be one'. . . .

. . . . He spoke to us about the proud traditions and history of our ancestors. . . . then he explained that the French had used Vietnam as a slave state, keeping the people in a state of underdevelopment for the benefit of France. . . . 'Nothing,' he said, 'is more precious than independence and liberty.'

(C) Truong Nhu Trang, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, 1985

Notemaking

Make your own brief notes of this chapter under the following headings

- End of Japanese occupation
- Allied occupation
- August revolution
- French return
- DRV
- Agreement in Paris
- Ready for war

Resource interpretation

- 1 What appear to be the key demands of the crowds during the August Revolution? **(A)**
- 2 (a) What is the theme throughout **(B)**?
(b) Quote a line which symbolises Vietnamese nationalism
- 3 Is Ho Chi Minh speaking as a nationalist or as a Communist in **(C)**? Justify your answer
- 4 Why would Ho Chi Minh have regarded the Fontainebleau agreement as unsatisfactory? Why would the French feel the same?

Activities

1. Imagine your class visits Ho Chi Minh in 1946. What impression does he make on you? Would you support his leadership? What personal and political qualities does he display to you?
Members of the class should write down their impressions of the imaginary visit and report back to a class discussion.
- 2 Set up a role play situation in your class with Ho Chi Minh in Paris negotiating with the French. Establish the two sides around the negotiating table and debate the future of Vietnam — French or Viet Minh rule?

Words to know

Viet Minh
Democratic Republic of Vietnam
Chinese Nationalists

PROFILE: THE VIET MINH

The Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet Minh), was formed in a cave at Pac Bo near the border with China in May 1941 under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

Its purpose as outlined by Ho was to:

unite all patriots, without distinction of wealth, age, sex, religion or political outlook, so that they may work together for the liberation of our people and the salvation of our nation.

Its immediate objective after the overthrow of the 'Japanese fascists' and 'French jackals' was to establish a democratic republic under its emblem of the red flag with the gold star.

The Viet Minh in 1941 was essentially a Marxist organisation emphasising *national liberation* rather than the establishment of a Communist state in Vietnam. However it had grown out of the Indochinese Communist Party. Under Ho Chi Minh's leadership the Viet Minh reached out to all Vietnamese in their struggle:

Men of wealth and position, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, civil servants, traders, young men, women, you are full of patriotism — at this time national liberation must come before all else.

Hence the ultimate strength of the Viet Minh lay in its contact with many adverse elements in Vietnam, both rural and urban. However its base was the peasantry who were attracted by its land reform proposals — an end to landlords and a fair distribution of land.

Late in 1943 Viet Minh members, led by Vo Nguyen Giap and financed by the Chinese, infiltrated Vietnam and

launched guerilla raids against the Japanese occupiers. They were able to gain control of large areas of northern Vietnam. There the Viet Minh guerillas became the Vietnam Liberation Army.

After the Japanese surrender Viet Minh units seized control of Hanoi and enabled Ho Chi Minh to proclaim the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with a Viet Minh government.

The Viet Minh's success as a military force against the French lay in its reliance on the population for manpower and support, to fight only when there was a reasonable chance of obtaining its objective.

The people are the eyes and ears of the army, they feed and keep our soldiers. It is they who help the army in sabotage and in battle. The people are the water and our army the fish.

So the essence of the struggle was to see the army as a political organisation.

In Viet Minh-controlled Vietnam thousands of people were involved in people's councils, electing local committees with the Viet Minh dominating key positions. The people were brought closer to real power and hence their support for the revolution.

In February 1951 a revolutionary congress set up the **Viet Nam Dang Lao Dong** (Vietnam Workers' Party) 'to drive out imperialist aggressors, to unify the nation, to give land to the peasants, to develop popular democracy as a basis for Socialism'. Its estimated membership was 700 000. Led by Ho Chi Minh this new party absorbed the Viet Minh and remained the dominant force in North Vietnam.

Chapter 4

The First Indochina War, 1946-54

By late 1946 it was clear that there would be a war of independence in Vietnam between the Viet Minh, a nationalist-Communist movement, and the French, a colonial power.

On 23 November 1946 French planes and warships bombarded the Vietnamese section of the port of Haiphong (apparently to prevent the arrival of Vietnamese arms) killing at least 6000 people. In the next few weeks each side struck blows of revenge and counter-revenge during which many more people were killed in the cities of North Vietnam. Open war erupted on 19 December with general uprisings in Hanoi and elsewhere. This was the beginning of the First Indochina War.

The first three years of bitter fighting were inconclusive with French superiority in arms unable to defeat Giap's guerillas.



Ho Chi Minh during the war with the French

The first three years

Ho Chi Minh declared he would fight on for ten years if he had to. The Viet Minh retreated from Hanoi after a heavy battle. Ho and his government vanished into the safety of the mountainous north (the Viet Bac). Here Ho concentrated on consolidating his support among the peasants.

WE SHALL BE VICTORIOUS

*Fellow-countrymen throughout the land!
Impelled by love of peace, we have made concessions. But the more we make, the more the French colonialists take advantage of them in order to trample on our rights . . .*

No! It would be better to sacrifice everything than forfeit our country and sink back into slavery. Compatriots, arise! . . . Let him who has a rifle use his rifle, let him who has a sword use his sword! And let those who have no sword take up pickaxes and sticks!

