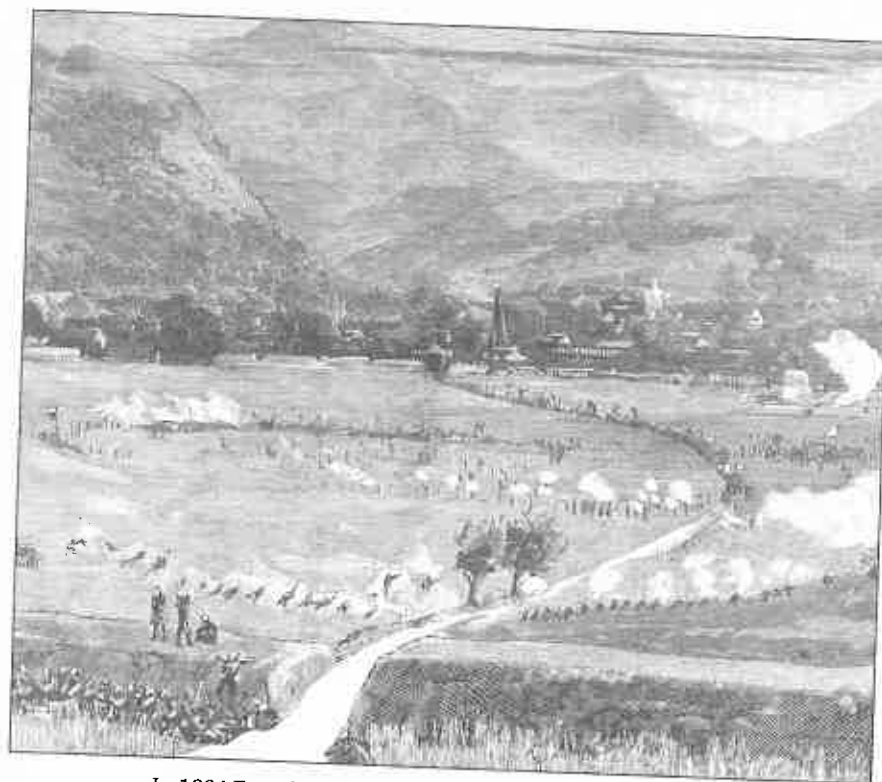


obligation and moral responsibility"; but this was not usually translated as restraint in the Dutch East Indies. Old habits died hard. Slavery was so widespread that Dutch colonial authorities, unlike the British to their north, left the institution undisturbed. Not only did a great demand exist for slave-servants in Java at Batavia, in outposts on other islands and at trading posts along the shipping route to Holland, but the Dutch East India Company itself employed slaves to harvest spices. In the 1620s it had killed or deported all the people living on the small islands forming the Banda group, and then replaced them with Dutch colonists using slaves to collect nutmeg and mace.

Yet the advance of the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago was not entirely based on violence. In 1859 they purchased the Lesser Sunda islands and a part of Timor from Portugal, then threatened with bankruptcy. But in Sumatra serious fighting was required to subdue Aceh, whose guerrilla fighters held out until 1904. Just how uncompromising the Dutch colonial attitude was can be glimpsed in the advice offered by L. W. van der Berg, a noted specialist in foreign affairs. He recommended that Aceh should be settled by Amboinese, preferably ex-colonial soldiers, in fortified villages. They would gradually take over from the "degenerate" Acehnese "in the same way that savages withdrawal from the spread of civilisation... and die out".

Such an attitude was not missed in the United States. During the 1930s, prominent newspapers asked how it was that a tiny country like Holland could go on plundering the whole of the Indonesian archipelago. President Franklin D. Roosevelt openly complained about the living conditions of colonial peoples and especially those in the Dutch East Indies, despite his own forebears being Dutch. Yet Washington remained anxious about Japan, which it feared might exploit Indonesian nationalism in what was a strategically important area. This gradual shift of American thinking delighted Batavia, which announced that the word "Indonesia" could no longer be used. Relations between the Dutch and the Indonesians then hit rock bottom as police surveillance was stepped up: even the popular village sport of pigeon racing was outlawed to prevent bad news becoming generally known. The fall of the Netherlands to Germany in 1940 could not be kept a secret forever, but the feebleness of Dutch resistance to the Japanese two years later still astonished the local population.

