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VIETNAM IN TURMOIL:
THE JAPANESE COUP, THE OSS, AND THE AUGUST REVOLUTION
IN 1945

By
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B.A., Texas Christian University, 1968

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ABSTRACT

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MASTER OF ARTS in History

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David C. Evans, Thesis Director

World War II brought about the demise of colonialism. The Japanese overthrew the French Indochinese government in March 1945. Their establishment of a puppet government encouraged the Vietnamese to seek independence. Ho Chi Minh, who had a Communist background, was ready to lead his nation, and was assisted in that undertaking by the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency. This work explores Ho Chi Minh's nationalist and Communist background along with the role that the OSS played in his rise to power in 1945.

Primary sources include U.S. Government documents and many memoirs written by the participants of this period.

It concludes that Ho Chi Minh was first a nationalist and secondarily a Communist. It also concludes that the United States had an opportunity in 1945 to greatly influence the course of Vietnam's history, but failed to do so because of other more pressing geopolitical postwar problems.
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CHAPTER I
ROOSEVELT AND VIETNAM

Between 1960 and 1975, the United States engaged in a futile, frustrating, and costly war in Vietnam. The tenacious and inexplicable resistance of the Vietnamese to the militarily superior American forces stemmed from Asian nationalism that had gradually been gathering strength in the late colonial era. Americans, themselves once colonists, should have understood the Vietnamese desire for freedom. During World War II President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a profound opponent of European imperialism and, not surprisingly, envisioned a postwar settlement that would have ended French dominion over Indochina. From about 1950 onward, however, the concerns of the cold war overwhelmed American political leaders. The ramifications of Roosevelt's anti-colonialism, along with rising nationalism in far away lands, were ignored. Eventually, Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam was viewed as nothing more than a Communist threat, and America soon found itself involved in a war to contain it.

It is especially ironic that, in light of these facts, Ho Chi Minh, and his followers, the Viet Minh, received their first professional military training from the United States. A small team of American servicemen, supplied by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), were parachuted into
the jungle of northern Tonkin in July 1945 to assist the Viet Minh in their guerilla struggle against the Japanese troops that were occupying Indochina. Moreover, as shown herein, actual American military and intelligence involvement in Vietnam had begun earlier in the war. The purpose of this study is to explore these American-Vietnamese relationships and to discuss the Vietnamese nationalism that, ultimately, had such a staggering impact on American history.

To understand President Roosevelt's views, a short review of Asian colonialism is necessary. European economic expansion into Asia during the latter half of the 19th century has been termed neomercantilism. The mother country (in the case of Vietnam, France) brought the colony into its tariff and commercial orbit. The colony then supplied the more advanced mother country with cheap raw materials and merchandise that did not compete with the homeland's products. The colony provided an outlet for the mother country's products. Neomercantilism was, of course, specifically designed to advance the economic well-being of the mother country; the interests of the colony were always subordinate. French economic control of its Southeast Asian

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empire was administered through the Bank of Indochina which, with its Paris headquarters, controlled all financing and investment of the Indochinese economy. High interest rates on loans to the Vietnamese led many peasants into a cycle of perpetual indebtedness. As an American study put it,

"It was French policy to hinder Vietnamese business through petty restrictions and prohibitive taxation. Vietnamese businessmen were forced to pay higher taxes than those paid by French entrepreneurs in the same business; banking rates and interest as well as business licenses and fees were higher for the Vietnamese." 2

The French also monopolized the production of salt, alcohol, and opium in Vietnam, expropriating what had earlier been native Vietnamese products. Income from the sale of these three made up a substantial part of the colony's general budget. French business ventures controlled rice production. They developed rubber plantations and established mining and textile industries. The French had no concern, however, for the long-term development of Indochina. Consequently, earnings from their various Indochinese investments were not reinvested in the country.

The French controlled all levels of government in Vietnam. The Paris government appointed a Governor General for a five year term. He administered all five regions of Indochina. These five regions were known as Tonkin (northern Vietnam, sometimes referred to as Bac Bo), Annam (middle Vietnam), Cochinchina (southern

2 Ibid, 18.
Vietnam, sometimes called Nam Bo), Laos, and Cambodia. Because of the volatility of French parliamentary politics, colonial governors rarely served out their whole terms of office. For example, between 1892 and 1930 Indochina had a total of twenty-three governors general. The governor general appointed advisory bodies that had no legislative powers and were only consulted on budgetary matters. Vietnamese representation in the colonial administration, in those rare cases where it existed at all, was of minimal political significance.

In light of the French strangle hold on Vietnam, it is not surprising that Roosevelt was a staunch anti-colonialist in his Southeast Asian policy. Cordell Hull noted in 1948 that the President had "entertained strong views on independence for French Indo-China." As early as January 1943, the President had "grave doubts" that Indochina should be returned to France because he was convinced that France had relinquished its world power status. Referring to the evils of colonialism, Roosevelt told his son, Elliott, during the January 1943 Casablanca Conference, "Don't think

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3 Ibid., 43.
4 Ibid., 40.
for a moment . . . that Americans would be dying in the Pacific tonight, if it hadn't been for the shortsighted greed of the French and the British and the Dutch." Roosevelt had no love for France and on November 28, 1943, he told Stalin that "after 100 years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants were worse off than they had been before." Stalin concurred, and according to Gardner, "he did not propose to shed Allied blood to restore French rule." On January 3, 1944, Roosevelt reiterated these sentiments to the British ambassador to the United States, Edward F. L. Wood, 1st earl of Halifax, telling him quite frankly that it was perfectly true that I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship. France has had the country—thirty million inhabitants—for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning. . . . France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that.

Even the Japanese, who occupied Indochina in 1940, had a low opinion of French rule there. Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shigemitsu Mamoru, wrote that

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7 Elliott Roosevelt, As He Saw It (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 115.


10 Hull, 1597.
French colonial policy was far more reactionary than that of Britain and the U.S. From the time France had conquered Annam and Cambodia and made them into French colonies, her policy had been one of exploitation. Independence movements were ruthlessly crushed and the political freedom of the people taken away from them.\textsuperscript{11}

Roosevelt strongly felt that, after the war, Indochina should be placed under international trusteeship and receive full independence as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{12}

Less than two months before his death, Roosevelt was still adamantly opposed to allowing the French hold on Indochina to continue. He did not like or trust Charles de Gaulle. Roosevelt was disinclined to recognize French authority or to help them in any way in restore their position in Indochina. At a press conference held on February 23, 1945, he expressed his concerns about postwar Indochina and his hope to establish a trusteeship there. He noted that

Stalin liked the idea. China liked the idea. The British don't like it. It might bust up their empire, because if the Indo-Chinese were to work together and eventually get their independence, the Burmese might do the same thing to England.\textsuperscript{13}

Unfortunately for Indochinese independence, Roosevelt

\textsuperscript{11} Mamoru Shigemitsu, \textit{Japan And Her Destiny: My Struggle For Peace}, translated by Oswald White (New York: Dutton, 1958), 209. [Henceforth, Shigemitsu]

\textsuperscript{12} Hull, 1595.

died on April 12, 1945, and his successor, Harry S. Truman, had a more tolerant view of French ambitions. He ignored Roosevelt's wishes and supported the French as they sought to regain possession of their colony after the end of the war. Truman told de Gaulle that "my government offers no opposition to the return of the French Army and authority in Indochina."\(^{14}\)

Truman's decision to follow a hands-off policy was based on the fact that the central concern of American postwar planning was European political and economic recovery. Europe, with its highly developed industrial base, had the capability to absorb and use American aid. American diplomats viewed Southeast Asia as a poor target for aid as it was mainly agrarian and seemed almost helplessly backward. Furthermore, Asia was in the throes of nationalist upheavals. The colonial empires were disintegrating and anti-Western sentiment was widespread.\(^{15}\)

This Europe-first policy grew out of America's military decision during World War II that Europe was the decisive theater of world conflict, and that Germany had

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\(^{15}\) Edward R. Drachman, United States Policy Toward Vietnam, 1940-1945 (Teaneck [NJ]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 115. [Henceforth, Drachman]
to be defeated first before Japan was beaten. General Joseph W. Stilwell, the commander of U.S. forces in the China-Burma-India Theatre, considered Southeast Asia to be a "Pauper's Theater" due to the low level of military support and political concern it received. Asia in general was a low priority. Therefore, it was not surprising that the State Department gave Vietnam a low priority after the war. The Department issued a Policy Statement concerning Indochina on September 27, 1948, setting forth the dilemma that the Department faced over taking a firm stand about Vietnam.

Our greatest difficulty in talking with the French has been our inability to suggest any practicable solution of the Indochina problem, as we are all too well aware of the unpleasant fact that Communist Ho Chi Minh is the strongest and perhaps the ablest figure in Indochina and that any suggested solution which excludes him is an expedient of uncertain outcome. [yet] we have an immediate interest in maintaining in power a friendly French government, to assist in the furtherance of our aims in Europe. This immediate and vital interest has in consequence taken precedence over active steps looking toward the realization of our objectives in Indochina.


After the war, the French Communist Party made alarming gains. Since Truman did not want to see the Communists come into power, he supported de Gaulle. Also, the French needed massive American financial aid to rebuild their fighting forces in Europe. So Truman instructed his Secretary of State, Edward R. Stettinius Jr., to talk with the French ambassador at the San Francisco Conference. Stettinius, in speaking with Ambassador Georges Bidault, made it clear to Bidault that the U.S. government did not question French sovereignty over Indo-China. Furthermore, in the early 1950s American policy makers solicited increased French participation in the Atlantic Alliance as well as French approval of German rearmament. Because they wanted France to endorse the treaty establishing the European Defense Community [EDC], American officials avoided actions that would incur the wrath of the French National Assembly.

America's pursuit of the Europe-first policy in the postwar era, meant that emerging nationalist struggles in the rest of the world, for the most part, were overlooked. Following the Communist victory in China in 1949 and the

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outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, American policy became more preoccupied with the Communist threat. When a nationalist movement became powerful, as in Vietnam, it was often misread as being primarily, or even entirely Communistic. This misinterpretation became the foundation for America's tragic involvement in Vietnam.

In most respects Vietnamese nationalism was a reaction to French colonial oppression. However, its catalyst was the Japanese occupation of Indochina in 1940 which shattered the mystique of white supremacy in Asia. The Japanese army marched boldly into Southeast Asia as the champion of anti-colonialism and national liberation, and its military strength broke the European hold on the Far East. It is to this episode in Vietnamese history that we now turn.
CHAPTER II

JAPANESE INVOLVEMENT IN INDOCHINA

The French controlled their colony in Indochina with a commercial and official population of no more than 42,000, and this number included all of the wives and children. They represented less than 0.2% of the total population.\(^1\)

Approximately 90,000 French army soldiers were stationed in Indochina to keep order and enforce French rule, but most of these were natives or colonials. Therefore, the French occupiers constituted a very thin and fragile stratum. When France fell to Germany in June 1940, and the Vichy regime friendly to Hitler was established, there was no political or ideological reason left to restrain Japanese ambitions in the region.

Japan's involvement in Indochina began with its ambitions in China. It defeated the Peiyang forces of the Ch'ing in 1894-95 and secured a foothold in Manchuria after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. It attempted to encroach on North China through Shantung during World War I. The Japanese army, an increasingly independent force within the Japanese state, greatly feared the growing Nationalist

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movement of the Kuomintang (KMT) under Chiang Kai-shek in the late 1920s. After the Mukden Incident of September 18, 1931, staged by young Japanese army officers, Japan quickly occupied Manchuria and established the Japanese-dominated state of Manchukuo. By the winter of 1933 the Japanese army moved into northern China and occupied Ch'engte (Jehol), approximately 100 miles northeast of Beijing. In 1935 they got Chiang to agree to withdraw his troops from the Beijing area and began to set up a puppet state in northern China. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, outside of Beijing, the Japanese army launched a full scale invasion of China and quickly took over Nanking, Hankow, and Canton.²

The Japanese began to take a serious interest in Vietnam in the late 1930s because one of Chiang's major supply routes originated at the Vietnamese port of Haiphong, approximately 55 miles east of Hanoi. Consequently, they began to collect and codify information pertaining to Vietnam's culture, economy, history, and geography as rapidly as possible.³ After the fall of Nanking in 1937, and Hankow and Canton the following year, Japanese direct

² Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, Japan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 249-257. [Henceforth, Reischauer]

involvement in Vietnamese affairs grew because they realized they had to cut off the flow of supplies to Chiang's KMT forces located in Yunnan.