. . . Even if we should have to endure the hardest privations and the worst sufferings, let us be ready to make every sacrifice. We shall be victorious . . .

(A)

Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*

During 1947-48 the classic guerilla warfare pattern of conflict typical of the Indochina wars took shape. The Viet Minh operated from bases in the countryside with small tightly equipped units using ambush attack. The French controlled the urban centres and major roads of South and Central Vietnam. Isolated in fortified or built-up areas, they continued with their old colonial policies.

HO AT WAR

In the early days of the resistance he used to live among the peasants, wear brown cotton clothes like theirs, and put up with the same restrictions as everybody else . . . When a bomber appeared, he used to do what the peasants did: run and hide in the fields . . . Later, at Quang Nap, he lived in a hut right in the middle of the jungle, built on piles, with a very low roof. . . It stood exposed to the four winds and was completely bare except for his 'Baby' portable, some coloured pencils and some writing paper. His sole companion, a dog, had fallen victim to the tigers which prowled at night . . .

(B)

Hoang Quoc Viet, quoted in Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, 1965

The Elysee Agreement

Despite Ho's apparent willingness to negotiate with the French they continued to look for a way to involve anti-Communist Vietnam in the struggle against the Viet Minh. The French turned once more to former Emperor Bao Dai (who had been in exile since 1946 gaining a reputation as 'the night club emperor').

In June 1948 the French government signed an agreement with Bao Dai whereby Vietnam would be

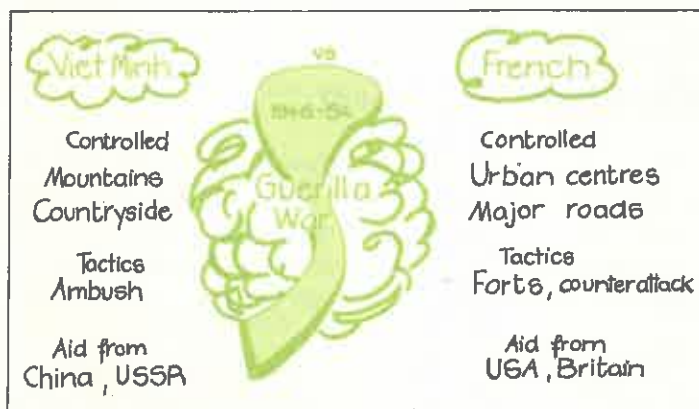
independent but France would keep control of its army, finance and foreign affairs. Cochinchina would become part of this new state. Bao Dai would be its emperor with his capital in Saigon. This became known as the *Elysee Agreement*.

There were now two governments claiming to represent the whole of Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic, now recognised by the Soviet Union and China, and Bao Dai's government. The United States and Great Britain recognised Bao Dai's new state and set up legations in Saigon to supervise the delivery of military equipment to the French Union forces.



Ho Chi Minh lectures his Viet Minh troops

The First Indochina War



The tide turns

By 1949 losses in money and men turned French public opinion against this 'dirty war', as it was called in France.

The turning point in the war was the victory of the Communists in China towards the end of 1949. Mao Zedong, a dedicated Communist, became master of the most populous nation on earth. Ho Chi Minh now had an ally on his northern border. Help and advice were rapidly dispatched to the Viet Minh and the tide of war turned in their favour. The French now saw themselves confronting a great red wave of Asian communism.

Mao Zedong's influence was profound. He altered the situation in three key ways:

- The Indochinese Communist Party was reborn under a new name, the **Lao Dong**.
- To secure the support of the peasants, land was divided and rent and interest rates reduced.
- Giap's military strategy was changed to *mobile warfare* and Viet Minh contingents were sent to China to retrain.

... Now, the Viet Minh switched to the Maoist military formula of annihilation. Instead of bleeding the enemy to death, drop by drop, the new strategy aimed to destroy him by a series of shattering blows ... The basic idea was beautifully simple. A military target was selected, assaulted by a numerically superior force, and wiped out by the sheer weight of numbers of the attackers. If, for instance, the French were to defend an outpost with fifty men, the Viet Minh would hit it with a full battalion.

H. Dareff, *The Story of Vietnam*, 1966

The new tactic worked. A string of French forts near the Chinese border were knocked out in 1950. The French suffered thousands of casualties. The Viet Minh were now on the offensive.

However China soon became preoccupied with the Korean War and for the next three years, Chinese war material ceased to flow into Vietnam.

French strategies

The French based their operations in Hanoi on a group of forts known as the de Lattre line. When the French forces went beyond this line they were forced to retreat as their



After the Battle, December 1952. French forces stand guard over Viet Minh dead and wounded following a paratroop attack to retake a hill position at Nasan.

lines of supply became stretched. During Operation Lorraine in late 1952, for example, 1200 soldiers were killed when the Viet Minh struck French troops strung along single-lane tracks.

The forces of the French Union included Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, troops from the French Foreign Legion and soldiers from French Africa. In 1952 the French strengthened the Vietnamese units serving with their forces. This policy was known as *jaunissement* or 'yellowing'. The purpose was to sustain the idea of a true anti-Communist nationalist force. However the French distrusted these Vietnamese contingents, fearing they might defect to the Viet Minh. Moreover the training of these units was going to take years. It was too late.