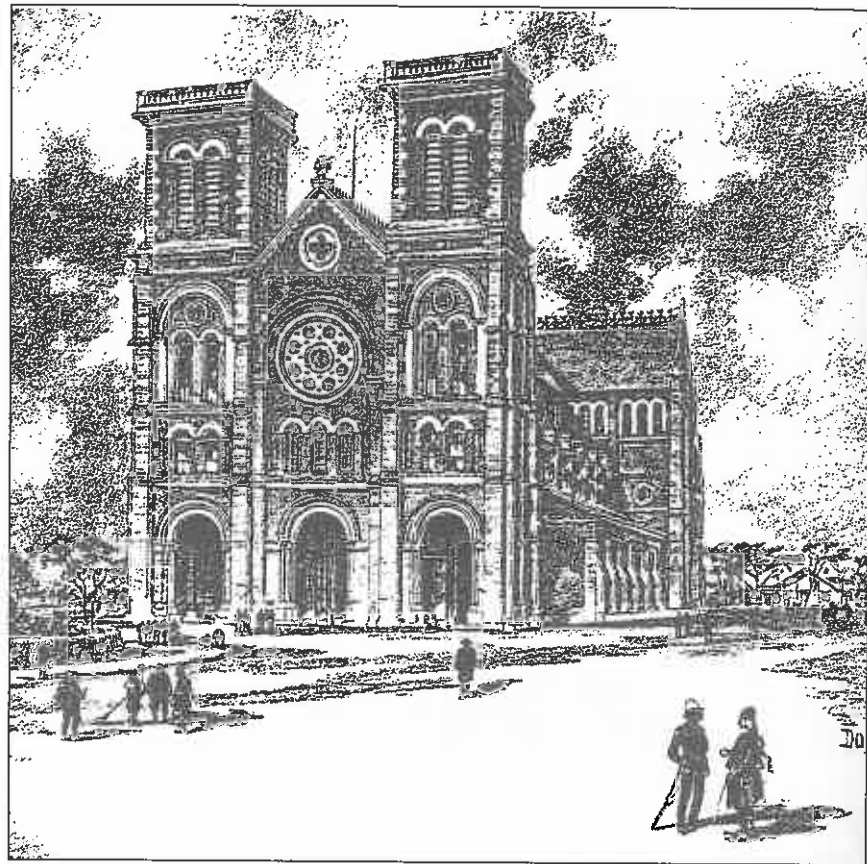


In 1884 French action in northern Vietnam overwhelmed Chinese forces sent to aid the Nguyen dynasty

French Indochina

Only in French Indochina did the level of unrest threaten colonial rule: the Vietnamese never accepted the concessions wrung from the Nguyen dynasty. The reign of Emperor Tu Duc was indeed a turning point, because by his death in 1883 France was on the verge of imposing its authority over all of Vietnam.

A last-ditch attempt to halt the French advance was mounted by China, which still regarded Tonkin as vital to the security of its southern frontier. Not only had this area once been Chinese territory for a thousand years, but almost for the same length of time it formed part of the imperial tributary system as well. Now the French were behaving as if China's suzerainty had come to an end. Although on his deathbed Tu Duc refrained from declaring war on France, his officials in Tonkin



Saigon Cathedral:
France transposed to Southeast Asia

issued proclamations calling upon the people to take up arms and offering bounties for severed French heads. Chinese troops dispatched to reinforce this resistance were, however, no match for additional forces sent by Paris, and a defeated China reluctantly signed the Treaty of Tianjin and gave up its long-standing relationship with Vietnam. From Tu Duc to Bao Dai, the last Vietnamese emperor of all, the history of the country is therefore that of French colonial rule, which finally came to a close in 1954–55.

The Cambodian practice of taking Thai and Vietnamese princesses as royal consorts in Phnom Penh inevitably produced two court factions:

one pro-Thai, another pro-Vietnamese. It was the former that blocked a treaty with France in 1856, correctly guessing that the French would help Cambodia to recover the Thai-occupied provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap. In 1863, France got its treaty, which stipulated that the Cambodian monarch had to agree to “all administrative, judicial and commercial reforms that the French government shall judge, in future, useful to make their protectorate successful”. Doubtless a gunboat anchored within sight of the royal palace had a salutary effect.