Chiang relied increasingly upon war materials being transported via three main supply routes. One was the Burma Road, and another was the "red road" from the Ulan Ude near Lake Baikal in Soviet Union to Ulan Bator in Mongolia. The third, and most important route, was the Tonkin Railroad from Haiphong to Yunnan. Supplies obtained from Britain, France, the Soviet Union, the United States and other countries permitted Chiang's government to continue its resistance to Japan after it had withdrawn to Szechwan province and lost most of its cities and industrial centers.

On June 19, 1940, the day after Marshall Georges Pétain asked Germany for an armistice, the Japanese handed an ultimatum to General Georges Catroux, the Governor General of French Indochina. It contained two provisions. First, the Tonkin-Chinese frontier was to be closed to the export of trucks, gasoline, and a number of other war materials. Second, Catroux was to admit a Japanese

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military control commission into Tonkin that would supervise not only the suspension of all aid to China but also the implementation of the agreement.\textsuperscript{6} Catroux, who was only given twenty-four hours to reply, accepted the ultimatum on June 20, 1940 with the proviso that the Japanese commission operate in a reserved manner.\textsuperscript{7} The French immediately closed the Tonkin-Chinese border. Chiang could no longer receive supplies and materiel via the port of Haiphong. By the beginning of July, General Nishihara Issaku had established several control stations along Tonkin's highways and railroads to interdict the flow of materiel to Yünnan. Over 100,000 tons of Chinese supplies, including 400 tons of medical supplies and more than a thousand trucks, valued at $6-8,000,000, were caught at Haiphong by this action.\textsuperscript{8}

The Pétain-Darlan Government, on its knees before Hitler, surprisingly disapproved of Catroux's decision to capitulate to the Japanese. It relieved him because he had failed to consult them, although on June 20, just two days after Pétain had asked for an armistice, the French government had issued a directive dealing with the loss of communication between France and its overseas territories.


\textsuperscript{8} Buttinger, 574 n. 10.
It gave colonial officials broad powers that might be necessary to deal with important policy matters which would normally be handled in Paris. It was virtually impossible for Catroux to communicate with his superiors at that particular time anyway because the French administration was in a chaotic state as it fled south from Paris to Vichy.

Vice Admiral Jean Decoux assumed command in Indochina on July 20, 1940. The Pétain Government ordered Decoux to negotiate a treaty with Japan. Despite some foot-dragging that irked the Japanese, Decoux concluded an agreement with Nishihara on September 22, 1940, that allowed the Japanese to occupy certain key sites in Tonkin. The Japanese also got transit rights and the use of airfields in northern Tonkin. They were allowed to station 6,000 men north of the Red River, but not more than 25,000 in the whole of Indochina.

The Japanese army authorities in China were still not satisfied, however, and decided to speed the way for future concessions by force. On the same day as the Decoux-Nishihara agreement, September 22, the Japanese Army in southern China, under General Nakamura Aketo, feigned ignorance of the treaty, crossed the border, and attacked French garrisons at Dong Dang and Lang Son, approximately 90

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9 Dreifort, 282.
10 Buttinger, 236.
miles northeast of Hanoi. The French resisted stiffly, killing some 800 Japanese, but Dong Dang fell within twenty-four hours and Lang Son fell the next day. The combat ceased only after the Emperor issued a personal order to the troops to stop fighting.\textsuperscript{11} The Japanese government later apologized for this action and Nishihara called it a "dreadful mistake." Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shigemitsu Mamoru, later characterized the incident as follows:

\textbf{. . . the Army was guilty of disgraceful behavior. The entry of troops was to have been a peaceful manoeuvre but the plan was upset by the intrigues of the senior staff officers. Staff officers of the occupying troops, with the connivance of the Army chiefs in Tokyo, carried out the entry as though it was an occupation by force of arms, and proceeded to control the territory in the manner that had become second nature to them. The fact was the officers were dissatisfied with the attitude of moderation shown by Nishihara in the negotiations, and, therefore, just ignored them.}\textsuperscript{12}

But the Japanese army had made its point, and the French were put on notice to forego any plans for future resistance to the Japanese occupation.\textsuperscript{13} One reason for this incident can also be traced to problems within the Japanese army and its lax military discipline. The army suffered from the tendency of junior officers to ignore or dominate their

\textsuperscript{11} Dreifort, 294.

\textsuperscript{12} Shigemitsu, 207.

\textsuperscript{13} Bernard B. Fall, Street Without Joy (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 24. [Henceforth, Fall - Street]
seniors in the decision making process. Hata has characterized this problem as a disease that infected the Japanese army and was "so widespread that the death of the Japanese empire was inevitable."

The agreement between Japan and the Vichy regime in Indochina made that area of the world somewhat of an anomaly in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. After all the propaganda touting "Asia for the Asiatics" and the end of the white man's domination, French Indochina stood as a bastion of Western imperialism protected by the "liberators of Asia." This was not encouraging to nationalist aspirations elsewhere in Asia. The Japanese really had little choice, however, because their removal of the French would have created chaos to Indochina's government and the economy. In turn this would have slowed their time-table of expansion into Southeast Asia and precipitated a drain on Japan's technical and administrative staff which she could ill afford. Japan needed a peaceful Indochina as a secure base of operations

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14 For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon see Masao Maruyama, Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics, edited by Ivan Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 109-115, and 382 "Rule of the higher by the lower (gekokujō)."

15 Hata, 207.

16 Willard H. Elsbree, Japan's Role In Southeast Asia Nationalist Movements (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1953), 23. [Henceforth, Elsbree]

17 Ibid., 24.
and staging area for its expected invasion of Malaya. Thus, the extent of Japanese control over each country in the Co-Prosperity Sphere was anticipated to vary "but proper and suitable forms of government shall be decided for them in consideration of military and economic requirements and of the historical, political and cultural elements particular to each area," according to a Japanese plan for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.\textsuperscript{18}

The United States was upset at this turn of events, even though the Vichy regime really had no alternative but to conclude an agreement with the Japanese. Roosevelt thought this French collaboration with Japan was inexcusable. On October 16, 1940, the United States responded by placing an embargo on sale of steel and scrap iron to Japan.\textsuperscript{19}

In reality the Japanese advance into Tonkin was only a pretext to occupy the entire country. According to a "Very Secret" document entitled "Outline of Japanese Foreign Policy," dated September 28, 1940, it was Japan's objective...


to penetrate the southern regions with the aim of controlling settled areas during a first stage and then "we should gradually advance into the other areas." steps shall be devised to enable Japan to hold strategic points in every area. Japan expected to force French Indochina to cooperate in establishing a "New Order for East Asia," and to participate with them in "settling the China incident, but to also have her support the Empire in both military and economical lines. [and] accede to the Empire's demands forming the contents of the political and military agreement and economical agreement." Consequently, Indochina would serve as a base from which the Japanese could strike other Far Eastern colonies that were held by the Western colonial powers - the East Indies, Malaya, Burma, and the Philippines.

Soon after their troops were permitted into northern Vietnam, the Japanese expropriated all Chinese businesses in

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20 IMTFE, E628: "JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY - VERY SECRET," dated September 28, 1940; unnumbered sub-paragraph entitled "Tentative Plan for Policy towards the Southern Regions," dated October 4, 1940: 6,977-6,978. This is a statement of Japanese Foreign Policy obtained from the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

21 IMTFE, E620: "The circumstances surrounding the conclusion of agreement between Japan and France concerning the advancement of the Japanese Army into French Indo-China," dated July - September 1940: 6,880.

22 Dreifort, 279; Rima Rathausky, ed., Documents of the August 1945 Revolution in Vietnam, translated by C. Kiriloff (Canberra [Australia]: Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1963), iii. [Henceforth, Documents/August Revolution]
Tonkin that were active in trading with Yunnan. This step further solidified their hold on the region. In mid 1941 the Japanese exacted the right to occupy Cochinchina after settling a border dispute between Thailand and Indochina, and troops entered the area on July 29. Indochina and Thailand were important to Japan because rubber, coal, iron ore, tungsten, manganese, antimony, tin, and other rare minerals from these regions were indispensable to the Japanese economy. Thus, Japanese dependence upon Western sources for these strategic raw materials would be significantly decreased. The Japanese also wanted to control the rice and other food supplies produced in the deltas of the Mekong and Red Rivers. Finally, zinc and coffee were also available in modest amounts.

On August 1 the United States retaliated with a full-scale embargo. Roosevelt's Executive Order prohibited the export of materials like wood pulp, metals, chemicals and related products and, most importantly, petroleum products especially those which could be refined into aviation fuel. It froze the assets of Japanese firms doing

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24 Dreifort, 279.

business in the U.S. so that as Shigemitsu put it, trade between Japan and the U.S. came to a standstill; economic warfare had grown to full scale. Britain and the Netherlands took similar steps. Trade, the life-blood of 80 million Japanese, was now lost save in the occupied territories. Economically the U.S. had within her grasp the power to strangle Japan.26

Thus, the move into French Indochina had placed Japan in a more precarious position than before. But the Japanese occupation of the area was secure. In fact, the oil in the Dutch East Indies was one of the main reasons for the Japanese drive to secure a base in Indochina. Faced with the embargo, the Japanese knew that without access to those oil fields, their navy would be immobilized, and without the navy the growth and existence of the Empire would be in peril.27

For reasons of political convenience, the Japanese left the administration of Indochina to the French. Generally, they made no attempt to influence directly the domestic politics of Indochina. The French administration functioned much as it had before the Japanese occupation. They were allowed to maintain their army as long as they agreed not to interfere with Japanese military operations.28

Consequently, France salvaged a modicum of honor and

26 Shigemitsu, 241.

27 Peter M. Dunn, The First Vietnam War (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 59. [Henceforth, Dunn]

28 R. Harris Smith, OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency (Berkeley [CA]: University of California Press, 1972), 320. [Henceforth, R. H. Smith]
colonial power.

Despite the presence of more than 90,000 French troops in Indochina, Japan was able to acquire a strategic base in the area at practically no military cost and to seal off China's southern border. Vietnam's air bases were available for use against China and Southeast Asian countries. Japan had virtually unhampered use of Vietnam's ports and harbors for shipping raw materials, military supplies, and manpower between Japan and Southeast Asia. The Japanese also had total control over Indochina's raw materials and crops.29

Japan's advance into Indochina was, as noted, an important stimulant to Asian nationalism. When the Japanese took Singapore on February 15, 1942, European colonial dominance in Asia was shattered. Singapore's capitulation inspired nationalists in Southeast Asia to seek their independence because the continuity of foreign power had been broken by fellow Asians. Boettcher noted that "The Vietnamese in particular were encouraged."30


CHAPTER III

THE JAPANESE COUP OF MARCH 9, 1945

Beginning in December 1941 the Japanese launched their invasion of Malaya, the East Indies, and Burma, and their occupation of Vietnam during these operations was an important strategic advantage. Following these offensives, the Japanese occupation of Indochina was quiet and uneventful until 1944. In that year, however, the growing strength of U.S. forces in the Pacific worried the Japanese military planners who held responsibility for Vietnam. The U.S., having invaded Leyte and destroyed most of the Japanese Navy in October 1944, was in a position to disrupt communications between Japanese forces in Indochina and Tokyo. An Allied sea-borne invasion of Vietnam was feasible as Southeast Asia became more and more isolated from mainland Japan. Japanese army staff officers expected the U.S. to launch an invasion of Indochina.\(^1\) After the fall of Manila on February 5, however, the Allies decided to advance northward from the Philippines bypassing Indochina. When the Allies reopened the Burmese route to Chungking in January 1945, however, the Japanese were forced to strengthen their defenses along the northern border of Vietnam in anticipation of an attack from

\(^1\) Nitz, 335; Ralph B. Smith, "The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945," Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 9 (September 1978): 278. [Henceforth, R. B. Smith]
that quarter. This deployment reduced the number of men in central Indochina by half and exposed Vietnam to more American air raids from General Claire L. Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force.²

American bombing attacks, which were conducted with increasing frequency after 1944, damaged much of Vietnam's transportation system. The railroad system was destroyed, and the Mandarin Road, which connected Vietnam's three regions, was virtually obliterated. American submarines not only torpedoed Indochina's coastal shipping but also mined the entrances to many harbors. By early 1945 aircraft carriers arrived offshore and regularly attacked targets of opportunity throughout Vietnam.³ Adding to the Japanese sense of urgency were worsening conditions of food supply for the general population. Harvests had been poor and U.S. attacks brought to a standstill the land and ocean shipment of goods (most particularly rice) from Cochinchina to Tonkin. These developments had grievous consequences for the Vietnamese in Tonkin. It led to a major famine during 1944-45 in which between one and a half and two million Vietnamese starved to death because of exceptionally poor harvests.⁴

² Nitz, 336.