By the end of 1953 the Viet Minh faced an increasingly demoralised French army as their casualties mounted and the war became unpopular at home. Ho Chi Minh had been right when he had once told a French reporter that even if the French killed ten Vietnamese for each French soldier, it would be the French who would tire of the war first.

FRENCH FARCE

'What we have here is a twilight government', said the French colonel. ... 'In our own area we control the cities and major roads from daybreak till nightfall. Thereafter the Viet Minh has the country to itself to levy taxes, attack our posts, and execute the "Vietnamese traitors," ...' Such, in a nutshell, is the situation in war-torn Indochina, after more than seven years of bitter fighting ...

A young graduate of the Ecole Militaire Inter-Armes at Dalat said to me: 'How do you think it feels getting oneself killed in the jungle for that man who comes up here to swear us in wearing a Riviera suit, a polka-dot tie, and inch-thick crepe soles?' He was referring to His Majesty Bao Dai, commander-in-chief of the Vietnamese forces, who has not yet been seen in the uniform of his army.

B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness*, 1954

American involvement

Throughout the First Indochina War the Americans felt obliged to support the French against what they saw as the spreading virus of 'imperialistic communism'. The first direct United States military aid was authorised by President Truman in 1950 in response to the Chinese

Dien Bien Phu: 55 days of hell

Fight when you can, run away when you cannot.

Dien Bien Phu was the battle that ended the First Indochina War. For 55 days 10 000 French Union soldiers attempted to hold an armed camp, in the middle of a valley, against nearly 50 000 Viet Minh forces. The defeat of this French garrison was one of the worst disasters in French military history and it brought to an end French control in Indochina.

By 1954 517 000 French forces were in action in Indochina. The French government, with opposition at home, wanted to end the war quickly. In fact there were indications of an imminent ceasefire by November 1953.

The French plan

General Henri Navarre, French commander-in-chief in Indochina (since 1953) had a simple strategy. He hoped to trap and destroy the best Viet Minh units by offering them the bait of a French armed camp. Navarre thought his men would have enough machine gun, heavy artillery, tanks and planes to hold off an attacking force of up to 20 000 Viet Minh.

Dien Bien Phu was a village in a valley surrounded by mountains and thick jungle. Its only link to Hanoi, France's main supply base, was by a mountainous road. Navarre relied on air transport to bring his 10 000 troops and their supplies in by plane. Viet Minh soldiers in the

mountains watched this operation. Colonel Christian de Castries was appointed to command the newly built camp. Most of his troops were not used to fighting in such terrain.