The Thai were also about to discover the same disadvantage of a riverside capital, when the killing of a French officer by Thai troops in Laos brought matters to a head. In 1893 gunboats threatened Bangkok until it was agreed that the kingdom of Laos should become a French protectorate. Already France had tightened its control over Cambodian affairs by persuading its king to nominate his pro-French step-brother Sisowath as heir. At his coronation in 1906, the new king was still considered by Cambodians to be an embodiment of universal order. Sisowath’s right eye represented the sun, his left the moon, his arms and legs the cardinal points, the six-tiered umbrella above his head the lower six heavens, and his pointed crown the top of thunder god Indra’s palace on Mount Meru, the home of the gods. No matter that his kingdom was so overshadowed by France that it was the French governor-general of Indochina who handed Sisowath his royal regalia, the hallowed throne remained the focus of Cambodian political thought. A decade later, when thousands of peasants gathered in Phnom Penh and requested lower taxes, they quietly returned to their villages at Sisowath’s command, in spite of this demonstration coinciding with more drastic anti-French protests in Vietnam.

So pleased were the French to show off Cambodian acquiescence that, shortly after his accession, Sisowath attended the Colonial Exhibition at Marseilles, in the company of his royal dancers. There the king’s dancing troop made a tremendous impression and reminded Europe that Cambodia, not Thailand, was the true custodian of Indian cultural traditions in mainland Southeast Asia. The recently arrived Thai had appropriated Cambodian traditions as late as their capture of Angkor. King Sisowath does not seem to have appreciated in Marseilles that he was something of an exhibit himself.

France's last addition to its possessions in Indochina was Laos, a landlocked kingdom at the mercy of Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese and Thai arms. The Thai had never made any bones about their interest in Laotian affairs and often placed a garrison in the capital, Luang Prabang, situated in the middle of the Mekong river. Their battles with Lanna, a power centred on Chiang Mai, and Lan Sang, the original name of Laos, can be viewed as a struggle for leadership of the migrant Thai. Lan Sang was virtually a Thai kingdom, one of its early rulers called himself Samsenthai, meaning the king of 300,000 Thai. So poor and isolated was Laos that there was no opposition to a French protectorate.

In 1900, the French chose Vientiane as the administrative capital of Laos, from which they hoped to accelerate economic development. But the small population of the country, as did that of Cambodia, precluded



The Treaty of Tianjin confirmed the end of China's suzerainty over Vietnam

the growth of a sustainable consumer market, for such trade as there was remained tied to the needs of subsistence farmers. Efforts to persuade Vietnamese immigrants to increase agricultural production were soon regarded as a failure, since those who moved to Laos preferred to be traders or hold positions in the French administration. Food supply has remained a persistent problem, the government of an independent Laos being forced as late as the 1970s to import rice because of drought. Apart from the vagaries of the weather, Laotians lack the rich alluvial soils of Cambodia and Vietnam.

So bad were relations between the French and the Vietnamese that in 1906 Phan Chu Trinh wrote a famous letter to Paul Beau, calling upon him as governor-general to live up to the declared colonial intention of modernizing Vietnam. An advocate of non-violent protest, Phan Chu Trinh bluntly told Beau that his administration appeared "contemptuous of the Vietnamese people". Only freedom of speech, the opening of schools, and the introduction of modern methods of production would stabilise the political situation, and make Vietnam more worried about France losing interest in the country than hating its colonial rule. An experienced diplomat, Beau was delighted to arrange for the publication of Phan Chu Trinh's recommendations in several Paris newspapers. But the governor-general found it difficult to implement any of them because of opposition from Vietnamese traditionalists, French colonists, and his own officials. In 1908, the poisoning of the French officers in Hanoi provided Paris with a pretext for Beau's removal and the abandonment of reform.