³ Marr, 135.

⁴ Ngo Vinh Long, Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French (Cambridge [MA]: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1973), 130; he translates an
In the fall of 1944, following the Allied reconquest of France, de Gaulle and his government in exile returned to Paris from Algiers to establish a new provisional regime. Since the Japanese had originally negotiated agreements with Vichy, they knew that de Gaulle's eclipse of that government boded ill for their position in Indochina.

Given these circumstances, it is no wonder that the French in Indochina were becoming restless. French resistance to the Japanese occupation became more organized and overt during the fall of 1944. In September portraits of Pétain and Vichy Government slogans were removed from public places. Decoux became more reluctant to supply rice to the Japanese. In Hanoi contempt was shown toward the Japanese flag. Small acts of sabotage, such as the wrecking of Japanese army transport trucks, began to occur. There were boycotts of Japanese businesses. Pro-Japanese Vietnamese were coerced or arrested in growing numbers. The Japanese also noted that French anti-aircraft units stopped

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eyewitness account of the famine by Tran Van Mai, entitled "Who Committed This Crime?" [Henceforth, Long]; Admiral [Jean] Decoux, *À La Barre de L'Indochine: Histoire de mon Gouvernement Général, 1940-1945* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1952), 267. [Henceforth, Decoux] Decoux would later write that U.S. bombing destroyed maritime lines of communication and practically halted the shipment of cereals from the south to the north. Although Decoux spoke in terms of one million dead, the real figure is probably closer to two million. Newspaper reports at the time used the higher figure and are generally accepted by the Vietnamese as being more accurate.

shooting at American bombers on raids. The French refused to surrender downed American pilots, became more vociferous in their condemnation of Japanese rule, and made it no secret that they would attack the Japanese after the Allied landings began. These acts caused the Japanese to be concerned about their security. They also felt that, even if the landings did not take place, the French still might take their revenge.

In his memoirs de Gaulle mentions that he had managed to persuade the British government and Lord Louis Mountbatten, British commander in chief in the Indian Ocean, to grant the French permission to establish a base at New Delhi, under the command of Lieutenant General Roger C. Blaizot, whose principal mission was to prepare for Indochina's recapture. De Gaulle also stated that several French authorities in Indochina, including General Eugène Mordant, had contacted him in Algiers about resistance work prior to 1945, but he was unable to give them much support or encouragement until France was liberated. Thus, there

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6 Ibid., 337.
9 Ibid., 625.
were few anti-Japanese activities in Vietnam until the fall of 1944.

In July 1944, however, the commander of French forces in Indochina, General Mordant, was contacted by a French officer working with British Force 136 in India, the Asian arm of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE - the British counterpart to the OSS). In an operation code named BELIEF I, Major François de Langlade was parachuted into Tonkin during the night of July 6 near Lang Son and made contact with Mordant in Hanoi. He delivered highly classified instructions from de Gaulle which asked Mordant to form a government-backed resistance movement in Vietnam. This movement would be controlled from outside Indochina and would mainly be involved in sabotaging shipping facilities in Indochinese ports. Mordant agreed and, without informing Decoux of his new plans, requested to retire on the grounds of age. Decoux approved and replaced him with General Aymé. On September 10, de Gaulle formally appointed Mordant to head the Resistance.

Mordant and his superiors in Paris decided to remove French army forces from the cities so that they could not be bottled up when the time came to strike against the

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11 Patti, 30.

12 Patti, 37-39; R. B. Smith, 277.
Japanese. He began to train his troops for night operations and mountain warfare. Mordant, unfortunately, was apparently not adept at concealing the French movements from the Japanese. Therefore, it was not long before everyone, including the Japanese, knew what he was doing.\textsuperscript{13} Also, Mordant was seriously hampered by suspicions that the French in Vietnam harbored for de Gaulle's Free French. Many older colonists hesitated to cooperate with Mordant's organization because they not only feared that Decoux's informants had infiltrated it but also that their careers and positions would be compromised.\textsuperscript{14}

In the meantime Aymé had informed Decoux about the existence of Mordant's organization.\textsuperscript{15} Decoux was not happy that Mordant had authority in the eyes of Paris while he had to continue in his position as Governor. Furthermore, he did not like de Gaulle or trust his Free French movement, so he cabled Paris and tendered his resignation.\textsuperscript{16} For his part, de Gaulle distrusted Vichyites and refused to work with them. But in this case he was forced to order Major Langlade, who in the meantime had returned to India, back to Indochina. On his return trip he

\textsuperscript{13} Patti, 38.
\textsuperscript{14} Cooper, 45.
\textsuperscript{15} Decoux, 319.
\textsuperscript{16} Patti, 39; R. B. Smith, 277; Vu, 326.
landed at Dien Bien Phu, which was under French control, and on November 19, 1944, met in Hanoi with Decoux, who then reluctantly agreed to become a front man for Mordant's underground. Eventually, in the fall of 1945, Decoux was arrested by the French Republic and charged with collaboration. He spent almost two years in prison before being released because of ill health. He was finally cleared in March 1949.

At the end of October 1944, the Southern Region Army asked the headquarters of the *Indoshina Chūtongun* (Japanese Stationary Forces in Indochina, or JSFI) to draft a plan for future military operations against the French Indochinese Army. Colonel Hayashi Hidezumi, a member of Lieutenant General Machijiri Kazumoto's staff, apparently drew up the original plan. It was completed by the end of December. This plan was given the name of *Mago Sakusen* (*Mago* Action; "Ma" represented the initial of Lieutenant General Machijiri). Meanwhile, Machijiri, who had commanded the Thirty-eighth Army since 1942, was replaced by Lieutenant

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17 Patti, 39; Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle For Indochina* (Stanford [CA]: Stanford University Press, 1954), 34. [Henceforth, Hammer]

18 Hammer, 30.

19 Nitz, 335.

20 R. B. Smith, 282. Evidence cited by Smith tends to suggest that Hidezumi drafted the plan.

21 Nitz, 335.
General Tsuchihashi Yuitsu, so the plan was forwarded to him. Tsuchihashi, who had previously been in Timor, took command on December 4.22

Upon arriving in Saigon, Tsuchihashi immediately went on an inspection tour of the north. He met with Decoux in Hanoi and immediately realized that the French had no intention of continuing their collaboration with Japan. He quickly understood that Decoux assumed Japan's eventual defeat and was merely stalling for time. Upon his return to Saigon, he decided to strengthen his headquarters command and change the code name of the coup to "Meigō" (or "Bright" [Moon] Action).23 On December 29, 1944, the Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo learned that they had lost the battle in Leyte, so the Prime Minister, Koiso Kuniaki, proposed to the Supreme War Leadership Conference that Japan take over Indochina immediately to forestall a U.S. landing there. The conference members agreed to put off their decision concerning an armed takeover of Vietnam until January.24

Saigon was bombed for the first time on January 9, 1945 by B-29's from India. On January 11 an American fleet appeared in the South China Sea and sank half of a Japanese convoy transportating supplies to Japan. American carrier-

22 R. B. Smith, 279.
23 Nitz, 339-40.
24 Vu, 317.
based planes bombed Saigon and other Japanese bases along the coast of Annam on January 12 and inflicted heavy losses. Saigon's port facilities were badly damaged.  

These attacks further encouraged the French. The bombing raids troubled the Japanese because it "was the first time that Indochina had been attacked by planes based on carriers in the Pacific."  

They thought the attack was a precursor to invasion, especially since American troops had occupied most of Luzon Island that same month. Prior to that date, the only known American pressure on the Japanese had been exerted by Chennault's land based Fourteenth Air Force which could only bomb as far south as Vinh, 165 miles south of Hanoi. Also, in January 1945, the SOE started dropping military supplies to the French in Indochina. The French unwisely placed these arms in their regular regimental arsenals in full view of the Japanese.  

On their side the Japanese were not idle. They made regular use of radio intercepts and undercover agents to discover Gaullist activity. Thus, Japanese intelligence was well aware of the French preparations for resistance and began to have concerns about the safety of Japanese troops  

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25 Ibid., 311.  
26 R. B. Smith, 278.  
27 Hammer, 38.  
28 R. H. Smith, 326.
stationed in Indochina.  

Leaving on January 21 for an inspection tour of all Japanese units in the country, Tsuchihashi directed his staff to prepare tactical plans for neutralizing French power while he was away although the high command had not yet made a final decision. He "planned to keep the existing administrative system as well as personnel, although Japanese diplomats would be appointed to the key posts." The Supreme War Leadership Conference members agreed on February 1 that

In view of the change in the war situation and the attitude of French Indo-China, the Japanese Empire, based on the absolute need of self-existence and self-defence, shall resort to timely independent military action. The time for resorting to military measures shall be determined separately.

The Japanese Imperial Headquarters issued an order authorizing the coup against the French for the first part of March. They decided to give the French only two hours to respond to their demands. Even though they might have to

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30 Nitz, 340.


32 Murakami, 522; she quotes from an official Japanese history document by Nihon, Bōeichō Senshishitsu (Japan, Defense Agency, Archives of the War History Office), *Sittan Meigō Sakusen* (Sittan and Mei operations), (Tokyo: Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1969),
resort to force, the Japanese resolved that Japan would not declare war on France. They were also determined to "elevate and support" the independence of Vietnam to garner the active support of the Vietnamese for their war effort. Their primary objective in granting independence was to make Vietnam cooperate more fully with Japan. In turn Japan would supply administrative guidance, disguising it as a voluntary independence.

On February 20 some French leaders met in Hanoi to discuss future military action against the Japanese. The Japanese had inside knowledge of this meeting and learned that many of those present had "advocated an immediate armed attack on Japanese positions." This caused them even more concern for the safety of their forces. Thus, on February 26, the Supreme War Leader's Conference decided definitely to proceed with the coup, and on February 28 the Japanese Imperial Headquarters issued the order to carry out the Meigō Operation.

In a telegram dated March 3 to Shigemitsu, the Japanese ambassador to Vietnam, Matsumoto Shun'ichi, sought reassurances from Tokyo that the Cabinet would backup his

589-90; Sakai, 24.


34 Nitz, 342.

35 R. B. Smith, 280.

36 Murakami, 521-22; R. B. Smith, 280; Vu, 332.
perilous position. He requested "a complete liaison with the military authorities."\(^{37}\)

In the meantime, the Japanese were moving more troops into Indochina. Most of these came from South China and Burma. Earlier in the war the average Japanese troop strength in Indochina was about 35,000 men. However, they had 61,775 troops stationed there at the end of February, 1945.\(^{38}\) The French were aware of these increased troop movements, but apparently believed that nothing was going to happen to them. Since they continued to control their army, the French, in their self-deceptive arrogance, were oblivious to the fact that trouble was indeed all they could cause the Japanese. While many of them may have considered their military to be a reserve force for the Allies, they tended to overlook the fact that the Japanese were still in control in Indochina. The French were convinced that their army was going to do great harm to the Japanese Army before the war ended. Buttinger wrote that "With the decline of Japanese military power this self-deception increased."\(^{39}\) Their blatant preparations for war, however, forced Japan to take action.