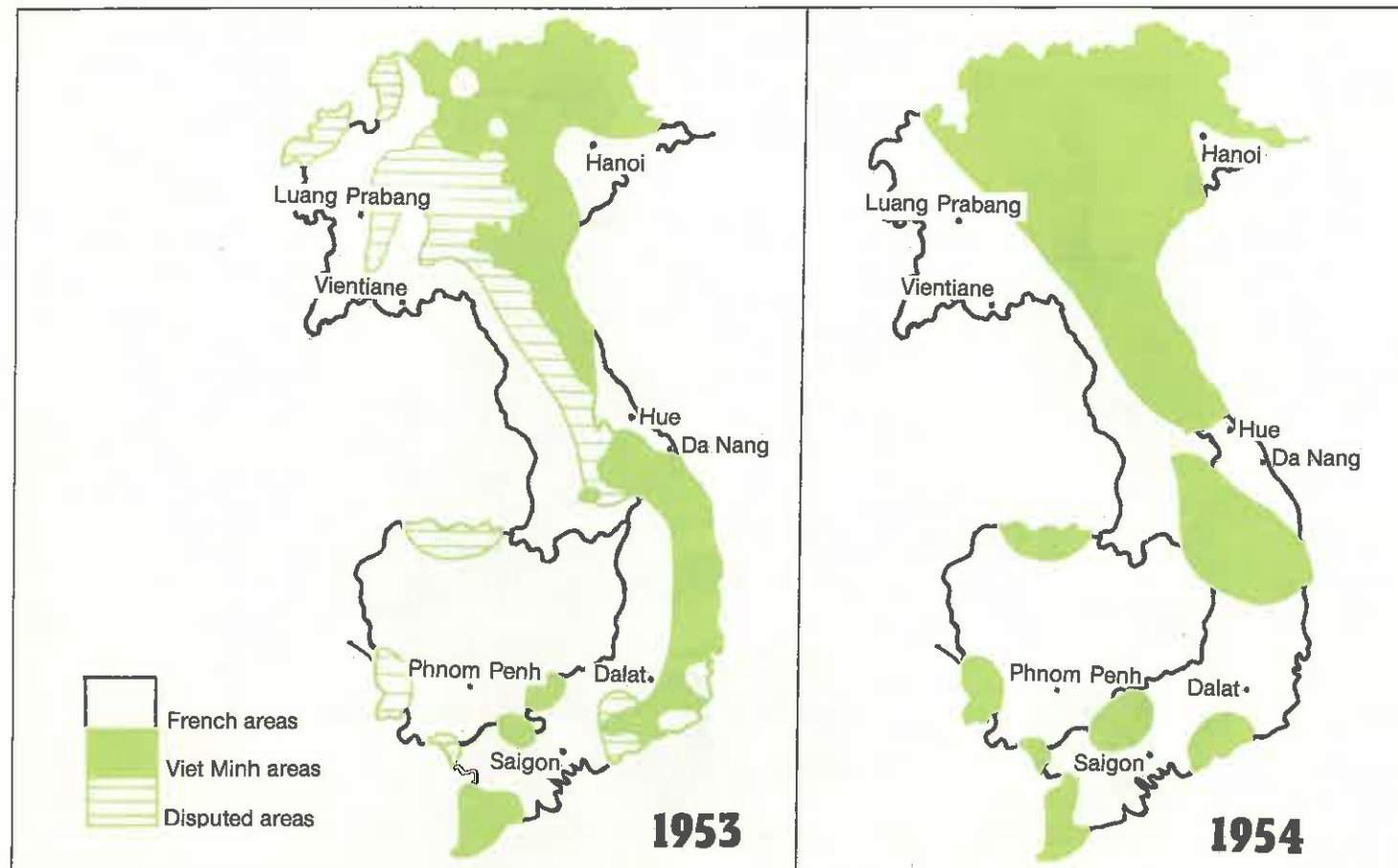
The Viet Minh strategy

As the mists and rain swirled around the mountains Giap moved his supplies, enlisting thousands of supporters as porters. They walked along the jungle-shrouded tracks at night from his base, Juan Giao, 120 kilometres away. By January 1954 40-50 000 Viet Minh combat troops looked down on Dien Bien Phu. What General Navarre could not know however was that the Viet Minh had also brought in a vastly superior artillery firepower.

I lunched there one day with the battalion officers just a few weeks before the Viet Minh attack. The officers' mess was a strip of tarpaulin stretched over the top of a dust-covered and fly-infested table . . . 'Take these and have a look at those hills', said a captain, handing me his field glasses. 'What you'll see up there are all Viet Minh.' Like spectators crowding into the seats of a stadium, the Viet Minh were taking up their positions for the battle to come.

D. Warner, *The Last Confucian*, 1964

The aerodrome at Dien Bien Phu



(C) Areas of Indochina controlled by the French and the Viet Minh in 1953 and 1954.

Communist revolution and the outbreak of the Korean War. By the end of 1950 \$150 million had been given to the French.

After 1952 the newly elected President, Dwight Eisenhower, increased the American commitment with the influence of strong anti-Communist campaigners — Vice-President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. By the end of the war in 1954 the Americans had spent \$2.5 billion and were paying for up to 80 percent of the total cost of the war.

Text and resource interpretation

1. What indications are there that the war was building up to a major international conflict?
2. How were the Viet Minh transformed during the war?
3. How did Mao's 'mobile warfare' differ from the Viet Minh's earlier tactics?
4. Why did the French promote the 'Bao Dai experiment'? What were Bao Dai's flaws?
5. Why did events in the war turn against the French?
6. What evidence is there to illustrate the Viet Minh belief that 'the people are the water and the army the fish'?

7. What physical conditions of the war are mentioned in (B)?
8. What inspiration does Ho Chi Minh provide for his forces? (A)(B)
9. (a) What do French controlled areas tend to have in common? (C)
(b) Which areas are Viet Minh strongholds?
(c) What do the maps show about Viet Minh advances between 1953-1954?

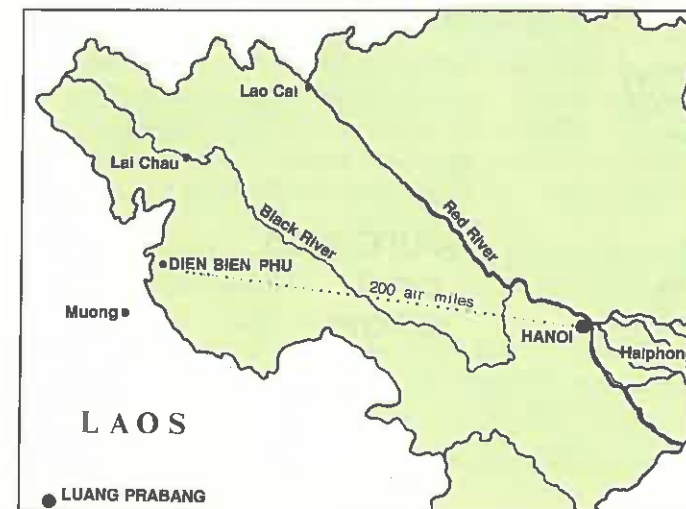
Activities

1. Make a timeline of key events in this chapter.
2. Rule two columns with headings *French* and *Viet Minh*. Underneath each heading list advantages and support which each side gained in the First Indochina War. Then list their disadvantages.
3. As French citizens debate the issue of whether France should remain in Indochina.
4. Write a speech or letter by Ho Chi Minh to the world press explaining the Viet Minh side of the war.