The year after Phan Chu Trinh's letter was written, the situation in Vietnam grew increasingly intense. Emperor Thanh Thai, who had originally been placed on the throne by the French in 1889, was forced to abdicate on suspicion of his involvement in rebel activities. His son and successor, the eight-year-old Duy Tan, chose as his reign title a Vietnamese word for modernization, thereby associating himself with the Meiji emperor, during whose reign Japan had been the first Asian country to introduce Western-style reforms. But it was probably too late for the subservient imperial court at Hue to do anything constructive. Young Ho Chi Minh had already come to this conclusion: he was expelled from school for joining a peasant demonstration there.

More serious for the French was a plot hatched by Phan Boi Chau, who tried to stage a coup by poisoning French officers attending a banquet at Hanoi: he hoped that rebels in the vicinity could start an uprising during the ensuing disorder and seize control of the city. When the dosage proved inadequate for its purpose, Phan Boi Chau fled abroad where he had a hand in several assassination attempts, before he was captured in Shanghai. Returned to French Indochina, where he expected a martyr's death, Phan Boi Chau suffered no more than the indignity of permanent house arrest.

The efforts of Phan Boi Chau to ferment full-scale rebellion seemed to have failed until the troubles of the 1930s. In addition to containing mutinies then by Vietnamese soldiers in the colonial army, the French were obliged to bomb and strafe peasants marching on Vinh, the capital of Nghe An province, halfway between Hanoi and Hue. Led by nationalist activists, these impoverished farmers were protesting against the greed of landowners as well as merciless tax collectors. Imperial troops were sent to bar the way to Vinh, but it took the French air force to disperse the protesters. A day's attack left the road littered with hundreds of dead and wounded peasants.

The French crackdown after the Nghe An disturbance was severe. Some 2,000 activists were killed and 51,000 of their followers placed in detention. Among them were the wife and sister-in-law of Vo Nguyen Giap, a schoolteacher from Hanoi. His course on Napoleonic history was considered exceptional by his students; after the deaths of these two women, the French and the Americans were painfully to learn that these lessons could be transferred from the classroom to the battlefield. General Giap proved himself to be one of the best commanders of the late twentieth century.

Emperor Bao Dai, who officially ascended the throne in 1925 but went back to resume his studies in France, decided on returning to Vietnam in 1932 that things had to change. Shaken by the naked oppression of the French, Bao Dai endeavoured to persuade the colonial authorities to desist in their efforts to run everyday affairs and return to the looser arrangements that had prevailed after the protectorate treaty of 1884. With the French security service on the trail of revolutionaries, real and imaginary, the governor-general was not inclined to agree. Bao Dai was

allowed to press on with the reform of his own administration, provided it was understood by the young emperor that France alone could take key decisions concerning the colony as a whole. The future president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, resigned in 1933 a ministerial post at Hue when French interference showed no sign of abating. His concern for national sovereignty, combined with a lingering disgust for French colonialism, would in 1963 undermine his own relations with the United States. Not even President John F. Kennedy objected to Ngo Dinh Diem's bloody overthrow then by the South Vietnamese military.

The American Colony of the Philippines

The oddest Western colonial adventure in Southeast Asia was the American occupation of the Philippines. Just as Britain had not acquired an empire there by accident, but through intense competition with France, so the United States could not reasonably claim that its annexation of the Philippines occurred in a fit of absentmindedness. Even though it suited President William McKinley to portray the event as an unforeseen consequence of American intervention in the Spanish Caribbean, the truth is that he had already decided to advance his country's position in the Pacific by means of the acquisition of key islands.

In 1899, McKinley disingenuously told Methodist church leaders how he had appealed for divine guidance about the future of the Philippines, and had decided that it was the duty of the United States to "educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them, and by God's grace to do the very best by them as our fellow-men for whom Christ had also died".

American missionaries were soon to be disconcerted by the discovery that the Filipinos were Christians already, having been forcibly converted to Catholicism by Spain. Worse still there remained in the south of the Philippines a sizeable Moslem population whose determination to resist conversion was by no means weakened by the ousting of the Spaniards. Even in post-colonial times, a powerful separatist movement among the Moros on the southern island of Mindanao continues to trouble Philippine democracy.

When McKinley took the presidential oath in 1897, a rebellion against Spain was in progress on the island of Cuba, barely a hundred kilometres from the US coast. Popular support for the rebel cause among