In February 1945, the French began to construct


\(^{38}\) McAlister, 110.

\(^{39}\) Buttinger, 285.
defensive positions outside of Saigon, thus telegraphing their plans to fight the Japanese. Mordant had advance warning of the Japanese preparations for action, but chose to ignore it. A Vietnamese police official who was an agent of SLFEO (Section de Liaison Française en Extrême Orient - Far Eastern French Liaison Section) warned Mordant on March 8 that the Japanese were planning to neutralize the French Army sometime between March 8 and 10. Because the man was a civilian, Mordant discounted his story. Civilians tend to exaggerate, he believed. More important, the French military services had not uncovered any indication of a coup.40

Japanese preparations were completed on the night of March 8, 1945. The next morning, Matsumoto informed Admiral Decoux that he needed to see him to convey important instructions that had just been received from Tokyo. At 6:00 P.M., Saigon time, Ambassador Matsumoto, along with Consul General Kono, visited Decoux. They discussed other matters and then, at 7:00 P.M., Matsumoto handed Decoux an ultimatum demanding that all French military and police forces be placed under the command and control of Japanese authorities. The French were also ordered to surrender all communications, transportation, banking systems and administrative services to the Japanese. Decoux was given until 9:00 P.M. that night to reply. The Japanese

40 Patti, 74.
ambassador also handed Decoux an already prepared note of acceptance that specified it had to be returned, signed, to Matsumoto by the deadline. Trying to buy time, Decoux replied with a note asking for a more thorough discussion of the matter and pledged that French troops would remain friendly unless attacked. A Captain Robin, from the French Navy, who was Commissioner General for Japanese-French Relations, was given the task of delivering the note. He got lost trying to find the headquarters of the 38th Army and did not deliver it until 9:15. The Japanese moved to take over the French government at 9:17 P.M. and, shortly afterward controlled Saigon.41

The arrest of Decoux and his men was only the first step in the March 9 coup. All French military barracks and forts throughout Vietnam were simultaneously attacked and fell with little resistance, although some 1,700 soldiers were killed.42 Those who surrendered were confined to barracks. Some French troops refused to surrender. At Lang Son, the Japanese beheaded French General Lemonnier and the civilian administrator, Governor C. Auphelle, under the eyes of the defenders when both men refused to call upon the garrison to surrender.43 Twelve thousand men fought for two days before running out of

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41 Sakai, 24; Vu, 334.
42 Boettcher, 39.
43 Fall - Street, 25.
ammunition and water. Hundreds of survivors surrendered, but the Japanese commander, infuriated by the losses that the French had inflicted upon his troops, massacred every last Frenchman. The troops at Dong Dang suffered the same fate. They surrendered after three days to the same Japanese commander who then executed every single man in the garrison.44

French forces in Tonkin under the command of Lieutenant General Gabriel Sabattier also put up some resistance. Sabattier, who had taken the SLEFO agent's warning seriously, declared a practice "state of alert," and left Hanoi on March 8 for his field headquarters. Aymé canceled the "alert" on March 9 because he felt it might unduly alarm the Japanese. Meanwhile, Sabattier's action had alerted Major General Marcel Alessandri who was at Tong just west of Hanoi. He immediately broke camp and moved his troops, about 1000 men, to the northwestern mountainous region of Tonkin.45

After the Japanese attack, Sabattier and Alessandri's troops linked up and moved westward to Dien Bien Phu. Hundreds of troops died during the fifty-seven day retreat. Marching an exhausting 800 miles to Kunming, China, they managed to escape from the Japanese. In a conversation with General Albert C. Wedemeyer on June 4, 1945, Sabattier

44 Patti, 74-75.
45 Ibid., 74.
estimated that there were 74,000 regulars in the French army at the time of the coup and that only 6,000 escaped with him to South China. Of those, there were only 320 officers, and 2,150 Europeans. The rest were Indochinese.\textsuperscript{46} He also estimated that at the time of the Japanese coup, there were approximately 50,000 French men, women, and children in Indochina.\textsuperscript{47}

By March 12 the Japanese were in control of all the main lowland centers in Indochina. The April 1 American invasion of Okinawa, however, made it clear to the Japanese that southern China and Southeast Asia would be bypassed. Their fears of an Allied attack on Indochina subsided.\textsuperscript{48}

This coup was an accomplishment for the Japanese army whose forces were greatly outnumbered by the French. The French had a total of 99,042 armed men, of which 74,020 were regulars, including 19,371 Europeans and 54,649 indigenous troops. The remaining forces consisted of local militia totaling 24,680 men with a cadre of 362 Europeans.\textsuperscript{49} Tsuchihashi later recalled that the coup's success was largely the result of three factors - a lack of French caution, the choice of date, and the low morale of the


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{48} Marr, 144.

\textsuperscript{49} McAlister, 110.
French Indochinese Army.\textsuperscript{50}

In summary, the French were shortsighted. In their arrogance and self-delusion, they failed to foresee the Japanese takeover early enough. The Japanese, however, moved swiftly to disarm the French and gain complete control of Indochina. This successful military strike was to provoke a rise in Vietnamese nationalism by holding out the prospect of independence. We turn now to that period in Vietnamese history.

\textsuperscript{50} Nitz, 348.
CHAPTER IV

VIETNAM AFTER THE COUP

All French officials, from Decoux down to the lowest functionary, were either killed, arrested, imprisoned, or confined to quarters. Generals Mordant and Aymé were quickly arrested as were key businessmen and pro-Gaullists. Japanese troops moved quickly to seize administrative buildings and public utilities throughout Vietnam. They also took over radio stations, telegraph centers, banks and industries.¹ Over 750 French civilian prisoners were ordered to relocate in seven selected cities - Hanoi, Vinh, Nha Trang, Saigon (with the exception of Cholon), Phnom Penh, and Vientiane.² Because of overcrowding and disease, 400 of these civilians died during their incarceration.³ French civilians who were not arrested were prohibited from going out at night. They were also forbidden to hold meetings of more than four persons or to walk in groups of

¹ Hammer, 38.

² IMTFE, E664: Proclamation No. 9, Sub-Paragraph 1, no date given but was issued between March 10-12, 1945: 7,188-7,189. This is a group of ten proclamations from the High Command of the Japanese Army setting forth a series of steps to be taken to achieve control over the military and administrative organizations in Indochina.

³ Boettcher, 49.
more than four persons.\textsuperscript{4} Since the Japanese did not have an adequate number of administrative personnel to fill all of the government positions, the Army encouraged French civilians to remain in their posts and guaranteed to pay them the same salary if they stayed.\textsuperscript{5}

Many government positions formerly held by Frenchmen were given to the Vietnamese. Thus, the Vietnamese suddenly found themselves in higher positions of authority than they had ever held under the French. In the minds of many Vietnamese, the French had lost all their power. The Japanese takeover encouraged the Vietnamese to believe that finally they might break the chains of bondage under which the French had kept them for the last hundred years. The Japanese also freed 8-10,000 political prisoners who had been incarcerated by the French. Many of these assumed posts in the new government.\textsuperscript{6} The Japanese coup destroyed the illusion of French omnipotence and invulnerability. It brought down the façade of French authority, and enabled the Vietnamese to establish a government that was subservient to the Japanese.

\textsuperscript{4} IMTFE, E664: Proclamation No. 2, Sub-Paragraphs 4 & 5, dated March 10, 1946 [sic - typographical error should be 1945]: 7,185. This is a group of ten proclamations from the High Command of the Japanese Army setting forth a series of steps to be taken to achieve control over the military and administrative organizations in Indochina.

\textsuperscript{5} Nitz, 345.

\textsuperscript{6} Elsbree, 98.
Fighting in Hue was still in progress on March 10. The Japanese "rescued" Emperor Bao Dai there. That is, they took him into custody. They were afraid that he might escape abroad and set up an anti-Japanese nationalist organization and, since they planned to use him as a puppet, they made sure he did not leave Vietnam. Because Bao Dai thought that the Japanese would force him to abdicate, he was surprised when they told him that they wanted him as the head of a new native government.\(^7\)

On March 11, 1945, Bao Dai was permitted to announce the independence of Annam. The Japanese retained control of Tonkin and Cochinchina. This declaration was the precursor to Vietnamese "independence." It had been prepared by Yokoyama Seiko, Minister for Economic Affairs of the Japanese diplomatic mission in Indochina and later advisor to Bao Dai. Bao Dai's declaration of independence abrogated the Franco-Annamese treaty of 1884 which had provided for a French protectorate over Annam.\(^8\) Bao Dai pledged cooperation with Japan in the Greater East Asia War.\(^9\) On March 12 the Japanese Commander-in-Chief in Indochina proclaimed

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\text{The Japanese army will support any endeavor to satisfy the eager desire of independence so dear to all the peoples of Indo-China. . . . and to help their sincere}
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\(^7\) Nitz, 344.

\(^8\) Ibid., 345; R. B. Smith, 286.

\(^9\) Nitz, 345.
national movement in conformity with the fundamental principles of the declaration of Greater East Asia.  

In June 1945, however, three months after Bao Dai had declared Vietnamese "independence," the Japanese had not formally recognized Vietnamese independence, or signed any treaty with a Vietnamese government. Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, the Japanese promise of independence turned out to be hollow. In 1942, during the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the Japanese had already decided that "It must also be noted that the independence of various peoples of East Asia should be based upon the idea of constructing East Asia as 'independent countries existing within the New Order of East Asia' and that this conception differs from an independence based on the idea of liberalism and national self-determination."  

At the behest of the Japanese, Bao Dai asked Tran Trong Kim, a renowned scholar known for his textbooks on Confucianism, Buddhism and Vietnamese history, to become his

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10 IMTFE, E664: Proclamation No. 10, dated March 12, 1945: 7,191. This is a group of ten proclamations from the High Command of the Japanese Army setting forth a series of steps to be taken to achieve control over the military and administrative organizations in Indochina.


Prime Minister and form a government. In 1943, Kim had felt threatened by the French because of his association with several Japanese experts in Vietnamese studies and his affiliation with a progressive association in Hanoi. He asked the Japanese army to give him asylum. The Japanese flew him first to Singapore and then to Bangkok, where he stayed for most of the war. On April 17 Kim formed a new Vietnamese government that lasted until August 25, 1945.

From March until the August Revolution, Vietnam would enjoy what was called/doc-lap banh ve (caricatured cake, or fake, independence). Tran Trong Kim's Cabinet was a government in name only. The political structure of Indochina changed very little. Kim's appointees had limited political backgrounds. They had only served on French-created councils or committees, so they had not had the opportunity to acquire the administrative experience necessary to operate a government. Consequently, they were incapable of working together to handle the chaotic situation. Kim did, nevertheless, replace pro-French mandarins in Hue, and his cabinet was able to moderate rice confiscations, reduce some taxes, and loosen censorship. By July his government had persuaded the Japanese to relinquish

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13 R. B. Smith, 288.
14 Ibid.
15 Khanh, 765.
16 Ibid., 766.
direct administration of Hanoi, Haiphong, and Da Nang.\textsuperscript{17}

Another result of the Japanese coup was a surprising upsurge in political involvement on the part of the Vietnamese throughout the country. In the first month after the coup, they were apprehensive about potential Japanese repression. Having seen their past political activities suppressed by French colonial authorities, the Vietnamese were naturally mistrustful of any foreigners who promised political freedom. It soon became apparent, however, that the Japanese were going to be indifferent towards them as long as their actions were not anti-Japanese. The Japanese Army had decided not to interfere in Indochina's internal affairs and left the Vietnamese free to do what they wanted.\textsuperscript{18} The Vietnamese soon began to participate openly and enthusiastically in political discussion.