Words to know

national liberation guerilla warfare
infiltrate Lao Dong

(A) The air route from Dien Bien Phu to Hanoi



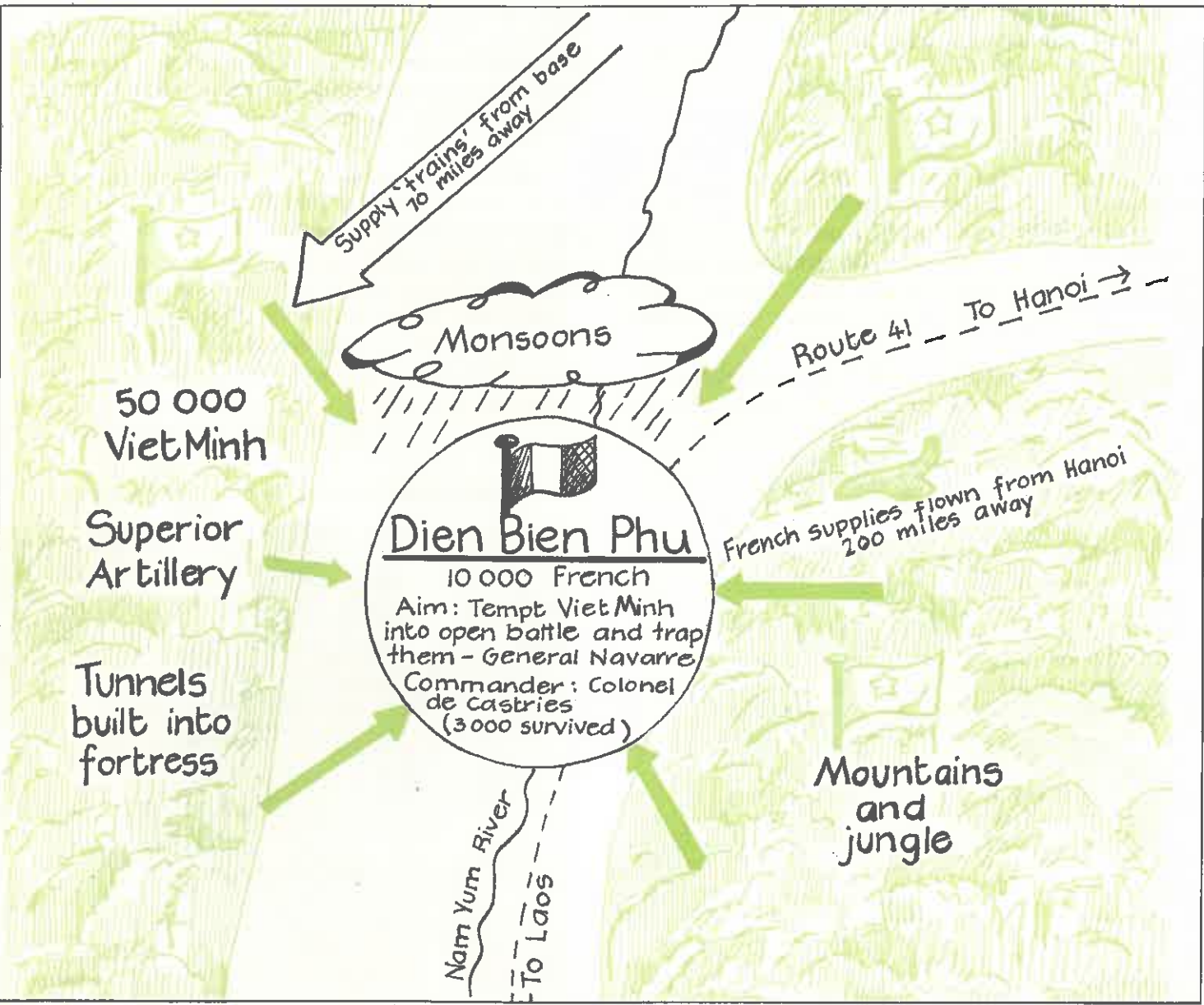
The last battle

A conference was scheduled to open in Geneva in April to discuss ceasefire possibilities in Indochina. Both sides hoped to gain advantage at the negotiating table with a victory at Dien Bien Phu. Giap launched his attack on 13 March 1954.

Viet Minh artillery pounded the French camp and defeat was obvious by the end of the first day. The French artillery commander committed suicide, the Viet Minh built tunnels into the camp, the monsoon rains poured down and French troops fell back into an area of only a few hundred square metres.

The possibility of America becoming directly involved

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu: March-May 1954



in the war with a massive air strike was promoted by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Vice-President Richard Nixon. However both President Eisenhower and America's allies, the British, argued in favour of settling the issue at the Geneva Conference table.

FALLING DOMINOES

On 7 April, Eisenhower explained to the public the strategic importance of Indochina by citing the falling domino principle: the fall of Indochina would lead to the fall of Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia; India would then be hemmed in by Communism, and Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Formosa and Japan would all be gravely threatened.

(B) D. Horowitz, *From Yalta to Vietnam*, 1965



Dien Bien Phu

After seven weeks of steady bombardment almost half of the camp's defenders were either dead or seriously wounded. Survivors existed in rain and mud in World War I conditions. However Viet Minh conditions were no better as they charged French gun positions night after night. In the 55 days of fighting about:

- 7900 Viet Minh soldiers were killed and 15 000 wounded.
- 13 000 French soldiers out of 16 000 were killed (some 10 000 died in the prison camps or on the gruelling trek to them).

DE CASTRIES' FAILURE

Colonel de Castries . . . who was assisted until well into the battle by an attractive female secretary, though certainly not lacking in courage, . . . was not often seen outside his command post. According to Colonel Jules Roy, . . . de Castries, a thrice wounded cavalryman, 'timidly used his reserves to stop gaps or mend holes, not to strike . . .'

Day by day the Viet Minh dug out trenches to the French strongpoints, gradually encircling them for the final assault . . .

Dien Bien Phu might well be rated one of the most decisive events since 1945 . . . demonstrating the superiority of an underdeveloped irregular force over a conventional army . . . Possibly in years ahead Dien Bien Phu may come to be regarded as the moment marking the end of any prospect of Western ascendancy in the Far East.

(C) A. Horne, 'Dienbienphu', *History of the Twentieth Century*, 1968

Wounded French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu



Navarre ordered a ceasefire at 5.30 pm on 7 May 1954. Viet Minh forces finally swamped Dien Bien Phu and raised the red flag with the large gold star.

So the decisive last battle of the first Indochina War ended with humiliation for France and General Navarre. Nothing had been gained from their seven-and-half-year war. French Union casualties were 253 000, including 92 000 dead. France had been deeply divided over the war and her recovery from World War II was also delayed.

For Ho Chi Minh and General Giap it was a triumph and an inspiration in the tragic years that followed.

NAVARRE'S FUNDAMENTAL ERROR

... Summing up Navarre's fundamental error, a French War College study concluded that he and his staff had wrongly disregarded intelligence that did not fit their prejudices, and instead substituted their preconceived idea of the Viet Minh for the facts. . . . He misread Giap's ability to move a huge force rapidly. . . . He rejected the notion that the Viet Minh could devastate his men with artillery deployed on the hills above Dien Bien Phu.

... He failed to anticipate that Giap's howitzers, poised within easy range of his airstrip could cut off flights in and out of the valley.

... He chose a terrain presumed suitable for tanks only to discover that its cover of thick bush entangled armoured vehicles.

S. Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*, 1983

Text and resource interpretation

- (a) What disadvantages (location, terrain) for the French are revealed by the map? (A)
- (b) Locate the supply bases of the Viet Minh and the French
- (c) How did the French supply their forces at Dien Bien Phu?
- (d) Why do you think Navarre chose Dien Bien Phu as the site for a showdown with the Viet Minh?
- List three or four reasons for the triumph of the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu
- What role did the Americans play in the French defeat?
- (a) What is the 'Falling Domino' principle? (B)
- (b) How does this affect Great Power attitudes in Indochina?

- Why is Dien Bien Phu rated as 'one of the most decisive events since 1945'? (C) Do you agree with this claim?
- What five points in the text are supported by the three photographs in this chapter?

Activities

- Write an account of the Battle for either a French, Chinese, Vietnamese or American newspaper
- Prepare a list of charges against Navarre and de Castries and ask them to respond. (Suitable for a class role play.)

Role Play: After the battle

A conference is convened in Geneva in April 1954 with the Great Powers and the countries in Indochina. France has just been defeated at Dien Bien Phu. Will the Western Powers sit back and watch the Communist Ho Chi Minh take control of Indochina?

Your class is divided up into eight small groups each representing one of the conference delegates:

| | |
|--------|----------------------------|
| France | Britain |
| Russia | DRV (Ho Chi Minh) |
| China | State of Vietnam (Bao Dai) |
| USA | Laos/Cambodia |

Preparation:

Each group should research their policy on Indochina. Should it be independent? Should it be divided? How much Great Power influence should be involved?

Simulation:

- Sit around with your desks arranged in a square.
- Introduce yourselves and your policy to the conference. Say how you want to see Indochina after this conference.
- Each delegation raises points or objections as the discussion progresses. How do you react to Ho Chi Minh's demands?
- Suggest possible solutions to the points raised.
- Have a map of Indochina displayed on the overhead projector and discuss possible partitions at parallels of latitude.

Agreement:

- Draw up a list of common agreements and attempt to reach a solution on the future of Indochina.
- Now compare your solution to the reality in chapter six.

Geneva Conference, 1954



In February 1954 Britain, France, Russia and the United States agreed to hold a conference to deal with the wars in Korea and Indochina. This conference was to shape the Indochina problem for the next 20 years.

The Conference opened in Geneva on 26 April 1954. Korea was the first issue on the agenda. The day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu the conference began discussions on Indochina. The Vietnamese Communists were obviously in a position of advantage at the conference table.

Besides the four Great Powers, (America, Britain, USSR and France) five Asian governments were at the table; China, Cambodia, Laos, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh's DRV) and the State of Vietnam (Bao Dai's government in the south).

Proposals and problems

The DRV representative, Pham Van Dong, proposed dividing all three countries of Indochina into Communist and non-Communist zones. Laos and Cambodia, with Great Power support, rejected this idea.

The United States was opposed to any sort of compromise with the Communists. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had refused to shake hands with the Chinese delegates and left Geneva after only a week (his deputy took his place at the table). Britain's delegate, Sir

Representatives of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia sign the Geneva treaties giving independence to the Indochina nations. Left: Au Chheun of Cambodia, Guy Lachambre of France, Leuam Insisienmai of Laos and Nguyen Van Thoai of Vietnam.