Political rallies and public demonstrations became common in the public squares and marketplaces of most towns and cities. Throughout Vietnam, as observed by the periodical \textit{Ngay Nay (Today)}, "after the brief storm of bullets of March 9, political parties, groups and associations shot up like mushrooms."\textsuperscript{19} Many of these were

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\textsuperscript{17} Marr, 145.
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\textsuperscript{18} IMTFE, E663: \textit{THE DISPOSITION OF FRENCH INDO-CHINA}, Part 3 (The development of the disposition), Sub-Paragraph (h), dated December 17, 1945: 7,180. This is part of a report relating the history of the Japanese 38th Army which describes the activities of the Japanese in Indochina during 1945.
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\textsuperscript{19} Khanh, 767; quote from \textit{Ngay Nay (Today)}, June 2, 1945.
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not well organized. Most had no real ideology or political program, and their leadership was inexperienced. They were, however, unabashedly nationalistic.\textsuperscript{20} Driven by their anti-colonialist feelings after the coup, few Vietnamese were inclined to collaborate with their new and "supposed" saviors - the Japanese.

The famine was an important backdrop to the drama of the Japanese takeover and rising Vietnamese patriotism. Its origins and course require some explanation if we are to understand the full picture of Vietnam in the critical year of 1945.

In 1943 the French had introduced an unpopular system of government purchase of rice. They paid people only 1.40 piasters for a ten-kilogram container of rice while the market price was 2.50 to 3.00 piasters. During the second yearly harvest in June 1944 the government still paid 1.40 piasters, but the market rate had jumped to 6.00-7.00 piasters. By the 1944 autumn harvest the market price was 20-30 piasters and rapidly rose to 60-70 piasters, but the government still only paid 1.40 piasters.\textsuperscript{21} Having to sell their crop at such a low price, Vietnamese farmers could not repurchase the rice they desperately needed to survive.

In mid-1943 the monthly per capita rice ration in the

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 767.

\textsuperscript{21} Long, 222-223; he quotes from Tran Van Mai, "Who Committed This Crime?"
towns and cities was 15 kilograms. By the end of 1943 it was lowered to 12 kilograms. Four months later it was reduced to 10 kilograms. After the March 9, 1945, coup it was cut to 7. Since the average adult needed at least 12 kilograms of rice to continue functioning, this was the beginning of starvation.  

Starting in late 1943, the weather made the farm situation difficult. Three typhoons hit the coastal areas of northern Vietnam (known as Bae Viet) from May to September 1944 and destroyed much of the rice crop. Starvation began to appear in October 1944, and the winter following was unusually cold. The most severe period was between January and June of 1945. Hunger was not new to the people of Vietnam. Under French colonialism, it had become "a permanent feature of their life." Yet this famine was the most disastrous one in recent times. To quote an eyewitness,

People looked at each other with all hope drained from their eyes and uttered words that made it seem that they were saying farewells to one another. . . . They were so hungry that they had to eat marsh pennywort, potato leaves, bran, banana roots, and the bark of trees. The villagers — fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, all of them alike — could no longer save one another.  

Peasants also

22 Marr, 135.

23 Khanh, 768.

24 Long, 228; he quotes from Tran Van Mai, "Who Committed This Crime?"
began to eat ground paddy husks, . . . grass, herbs, clover - all the feed that was normally reserved for their cattle and pigs, all the plants that were not poisonous, anything that could be swallowed. As the Viet Nam Tan Bao (New Tribune of Viet Nam) reported: A dead dog or a dead rat was an occasion for the entire hamlet to get together and share a few bites.25

Northern Vietnam seldom grew enough rice to feed itself and was heavily dependent upon the South to supplement its needs. The war worsened the problem. The French in Indochina had agreed to supply industrial products to the Japanese war machine. Peasants were forced to convert large tracts of arable land in North and Central Vietnam from rice fields to fields of jute for cordage, and cornfields were made into fields of peanuts needed for machine oil.26 Hemp and castor oil plants were also planted for use by the Japanese. During the worst of the famine people sometimes managed to sow a paddy only to die before the crop was harvested.

In the cities life was not much better. Peasants fled to the urban areas but still starved. Parents tried to sell or give away their children and, when this stratagem failed, they abandoned them. Khanh has written that

Rows of naked peasants, little more than skeletons, lined the walls, waiting for death to take them away. At 12:00 noon and 5:00 P.M. daily, oxcarts made their regular runs. Their mission was to collect dead and dying bodies piling up on the pavement or at street corners. These were then dumped - sometimes still protesting - into mass graves outside the city.

25 Khanh, 768-769.

26 Ibid., 768.
The French and the Japanese appear to have done little to alleviate the disaster. The Japanese even made Bao Dai promise, during his independence speech, that the delivery of regular supplies to the army would continue. The government of Tran Trong Kim was all but helpless because the Japanese, fighting a battle to the death in the Pacific, commandeered as much rice and other supplies as possible.

As we have seen, the Japanese coup finally ignited Vietnamese yearnings for nationhood. This rise in nationalism took place during an increasingly serious famine. This is one reason why the Japanese could not expect their occupation to be entirely peaceful. Though starving, or perhaps because they were starving, the Vietnamese began to rise up against the Japanese. And there, ready to lead them, was a little known but well organized movement of long standing, the Viet Minh. Its leader - Ho Chi Minh - was an uncommon man with a charismatic talent for leadership.

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27 Ibid., 769.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese patriots formed a guerilla organization called the Viet Minh in May 1941 to fight the Japanese and the French in Vietnam. Although it was based on Communist ideology, it basically appealed to the nationalist sentiment of the Vietnamese people. A brief sketch of Ho's ideological development is necessary to show that his commitment to Communism was, at best, a tactical move. Ho said "I am a professional revolutionary. . . ."\(^1\) However, his characterization of himself could easily be expanded to "professional revolutionary patriot" because a free Vietnam was Ho's overriding passion for most of his life. The movement he founded reflected this. One of his compatriots, Tran Ngoc Danh, summed up Ho's beliefs in this manner:

How many times in my life I've been asked: you who know Ho Chi Minh so well, can you say whether he is a nationalist or a communist? The answer is simple: Ho Chi Minh is both. For him, nationalism and communism, the end and the means, complement one another; or rather, they merge inextricably.\(^2\)

From the perspective of the last decade of the twentieth century, we know that this is not the paradox it seems to

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be. Nationalism retained its power in many Marxist regimes and reemerged openly following the relaxation of the Soviet hold on eastern Europe. In Vietnam, nationalism was the stronger of the two from the start of the Viet Minh's history.

There is no major twentieth century political figure about whose early life we know so little as Ho Chi Minh. Many years are a total blank. His exact year of birth is uncertain, but 1890 is the most accepted. The exact day and month is well established - May 19. He was born in the village of Kim-Lien, in the province of Nghé-An, in Central Vietnam near the city of Vinh. His original name was probably Nguyen Sinh Cung but may also have been Nguyen That Thanh.

It is believed that he was the youngest of three children although not much is known about his family. His father was a well-to-do peasant, an ardent nationalist, and a scholar who later spent the last twenty years of his life wandering around Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Thailand. Ho's father taught him to read at an early age. Ho learned French and Cantonese since most books in Indochina at that time were written in those languages. Thus, Ho's

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3 Many scholars differ over Ho's original name. It was either Nguyen Tat (or That) Thanh, or Nguyen Sinh Cung. According to Bernard Fall in The Two Vietnams (New York: Praeger, 1963), 81: "A perusal of a dozen Communist sources on his background will produce at least ten different birth names...."
proficiency with foreign languages dates from his early youth. During his lifetime he learned to speak seven or eight different languages. He is said to have attended Vietnam's best high school, the Lycée Quốc-Hoc, at Hue. In 1910 he was dismissed from it for anti-French activities. He drifted south until he obtained a job as a teacher in a private school in the fishing village of Phan-Thiet, 100 miles east of Saigon. He soon left that job, moved to Saigon in 1911, and changed his name to Ba to escape the scrutiny of the French police.

From 1911 to 1915 he wandered around the world as a cook aboard the French ship Amiral Latouche-Tréville. He traveled to the United States, and visited Boston and San Francisco. Eventually, he settled in Brooklyn, where he worked as an itinerant laborer and learned to speak English. In 1915 he was living in London, where he became interested in the Irish uprising. He also began to associate with members of the Fabian Society, a Socialist movement that had as its goal a democratic Socialist state in Great Britain. It advocated an evolutionary Socialism rather than revolution. While in London, Ho also read many books on politics and began to acquire a revolutionary

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4 Shaplen, 35.

5 Bernard F. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York: Praeger, 1963), 85. [Henceforth, Fall - Two]

6 Fenn, 23.
In late 1917 he moved to Paris, and it is here that Ho adopted his other well-known pseudonym, Nguyen Ai Quoc, which means "Nguyen the Patriot." In 1919, during the Versailles peace talks, Ho, inspired by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and call for self-determination, wrote a letter to Wilson concerning the status of Indochina. He included a petition for Vietnamese autonomy entitled "Claims of the Annamite People." The petition asked for representation in the French parliament. He requested that


8 Throughout his life, Ho used many aliases. Below is a list of some of those names and the dates in which he used them. This list is mainly from Chen, 37–38.

Nguyen Sinh Cung [or Nguyen Van Cung] (1890–1900)
Nguyen Tat Thanh (1900–1912)
Ba (1912–1917)
Nguyen Ai Quoc (1917–1924, 1930–1933)
Nguyen O Phap (1923–1924)
Ly Thuy [or Li Jui] (1924–1927)
Vuong Son Nhi [ or Mr. Vuong, or Old Vuong] (1924–1927)
Wang Ta-jen [or Vuong Dat Nhan] (1926)
Tong Van So (1924–1927)
Thau Chin (1928–1929)
Song Man Cho [or Sung Man-ch'o] (1931–1932)
Linov (1933–1938)
Lin (1934–1938)
P. C. Lin (1938–1940)
Ho Quang [or Hu Kuang] (1938–1940)
Comrade Vuong (1939–1941)
Mr. Tran [or Old Chen] (1939–1940, 1944)
Ho Chi Minh (1940–1969)
Thu [or Old Thu] (1941–1942)
Vuong Quoc Tuan [or Hoang Quoc Tuan] (1941–1942)
Lucius (1944–1945)
Ho Ting Ching (1944)
there be freedom of the press and freedom to hold meetings or form associations. He asked for the release of political prisoners, and that there be equality of legal rights between French and Annamese.\footnote{Lacouture, 24.} Ho rented formal wear and a bowler hat and tried to deliver his letter to Secretary of State Robert Lansing on June 18, 1919. His attempt came to naught. He was unceremoniously shown the door because so many other representatives of the underdeveloped world - Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, etc. - were also clamoring for national recognition and restoration of their boundaries.\footnote{Fall - Two, 88; Lacouture, 24.}

His attempt to appeal for the rights of his people, however, attracted the attention of prominent Socialists such as Léon Blum and he was subsequently invited to the Congress of the French Socialist Party at Tours in December 1920.\footnote{Stanley Karnow, \textit{Vietnam: A History} (New York: Viking, 1983), 121.}

On December 25, 1920, the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) was formed with Ho as one of its charter members. By his own admission, Ho knew little about either Socialism or Communism, and he joined the PCF because they had befriended him. In 1960 he wrote that "I understood neither what was a party, a trade-union, nor what was Socialism or
Communism." However, Ho was profoundly influenced by Lenin's *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions* which Lenin had issued at the Second Comintern Congress in 1920 and that had been published in Paris by *L'Humanité*. In his *Theses* Lenin stated that Asian Communists not only had to work with nationalist groups in each country but also had to organize the peasantry as the primary force in the struggle to end Western imperialism.\(^{13}\)

After reading this treatise many times, Ho concluded that "... only Socialism and Communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery."\(^{14}\) It was this document which attracted Ho to Communism because he believed Lenin's claim in the *Theses* that all the national liberation movements in the colonies and among the oppressed nationalities ... are learning from bitter experience that their only salvation lies in the Soviet system's victory over world imperialism.\(^{15}\)

Lenin further explained that the working masses of colonial countries were being abused by the same capitalists who were


\(^{14}\) Ho Chi Minh, 6-7.

exploiting the proletariat in the home country. Thus, Lenin's uncompromising attitude toward imperialism was to have a profound influence upon Ho. He came to believe that fate had ordained a Communist strategy to free Vietnam from the French colonialists, or rather, that Vietnam's fate could be changed. As one historian put it,

The Marxist concept included the *inevitability* of proletarian victory. It is not without significance that the Vietnamese expression for revolution—*cach mang*—means literally "change fate."\(^{16}\)

Ho concluded that only a force as ruthless and brutal as Communism could generate the force he needed to make his nationalism succeed. Ho quickly became disillusioned with the PCF, however, because of its indifference towards solving colonial questions despite its verbal declarations of support of the Communist International's program on colonial affairs.\(^{17}\) He became a spokesman for oppressed colonial peoples and founded the Intercolonial Union, an organization of radicals from the French colonies who were living in France.