Anthony Eden, observed, 'I have never known a conference of this kind. The parties would not make direct contact, and we were in constant danger of one or another backing out the door.'

THE DULLES VIEW

The American government . . . approached the French and ourselves with a new proposal . . . that all countries concerned should issue, before Geneva, a solemn declaration of their readiness to take action under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter against continued interference by China in the Indochina war. . . . Mr Dulles was convinced that Indochina was the place for such action, should it become necessary. . . . I was not convinced by the assertion which Mr Dulles then made, that the situation in Indochina was analogous to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and to Hitler's reoccupation of Rhineland.

. . . As soon as I arrived in Geneva, Mr Dulles came to see me to learn the British attitude to the United States proposal. I told him . . . we were not ready to take part in armed intervention now.

(A)

Sir Anthony Eden, *Full Circle*, 1960



Anthony Eden

Geneva
Conference
delegates

Britain

USSR



Vyacheslav Molotov



Zhou Enlai

China

France



Mendes- France



John Foster Dulles

USA

DRV



Pham Van Dong

Meanwhile a new French Prime Minister, Mendes-France, announced he would resign if he had not achieved a ceasefire in Indochina by 20 July.

The Soviet Union and Chinese delegates, Molotov and Zhou Enlai, were not prepared to back the Viet Minh claim to the whole of Vietnam. They favoured a peaceful compromise. The Chinese had always worried about the danger of a strong united Vietnam south of their border. Zhou Enlai agreed that Communist forces should be withdrawn from Laos and Cambodia in return for a ceasefire.

On the afternoon of 20 July, Mendes-France's deadline, Molotov convened a meeting at his villa, Le Bocage. He conspicuously excluded Bedell Smith (USA) and Bao Dai's delegate, but Mendes-France, Zhou, Eden and

Pham Van Dong assembled in the salon and they bargained. Pham Van Dong, perspiring as the heavy-weights encircled him, now accepted a partition at the sixteenth parallel. Mendes-France stuck to the eighteenth. 'Let's agree on the seventeenth,' announced Molotov, then moved on to the election schedule. Mendes-France wanted the timetable left open. Pham Van Dong amended his demand for six months, offering a year, maybe even eighteen months. Molotov, his round face motionless, delivered the verdict with a rhetorical question: 'Shall we say two years?'

S. Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*, 1983

Premier Mendes-France gained two major concessions from the Communists:

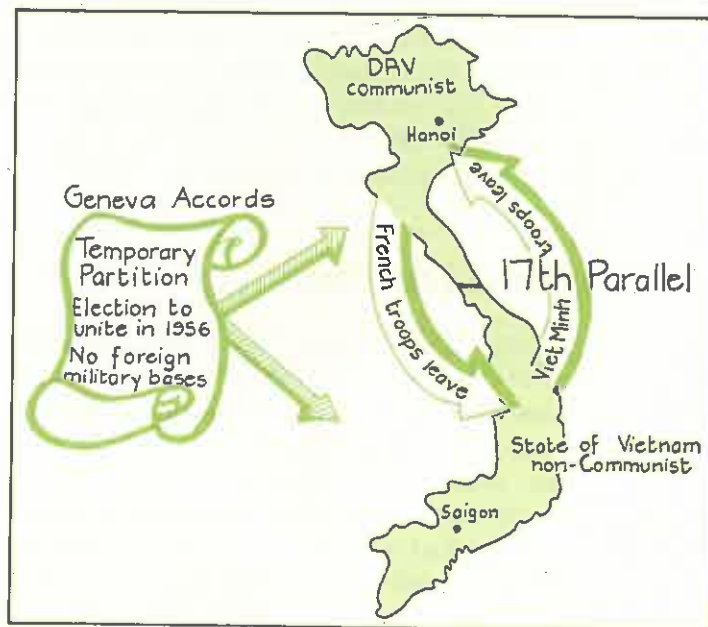
- The dividing line between North and South Vietnam would be placed at the seventeenth parallel (rather than the thirteenth, which was further south).
- The nationwide election in Vietnam aiming to unite North and South would be held in 1956 instead of late 1954. This date could favour non-Communist politicians.

The Americans were persuaded in favour of this compromise and on 28 June 1954 Prime Minister Churchill and President Eisenhower signed a secret agreement accepting the idea.

The ceasefire agreement

In the early hours of 21 July 1954 the ceasefire agreement was signed. Vietnam was divided into North and South separated by the seventeenth parallel:

The Geneva Agreement 1954



- The Viet Minh were to control the North.
- The State of Vietnam was to control the South.
- Within three hundred days Viet Minh troops were to be moved into North Vietnam.
- All French troops were to leave North Vietnam.
- Civilians were allowed to move between North and South within 200 days.

An International Control Commission of Indians, Canadians and Poles was to supervise the agreement. No foreign military bases were to be set up in Indochina nor were Vietnamese military forces to be strengthened. These agreements were military and were not meant to affect the eventual political solution to Vietnam's problem.

A temporary arrangement?