In 1923 Comintern leaders invited him to Moscow because they thought he showed uncommon promise as an Asian revolutionary. Ho was soon on good terms with Bukharin, Dimitrov, Trotsky, and especially Stalin. He briefly

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\(^{16}\) Fenn, 41.

\(^{17}\) I. Milton Sacks, "Marxism In Viet Nam," in *Marxism in Southeast Asia: A Study of Four Countries*, edited by Frank N. Trager, (Stanford [CA]: Stanford University Press, 1959), 108. [Henceforth, Sacks]
attended the University of Oriental Workers (also known as the Stalin School for the Toilers of the East) which was founded on the edicts of Lenin's Theses. This school was a training ground for Asian and other Third World insurgents. Here he learned how to turn Communist theory into practice because

Lenin emphasized that hesitation, weakness, pity, deviation, reformism and compromise all helped the enemy. Remembering the goal, the communist could not shirk the means. Violence wins the revolution; dictatorship consolidates it. Both require ruthless leadership.18

From June 17 to July 8, 1923, he was a delegate to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International. In October Ho also was appointed as a PCF delegate to the Peasant International (Krestintern) where he was elected as the Asian representative on the Permanent Directing Committee of the Krestintern. He served in that capacity for eighteen months.19 While in Moscow he wrote a book entitled Le procès de la colonisation française (French Colonization on Trial). It was published in Paris in 1926 and was an attack on French colonial policies. It was smuggled into Vietnam and became a bible for early Vietnamese nationalists.20

In 1925 the Comintern sent Ho to Canton to serve as a

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18 Fenn, 46.
19 Sacks, 109.
20 Hammer, 76.
translator and interpreter for Mikhail Borodin, the
Comintern adviser to Chiang Kai-shek. Borodin's assignment
was to manage the reshaping of the Kuomintang. Ho would
later copy Borodin's organizational activity by building a
Vietnamese national revolutionary movement comparable to the
KMT.21 At this time Canton was a center for Vietnamese
exiles so, in 1925, under Comintern orders, Ho began to
organize the Vietnamese students in South China as the
Revolutionary Youth League (Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang
Dong Chi Hoi) which was usually known by its abbreviated
name of Thanh Nien (Youth). Although Ho used
Communist organizational methods and provided it with a
Communist core, "The most noteworthy feature of the new
organization was its deliberate attempt to appeal to
Vietnamese nationalism. . . ."22

In 1927 Chiang purged the Communists from the
Kuomintang and thousands were either imprisoned or executed.
Ho escaped and fled to Moscow. In his absence the
Thanh Nien disintegrated and split into three or four
different factions, one of which was the Viet Nam Quoc
Dan Dang (Viet Nam Nationalist Party, or VNQDD). The
VNQDD was a non-Communist, pro-Chinese, revolutionary
nationalist organization that modeled itself after the

21 Sacks, 116.

22 William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam
Kuomintang. It would cause trouble for Ho in the future.\textsuperscript{23}

Ho wandered around Europe and Asia for several years until he settled in Hong Kong where, on February 3, 1930, he formed the \textit{Viet Nam Cong San Dang} (Vietnam Communist Party) from the remnants of the \textit{Thanh Nien}. In October, at the request of the Comintern, it was renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (\textit{Dong-duong Cong-san Dang}), or ICP, to include Laos and Cambodia.\textsuperscript{24}

Meanwhile, during the years 1927-1930 the VNQDD had become powerful in Tonkin. It advocated the use of violence to accomplish its aims. After the 1929 assassination of an important Frenchman, the police arrested many VNQDD members forcing the party to reorganize on the Communist cell pattern. At that time its leader, Nguyen Thai Hoc, planned an armed uprising against the French. He believed it would be successful because it would gain the support of the Vietnamese masses.\textsuperscript{25}

The uprising began on February 9-10 1930, at the Red River port of Yen Bai in Tonkin.\textsuperscript{26} It quickly spread to twenty-five provinces in all three regions of Vietnam. The French conducted a bloody but highly effective purge of both the Vietnamese Communists and VNQDD members. The revolt was

\textsuperscript{23} Patti, 530; \textit{Documents/August Revolution}, iv.

\textsuperscript{24} Patti, 508.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 531.

\textsuperscript{26} Buttinger, 109.
crushed by mid-1931 and hundreds of Communists were killed or imprisoned. According to one Soviet account, based on Vietnamese and French sources, there were 58 executions (22 by guillotine), 61 life imprisonments, and 42 prison sentences of varying length; another 576 lesser leaders were also tried.\(^\text{27}\) Those who survived fled to China, but Nguyen Thi Hoc was captured and executed. Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho, later confederates of Ho Chi Minh, spent several years on the prison island of Poulo Condore.\(^\text{28}\) Most of the Communist leadership died in prison. French action thus ended the ICP and VNQDD as influences in Vietnam during the 1930s because both movements had failed to take into account one of Lenin's rules - that a revolution must never be started until the insurgents are ready to fight to victory.

As a consequence of the uprising, Ho was imprisoned by the British in Hong Kong. During one of his court hearings he denied that he was a Communist and stated that he was a nationalist.\(^\text{29}\) While in the prison hospital he made


\(^{28}\) Poulo Condore (also known as Con Son) is located approximately 60 miles south of the Mekong River delta. It was notorious as a concentration camp where the French sent thousands of political prisoners.

friends with many of the staff and persuaded one of them to sign a fake death certificate. With the help of Frank Loseby, a noted British anti-imperialist, he used the certificate to escape in mid-1932. This led to rumors in the Vietnamese community of Hong Kong and beyond that Ho was dead. He passed into obscurity for the next five years. Ho finally settled in China sometime after 1938.30

In May 1941 Ho briefly appeared in Vietnam, returning to his homeland for the first time in almost thirty years. From May 10 to May 19, the Executive Committee of the revived ICP held its Eighth Conference in a cave near Pac Bo, in the remote Cao Bang Province of northeastern Vietnam. Ho chaired the Conference, marking his emergence as ICP leader. He and his followers agreed to establish the Vietnamese Independence League (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi), or Viet Minh Front.31

The Viet Minh's immediate task was to form a "united front" with non-Communist elements by advocating the broadly popular goal of national liberation along with socioeconomic reform. Its purpose 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."32 The Viet

31 Fall - Two, 62; Khanh, 772; Patti, 524.
32 Lacouture, 75.
Minh stressed independence from foreign rule. Its moderate domestic program, combined with its determination to expel both the French and the Japanese from Indochina and establish an independent democratic republic, guaranteed its widespread appeal to all social classes throughout Vietnam. The main Viet Minh cadres and leadership were explicitly Communist from the outset. Rank and file support came from trade unions, youth groups, peasant organizations, and, in due course, nationalist organizations composed of middle-class elements. As McLane summarized it, the "Vietminh, in short, had the virtue, from the Communist viewpoint, of exercising the appeal of a 'united front from above' while organized as a 'united front from below.'" The ideology held by the Viet Minh's followers was less Communism than anti-colonialism and nationalism. Communism's anti-colonial stance was the primary source of its appeal to Vietnamese intellectuals. It provided a doctrinal basis for anti-colonialism and consequently legitimized the independence movement. In this manner, the "Communist leaders succeeded in keeping the support of many of the non-Communist nationalists." The French failure to allow a nationalist alternative to the Viet Minh drove moderate Vietnamese willingly into the ranks of the revolutionary

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33 McLane, 261.
34 Cooper, 11.
35 Sacks, 102-103.
movement. The result, according to I. Milton Sacks, was that

nationalism became the Vietminh's major ideological weapon, and with this psychological advantage its mass support was assured. . . . The Vietminh's emphasis on organized participation by the whole population . . . was of major psychological and organizational importance in its success.  

During most of World War II, Ho directed the Viet Minh's activities from a safe haven inside the KMT-controlled part of China. For a time, however, he was imprisoned at the order of Tai Li, Chiang Kai-shek's trusted subordinate and chief of the KMT's secret police. On August 29, 1942, Ho was arrested apparently because the Kuomintang had made its own plans to establish a Vietnamese nationalist movement subject to its control. The pretext for his arrest was suspicion of espionage and invalid documents.  

He was first confined at Chinghsi, 125 miles west of Nanning, the capital of Kwangsi Province, but was moved often and later recalled that he was confined in eighteen different prisons. Ho was finally released on September 10, 1943, after agreeing, in return for his freedom, to mobilize the Viet Minh organization to cooperate with the Chinese forces under the control of an important Chinese warlord, General

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36 Cooper, 11-12.


38 Ibid., 684.
Chang Fa-K'uei. Chang, who had been responsible for the expulsion of the Chinese Communists from Canton in 1927, was all the more vigilantly anti-Communist in 1943 because of Chinese Communist battles against KMT forces raging within the anti-Japanese war. He was, however, evidently willing to overlook Ho's Communist background. He planned to use Ho's nationalist convictions for his own purposes and those of the Kuomintang. 39

Chang secured Ho's release without the knowledge of Tai Li's or his minions. Chang later recalled, however, that when he informed Chiang Kai-shek's headquarters of Ho's release, "the Center approved of my action." 40 He released Ho for several specific reasons. First, he wanted Ho to join the Viet Nam Cach Menh Dong Minh Hoi (Vietnam Revolutionary League) "to strengthen the League," Chang later recalled. 41 Secondly, Chang had just received word from Chungking to prepare for an eventual Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Chang needed intelligence on the situation across the border and was anxious to turn the nationalist factions inside Vietnam into a useful political

39 Ibid., 685-686.

40 Ibid., 686. Many writers have claimed that Ho wrote to Chang from prison offering to reorganize the Viet Minh's intelligence network in Tonkin for use by the Chinese in exchange for his release. Chang recalled "He might have written me but I do not recall hearing from him." Chang, 687.

41 Ibid., 685-686.
organization. In releasing Ho, Chang claimed his principal motive had been to help a weak and oppressed people to win independence.

It was at this time that Ho, at Chang's suggestion, changed his name from Nguyen Ai Quoc to his most famous pseudonym, Ho Chi Minh, or "He Who Enlightens." He had used this name briefly in the early 1940s, but now used it to hide his identity from Tai Li's agents and dispel the aura of his past Communist activities. Ho directed a number of Vietnamese nationalist groups from China. Chang paid him $100,000 Chinese a month for the espionage operations in Indochina and Ho skillfully funneled most of those funds to the Viet Minh. But the intelligence that he provided Chang was "trivial and on occasion, inaccurate." While in China, Ho adroitly deferred to Chinese authorities by pretending to work with them concerning revolutionary plans for Vietnam after World War II. If anything, Ho was a master politician who "always avoided open conflict with an enemy whose power he knew to be greater than his own." A skilled opportunist, he was not overly concerned with either appearances or what he had

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42 Duiker, 78.

43 Chang, 687.


45 Buttinger, 298-299.
to do or say to avoid strife with potential adversaries. He told Chang Fa-K'uei that he was a Communist Party member but qualified himself by stating that his immediate objective was "Vietnamese freedom and independence. He wanted specially to guarantee that communism could not be carried out in Vietnam for fifty years." Chang helped him because Chang was bitterly opposed to colonialism and Ho was, in Chang's eyes, "not a Chinese communist but a foreign communist. . . . He was anti-imperialist, not against us." Ho probably adhered to some tenets of Communism, but he never lost sight of his ultimate goal - Vietnamese independence from French rule.

The opportunity to achieve that goal came with abrupt suddenness on March 9, 1945, with the Japanese coup against the French. When Ho heard the news of the French fall, he readied his return to Vietnam. He expected that the Allies were going to win in Europe, and that they would then focus their military might on Japan. Realizing that his time was limited, he had to return to Tonkin as soon as possible "to present a de facto, if not de juris [sic], authority in Indochina to the conquering Allies if he were to gain and retain control of an independent Viet Nam."

Actually, the plan for a Viet Minh takeover had long

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46 Chang, 688.
47 Ibid., 850.
48 Patti, 52.
been in readiness. During the Eighth Conference of the ICP in May 1941, at which the Viet Minh Front was created, groundwork for an insurrection was laid. The Viet Minh was created to implement the resolution of national liberation. By late 1942, because of effective grass-roots organizing, "Viet Minh Committees" had begun to exercise effective power on the local level through an underground administrative organization that paralleled the French.\(^49\)

On December 22, 1944, Vo Nguyen Giap created an armed force in the Dinh Ca Valley and named it the "Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam." That date is now celebrated as the official birthday of the "Vietnamese People's Army." The Brigade consisted at first of a mere thirty-four men "chosen from section leaders, platoon commanders, or from outstanding members of local armed groups."\(^50\) On Christmas eve 1944, the Brigade staged its first attack against the two small French border posts of Phai Khat and Na Ngan. Both French garrisons were massacred.\(^51\)

After this episode, the Viet Minh began to expand its activities. Viet Minh cadres, following the slogan "Destroy the granaries, solve the danger of hunger," led peasants in

\(^{49}\) Khanh, 774.


\(^{51}\) Ibid.
seizing hundreds of rural granaries and freely distributing the rice. Their assistance to the starving peasants paid big dividends. It enabled them to enlist more members and gain broad popular support. Word of these granary seizures soon reached the cities and drastically changed the public image of the Viet Minh. No longer were they viewed as a distant band of poorly equipped peasants. By mid-1945 Giap had over 10,000 men under arms. They gave the Vietnamese people hope that true independence for their country was a possibility.

Thus, at the time of the Japanese coup against the French, the Viet Minh was the best known, best organized and strongest resistance group in Vietnam. The Chinese had even used it for intelligence operations. This fact was certainly known to the Americans, in particular to their intelligence organization, the OSS, which had extensive Chinese connections. Here was the beginning of the link between the Americans and the Viet Minh.

52 Khanh, 776.
53 Ibid., 776.
54 Giap, 21.
Prior to Pearl Harbor, the United States had no coordinated intelligence gathering activities and no agency that carried out secret operations. While the Army and Navy had intelligence corps, they were, for the most part, limited in function. Their capability to collect strategic intelligence or plan secret operations was virtually nil.

Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt had asked William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, a 58 year old World War I Congressional Medal of Honor winner, to draft plans for the creation of an intelligence service for the United States. On July 11, 1941, the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) came into existence, and Roosevelt appointed "Wild Bill" its head. On June 13, 1942, the COI was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Its purpose was to plan and carry out such special services as collection of foreign intelligence, espionage, sabotage, "black" or counterpropaganda, guerilla warfare and other clandestine activities under the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹

Donovan, as it turned out, did not operate by the book. Instead, he stressed independent action and improvisation as

¹ R. H. Smith, 1.
the modus operandi of the OSS. He gave his men great freedom of maneuver and then supported them to the hilt.²

The OSS Chinese base was the result of a feud between Donovan and General Douglas MacArthur, who had served together in World War I. The origin of the bad blood between the two men is unknown, but MacArthur may have been envious or jealous of the fact that Donovan had won every major medal that a soldier can be awarded for combat. When the COI was in its infancy in the fall of 1941, MacArthur was outspoken in his opposition to an intelligence service headed by Donovan. A few months later, Donovan sent Colonel Warren Clear, an intelligence officer and Japanese specialist, to the South Pacific to explore the establishment of a COI espionage network in that theater of operations. For some reason Clear ran afoul of MacArthur and gave Donovan's fledgling operation a bad name.³

To make up for Clear's failure, Donovan sent Professor Joseph Hayden to make amends in December 1942. But this was a gaffe on Donovan's part. Hayden had published a book, entitled The Philippines, that was highly critical of MacArthur's prewar defense plan for the Philippines. Hayden


³ Ibid., 250.
was therefore unwelcome, and besides that, he learned MacArthur's intelligence aides had already established their own intelligence network in the Pacific and wanted nothing to do with Donovan's OSS. MacArthur refused to discuss the matter with Hayden who, not unexpectedly, returned to Washington empty handed.  

The OSS did attempt to penetrate MacArthur's theater of operations, but the lone operative who made it to the Philippines was captured, not by the enemy, but by MacArthur, and was sent home. Thus, MacArthur had effectively banned the OSS from working in his South Pacific area of operations. Donovan's exclusion from it forced him to establish a Chinese base for his Asian operations.  

In April 1943 a joint secret service, known as the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO), was created between the U.S. and the Kuomintang. Donovan reluctantly agreed to this relationship because it met with Roosevelt's approval and Chiang Kai-shek had insisted on this method of Allied cooperation. Under the directorship of Tai Li, who was said to control over 300,000 agents in China and every foreign nation where there were Chinese nationals, SACO was to engage in espionage, guerrilla training, radio interception, and sabotage. The Chinese agreed to  

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4 Ibid., 251.

5 Ibid., 250-251.
furnish the manpower and facilities while the U.S. provided the weapons and supplies.\textsuperscript{6} SACO's headquarters was established in Chungking, the Nationalist capital during the war. OSS relations with the Chinese were cool because no one trusted Tai Li whose operation was like the Gestapo's.\textsuperscript{7} Later on the OSS moved its headquarters to Kunming, where Chennault had his command.

American intelligence efforts in Indochina began with the GBT or the "Gordon Group." GBT was an acronym derived from the last names of three men - Laurence Laing Gordon, Harry V. Bernard, and Frank ("Frankie") Tan.\textsuperscript{8} To start with, the leader of the group, Gordon, was a British subject born in Canada who owned a coffee plantation in Kenya before beginning a career in international oil. At the beginning of the war, he directed operations for Cal-Texaco in Haiphong. He moved to California shortly after the Japanese occupation, but in early 1941 Cal-Texaco asked him to return to Southeast Asia to look after its interests. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor took place, however, before his departure and Cal-Texaco was forced to infiltrate him into Vietnam. Sir William Stephenson (later known as "Intrepid"), who was the head of the British Security Coordination Office provided him with a cover. Stephenson

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 245, 251-252.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{8} Patti, 44-45.
was operating secretly out of New York City, with official sanction from J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Gordon was recruited into the British Secret Service and ordered to New Delhi. There, on instructions from the War Office in London, he was secretly commissioned as a captain in military intelligence. He was assigned the job of setting up an intelligence network in Indochina with the help of the French military mission in Chungking. The Chinese authorized him to operate out of Lungching in Kwangsi Province, which was adjacent to the Tonkin border and had many access routes into Indochina. Under the guise of a free-lancing oil agent, Gordon traveled throughout Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. Within a year Gordon was joined by the other two men, both Americans. Frank ("Frankie") Tan was a Bostonian of Chinese extraction, and Harry V. Bernard had worked for Cal-Texaco in Saigon but was also a tobacco merchant for British firms.  

By 1943 they had managed to establish a radio network and listening posts throughout Indochina. Once they were in full operation they began to make a substantial contribution to Chinese intelligence. They were also indispensable to Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force and various U.S. Navy aviation units. This network provided intelligence on transporters, industry, shipping and airfields. By the end of 1944, the Fourteenth Air Force was providing most of the

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9 Ibid.
group's operating funds as well as more modern and powerful transmitters for its Vietnamese radio net.\(^{10}\) The Japanese coup against the French on March 9, 1945, resulted in the disruption of this group. Further efforts by the United States were necessary to obtain intelligence on Japanese activities.

Meanwhile after the coup, the Allies realized that they had to cultivate new avenues of clandestine communications in Indochina if their plans against the Japanese in China and the Pacific were to succeed. For this they had to rely on the OSS office in China, which was quickly authorized to use "any and all resistance groups" in Indochina.\(^{11}\) The Viet Minh was an organization that could supply information on the scale desired. Also, it had shown its capability to rescue downed Allied pilots.

In late 1944 an American aircraft on a mission was shot down over Cao Bang in northern Tonkin. The pilot, a Lieutenant Shaw, parachuted into the jungle and was rescued by the Viet Minh. They took him to meet Ho on the Chinese


\(^{11}\) Patti, 57 & 544; he quotes from OSS: Letter, Hqrs USFCT [Headquarters US Forces, China Theater], dated 20 March 1945; subject, "Intelligence Activities and Aid to Resistance Groups in French Indo-China"; from Mervin E. Gross, B/Gen. [Brigadier General], GSC [General Staff Corps], Act'g C/S [Acting Chief of Staff], by command of M/Gen. [Major General] Chennault, to OSS-CT [OSS-China Theater], APO 879.
border. Ho, seeing his opportunity, decided to escort Shaw to Kunming. At the border, the Chinese refused to allow him to accompany Shaw, although Ho was eventually permitted entry into China. When he arrived in Kunming, Ho got in touch with the OSS.\(^\text{12}\)

In looking to the Americans for help, Ho secretly went to the office of Colonel Paul Helliwell, who was the Chief, Secret Intelligence branch, OSS-Kunming on four separate occasions (late in 1944 and early in 1945). Ho offered to give the OSS intelligence, to engage in sabotage against the Japanese and to rescue downed Allied pilots in return for arms and ammunition. His proposals were rejected. At that time, the OSS had a policy of refusing aid to Communists because they were considered to be a possible source of postwar trouble.\(^\text{13}\) Ho kept on trying. Finally, in early March, upon Helliwell's orders, Ho received six new pistols and twenty thousand rounds of ammunition just before he departed for Tonkin.\(^\text{14}\) Helliwell later claimed that he had

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\(^{13}\) Shaplen, 33.

\(^{14}\) Some accounts say the pistols were either .38 caliber or .45 caliber. For example, Helliwell, in a letter to Bernard Fall dated October 14, 1954 (in *The Two Vietnams*, 100 & 457 n. 29), stated "the only arms or ammunition which were ever given by OSS/China to Ho were six .38 caliber revolvers." But Patti, who had access to official documents, states "In early March Helliwell authorized the issuance from OSS stock of six new Colt .45 automatic pistols. . ." Patti, 545 n. 19. Fenn, who recruited Ho, refers to "six new Colt .45 automatic pistols in their
given these arms to Ho as a token of appreciation for his rescue of three downed American flyers. He refused, however, to send any more arms to the Viet Minh because Ho refused to give assurances that he would not use them against the French.\textsuperscript{15}

On March 17, 1945, Ho met with OSS agent Charles Fenn at the Indochina Cafe on Chin-Pi Street in Kunming. The two worked out details by which Ho would set up intelligence listening posts using OSS-supplied radios. Ho, who was given the code name "Lucius," also agreed to rescue downed American flyers, supply information on "Japanese troops in Indochina, note trends in agriculture, and report on typhoons, floods, and other disasters."\textsuperscript{16}

It is worth noting that Ho was ultimately responsible for the rescue of 17 American airmen.\textsuperscript{17} On two occasions, an airstrip located in the remote valley of Dien Bien Phu, later to be the scene of the climactic battle against the

\textsuperscript{15} Shaplen, 33.

\textsuperscript{16} Chen, 93.