The final declaration to the Geneva Conference stated that the division of Vietnam was to be *temporary*. A general election to be held in July 1956, supervised by the International Control Commission, was to unite the two halves of Vietnam under a single government of the people's choice. This declaration was never signed but a verbal agreement was made. However the US expressed its reservations and South Vietnam rejected it altogether.

The American position on this issue is crucial. They interpreted the partition of Vietnam as *political*. South Vietnam was to receive US support on the basis that it was a separate non-Communist state. America refused to allow elections to unite Vietnam. It was clear to President Eisenhower that if mid-1956 elections were held Ho Chi Minh would be elected by an overwhelming majority.

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochina affairs who did not agree that had elections been held possibly eighty percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh.

However it was never certain what was meant by a single nationwide election. The Americans argued that what was meant was the holding of a plebiscite first of all on whether reunification was in fact desired. Senator Kennedy (later President) objected to what he called 'an election obviously stacked and subverted in advance, urged upon us by those who have already broken their own pledges under the agreement they now seek to enforce.'

So although the war was over and a peace agreement had been made, the ingredients for future conflict were already sown. What was intended as a temporary division of Vietnam came to be a permanent reality. The Americans adopted the notion of **Two Vietnams**, an

artificial concept which allowed them to defend the division between North and South as if it was meant to be permanent. South Vietnam was seen as an independent state, a bulwark against the advance of communism in Southeast Asia.

The end of an era

Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference were the end of an era. The French had at last left Indochina. European domination of Asia was in its twilight. The Dutch had departed from the East Indies and Indonesia was independent. Britain had lost India, Burma and Sri Lanka. Soon Malaya and Singapore would follow.

However, the emergence of communism in China and now a Communist state in North Vietnam was to engage the increasing interest of the Great Powers.

Notemaking

Make your own brief notes on this chapter under the following headings:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Conference participants | • Agreement |
| • Proposals by DRV | 17th parallel |
| USA | ICC |
| China | election |
| Russia | • American interpretation |

Text and resource Interpretation

1. A vacuum had been left in Indochina by the fall of the French. How was that vacuum filled?
2. What was Dulles's attitude and how did it shape the Geneva Conference? (A)
3. How did the military agreements made at Geneva affect the political future of Vietnam?
4. What is the difference between the ceasefire agreement and the final declaration of the conference?
5. What arguments did the Americans make against elections to unite Vietnam?

Activity

Return to your role play conference at the end of chapter 5. Discuss these conclusions and whether you could do a better job!

Words to know

plebiscite
analogous

PROFILE: LAOS



Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong (1964)

Overshadowed by Vietnam, landlocked and underdeveloped, Laos with its population of under three million has been described as one of the sideshows of the Indochina conflict. Its national emblem, a white elephant with three heads, perhaps represents some of the confusion in this complex land.

The people of Laos are divided into four groups:

- Lao, living on the lowlands and Buddhist, account for half the population;
- Thai, live in the valleys of the North;
- Meo, living in the mountains of northern Laos, grow opium and worship ancestors;
- the Kha, or slaves, tribal and poor, who also live in the mountains.

Laos is a land of small isolated towns and villages. It remained backward under the French, with only one Western trained Lao doctor, no railways, poor roads and no telephone links between towns. Its traditional government of king and leading families operated from the royal capital of Luang Prabang.

At the end of World War II a group of leading families formed the Lao Issara (Free Lao) and rose in revolt against the French. At its head were three princes, all sons by different mothers of Prince Boun Khong of Vientiane: Prince Petsarath, the eldest son; Prince Souvanna Phouma; and Prince Souphanouvong, the twentieth and last son who joined the Viet Minh. The French rapidly suppressed the revolt and Souphanouvong escaped with a bullet in his lungs. The Lao Issara established a government in exile in Bangkok under Prince Petsarath.

The French split the rebels by agreeing to a constitutional monarchy. Souvanna Phouma, the Pink Prince, went back to Vientiane and was soon Prime Minister in the Royal Government of King Sisavang Vong. Souphanouvong, the

Red Prince, took off for the Laotian jungle to continue the fight with some dedicated Communists.

August 1950 saw the establishment of the **Pathet Lao** army and the **Neo Lao Issara** (Laotian Liberation Front) with Souphanouvong as Premier. Their aim was to drive out the French and establish a Communist state. Helped by the Viet Minh they 'liberated' two northern provinces.

When the **Geneva Accords** brought the First Indochina War to a halt the two half-brothers headed rival governments. Skirmishes continued.

In 1957 agreement was reached to hold elections. Souphanouvong achieved considerable support. However a right wing coup against Souvanna Phouma by General Phoumi Nosavan led to the arrest of Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao took up arms again.

Further coups in 1959, 1960 and 1964 came when Laos was on the verge of forming a neutral coalition. Each time the delicate balance was destroyed by a right wing grab for power, supported by the American government.

America pumped money into Laos for the upkeep of the Royal Lao armed forces. With the Ho Chi Minh trail running through Laos, the Vietnam conflict overflowed its borders and American planes commenced bombing the trail in 1964. Pathet Lao areas were routinely bombed. By 1970 it is estimated more bombs had been dropped on Laos than on Vietnam.

Laos might have been only a 'sideshow' in the Indochina conflict but what happened there bore a frightening similarity to the events in war-torn Vietnam.