\textsuperscript{17} Lloyd Shearer. "When Ho Chi Minh Was an Intelligence Agent for the U.S." \textit{Parade Magazine}, 18 March 1973, 8. [Henceforth, Shearer].
French in 1954, was used to smuggle out Allied flyers.\textsuperscript{18}

During one of his meetings with Fenn, Ho asked to be introduced to General Chennault, the commander of U.S. Army Air Forces in China who had created the American Volunteer Group (AVG), best known as the Flying Tigers, to combat Japanese air forces in China. Fenn agreed to arrange an introduction but only if Ho agreed not to ask him for anything - neither supplies nor promises of support.\textsuperscript{19} On March 29, Ho met Chennault. The General thanked Ho for rescuing a downed American pilot (probably Shaw) in Indochina and they discussed saving more pilots. As Ho was about to leave, he said

he had a small favor to ask the general. . . . But all Ho wanted was the general's photograph. . . . In due course . . . a folder of eight-by-ten glossies [were produced]. "Take your pick," says Chennault. Ho takes one and asks would the general be so kind as to sign it? . . . . Chennault writes across the bottom, "Yours Sincerely, Claire L. Chennault."\textsuperscript{20}

Ho later used this photograph to convince skeptical Vietnamese nationalists that he was backed by the United States.

On April 27, 1945, Ho met Major Archimedes Patti, an OSS operative, at the village of Chiu Chou Chieh, about 6 miles outside of Chinghsui. Patti would later be the


\textsuperscript{19} Fenn, 77.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 78-79.
commander of the OSS contingent that flew to Hanoi after Japan's surrender. Patti was the son of an Italian-American attorney in New York who was a political associate of General Donovan. In their first conversation Ho described to Patti how difficult life in Tonkin had become because of the widespread famine. Ho's sincerity impressed Patti, who felt that "he could be trusted as an ally against the Japanese." At this meeting Ho argued that American aid in the form of communication equipment, weapons, and American instructors to train the Viet Minh would be of great help to his resistance movement. He did not, however, directly ask for such aid or commitment from the Allies. He merely suggested that it would be helpful and, in return, his military-political organization would be of great assistance to the Allies.

Shortly after his meeting with Patti, Ho returned to Vietnam. He set up his military and political headquarters at Tan Trao, about 75 miles north of Hanoi. He moved quickly to consolidate Viet Minh authority by taking over six northern provinces and parts of three more in Tonkin. The six were Cao Bang, Bac Can, Lang Son, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, and Thai Nguyen. Interestingly, approximately 85 percent of this area's

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21 Patti, 86.

22 Ibid., 87.

23 Ibid., 550 n. 2.
population were non-Vietnamese minorities who had never been fully pacified by the French. They actively supported the Viet Minh and provided food and shelter for the guerilla movement. Thus, the Viet Minh were able to find ready recruits among the mountainous tribesmen. In fact, in 1941 Giap had formed an alliance with Chu Van Tan, the tribal leader of the Tho. This montagnard tribe was one of the largest of the minority groups and inhabited a physically impregnable area that would serve as Giap's stronghold.

After establishing his base of operations, Ho began to send intelligence information to the Americans in Kunming. Most of these reports dealt with the location and strength of various Japanese units and outlined Japanese construction and improvements to former French fortifications.

In the five months after the March 9 coup to the August Revolution, there was a flurry of Viet Minh activity. Ho ordered it to expand its guerrilla warfare activities in preparation for a general insurrection. Soon after the coup, they were able to recruit several thousand formerly French-employed Vietnamese militia. The Viet Minh also

24 Marr, 147; Vu, 410.
25 Dunn, 13.
26 Ibid.
27 Patti, 102.
picked up weapons, including machine guns and mortars, from the fleeing French. Within a week of the coup, guerilla units were making small scale attacks on Japanese outposts.\textsuperscript{28}

The "Viet Minh Committees" from the 1942 period were supplanted by "People's Revolutionary Committees." Wherever possible (mostly in rural areas), they took over local governments. The largest area that they administered was the "Liberated Zone" consisting of the six provinces in northern Tonkin. In all they governed over one million people. They set up training schools for military, political, and administrative affairs in this zone and sent their newly trained cadres to all areas of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{29} The collapse of the French along with Japanese pre-occupation with the Pacific war created a vacuum of power in the many areas of Vietnam isolated from administrative and military control centers.\textsuperscript{30} The "Revolutionary Committees" quickly filled this vacuum. These committees also seized Japanese and French-owned properties and distributed them to the poor. Taxes were abolished, working hours were shortened, and other reforms were put into effect.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{28} Khanh, 775.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 776.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 781.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
Patti encountered difficulties with French authorities while he was in China and when he transferred to Hanoi. The French wanted to reoccupy their former colony at the earliest possible moment. Because they suspected the Americans of being sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh and his followers, they attempted to subvert any American effort that ran counter to their plans. Helliwell later said:

It was perfectly obvious by June of 1945 that the French were infinitely more concerned with keeping the Americans out of Indochina than they were in defeating the Japanese or in doing anything to bring the war to a successful conclusion in that area.32

A note from the French Embassy in China to the American Embassy in China, dated January 20, 1945, sums up France's postwar plans for Indochina.

First, France cannot admit any discussion about the principal of her establishment in Indochina... The occupation of Indochina by the Japanese has not changed anything in that state of affairs. This occupation is nothing but a war incident similar to the invasion by the Japanese forces of Malaya, of the Netherlands East Indies and Burma... France intends to take part in the liberation of those of her territories that have been momentarily torn away from her by the enemy.33

Even de Gaulle was fully aware that "new nationalist movements were springing up all over the world, with Russia and America competing for their adherence."34 There can be little doubt that France was going to do everything in its

32 Shaplen, 41.
33 FRUS - British, 295.
34 de Gaulle - Salvation, 253.
power to reestablish her authority in Indochina as soon as possible, and it was not going to let the Americans, or Ho's independence movement, stand in her way.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt had opposed all plans that involved the use of French troops to liberate Indochina. He even refused to approve "low level intelligence and commando-type operations in Indochina involving French participation."\(^{35}\) In the meantime, the U.S. was making plans to reestablish its intelligence network inside of Vietnam. These plans would involve direct military aid to Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh.

\(^{35}\) Spector, 24.
In mid-May 1945, a United States Army lieutenant named Phelan, a former official of the Chase Manhattan Bank, parachuted into Ho's jungle headquarters near the village of Kim Lung in northern Tonkin. His mission was to establish an underground that would help downed Allied flyers escape to freedom. Phelan was to act as a liaison between the Viet Minh and the OSS until the OSS could send a team to Ho's base. He lived and worked with Ho for several months and found him most helpful toward the Allied cause. During that time Ho sent out scouting and raiding parties in addition to rescuing Allied soldiers. Phelan recalled that Ho was interested in other things:

He kept asking me if I could remember the language of our Declaration [of Independence]. I was a normal American, I couldn't. I could have wired up to Kunming and had a copy dropped to me, of course, but all he really wanted was the flavor of the thing. The more we discussed it, the more he actually seemed to know about it than I did. As a matter of fact, he knew more about almost everything than I did. . . .

Unwittingly, Phelan had helped Ho write part of

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1 Shaplen, 28; he refers to Phelan as "John." Fenn confirms that "John" was indeed Phelan; Fenn, 81-82. Patti says that a young lieutenant named Phelan, from AGAS (Air Ground Aid Section-China), was assigned to undertake a mission as a liaison officer between Ho and the OSS; Patti, 126.


83
Vietnam's Declaration of Independence.

During the first week of June Ho informed the OSS that he was prepared to make available up to one thousand well trained guerrillas for any plans that the Americans might have for use against the Japanese. In response, the OSS launched a plan to train two intelligence teams, code-named "Cat" and "Deer," that were to be infiltrated into northern Tonkin. Captain (later Major) Charles M. Holland and Major Allison K. Thomas were chosen to head the two teams.3

In the late afternoon of July 16, a team commanded by Major Thomas parachuted into the vicinity of Kim Lung. The Americans under Thomas were Sergeant William Zeilski, a radio operator, and Private First Class Henry A. Prunier, a French and Annamese interpreter. The team included a French contingent consisting of a Lieutenant Montfort and two Vietnamese sergeants in the French army, Logos and Phac.4

The French officer was included in the team because of French pressure. On May 30, the French forces in China, with OSS approval, had launched a major intelligence gathering operation coded named "PAKHOI" (after the South China seaport of that name which is now called Peihai).5

3 Patti, 107 & 125.


5 Patti, 106-107.
It involved two patrol boats supported by motor-junks, all manned by French crews. Operating in the northern area of the Gulf of Tonkin, mostly outside of Haiphong, they watched the coast and "began to transmit (with OSS radios) valuable Japanese shipping information and assisted our [U.S.] naval coastal team in taking soundings. . . ." The OSS had also agreed with General Sabattier to train some French and Vietnamese troops in Chinghsí, China for use with intelligence operations such as the Cat and Deer Teams. When the French troop commander, a Major Courthlac, arrived at the Chinese training area, he "demanded that OSS pay his troops and also provide funds for their rations." This was not part of the OSS agreement with Sabattier. Major Thomas, who was in charge of the training, had no funds for such a demand and refused Courthlac's demands. The French then stopped transmitting PAKHOI intelligence information. To induce the French to resume their transmission of intelligence, the OSS had to agree that Frenchmen would accompany any OSS team parachuted into Tonkin. Thus, Montfort went with the Deer Team. The French also agreed to pay for the troop training at Chinghsí.

Upon landing Thomas later reported that

We were first greeted by [NAME DELETED] of AGAS and

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 107.
8 Ibid.
by [NAME DELETED] the boy from Boston, and employed by GBT. ... I was then escorted to Mr. Hoe [sic], one of the big leaders of the VML (Viet Minh League) Party. He speaks excellent English but is very weak physically.\(^9\)

Thomas also noted that the Viet Minh had hoisted signs in English welcoming the group to Ho's headquarters. Although the Deer team tried to disguise Lieutenant Montfort's identity as a Frenchman, because they feared that the Vietnamese might harm him, he was immediately recognized by one of the Viet Minh who had served under him in the French colonial army at Cao Bang in northern Tonkin. Ho told Thomas that "it would be impossible for Lt. Montfort, the French officer, to stay, nor would any more French be welcome."\(^10\) Several days later one of the French army sergeants, Phac, was identified by a Viet Minh as a member of the pro-Chinese Nationalist Party (VNQDD). The Viet Minh detained him. On July 30 Montfort and the two Vietnamese sergeants were escorted to a nearby village to join twenty other French refugees. Montfort led them all on foot back to China. This incident did not alter the friendly

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\(^9\) *Causes*, 244. Quote from Copy of OSS Report. After Action Report no. 1, dated 17 July 1945 (Kim Lung, Tonkin); received at Kunming 27 July 1945; from "Deer" to "Chow." Patti says that Lieutenant Phelan parachuted into Tonkin where he was met by Frankie Tan of the GBT Group; Patti, 126. Tan, as noted earlier, came from Boston and is the person referred to in the second deletion. Phelan is most likely the person referred to in the first deletion.

relationship between the Americans and the Viet Minh.\textsuperscript{11}

According to Henry Prunier, when the Deer team first arrived, "Ho was dying of dysentery and malaria. We did what we could to keep him alive that first week."\textsuperscript{12} Thomas radioed the OSS and asked for a medic to be included with the final contingent of the Deer team that was to be dropped into Ho's headquarters a few days later. On July 29 the group arrived. It was led by Captain Charles M. Holland and Lieutenant René Defourneaux. It included Staff Sergeant Lawrence Vogt, a weapons instructor, Sergeant Aaron Squires, a field photographer, and Private First Class Paul Hoagland, the medic. Lieutenant Defourneaux was born and grew up in France before moving to New York. He had been a U.S. Army intelligence officer since 1943.\textsuperscript{13} Hoagland, who had received his training aboard a Swedish prisoner-exchange ship in the early days of the war, immediately began to treat Ho because his diagnosis was that "such a fever had to be caused by either malaria, dengue or dysentery, or a combination of all three - plus God only knows what other mysterious Oriental diseases."\textsuperscript{14} He administered quinine,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Patti, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Henry A. Prunier, "City Man Helped Train Guerrillas of Ho Chi Minh." Interview by Raymond P. Girard. (Worcester [MA] The Evening Gazette, 14-15 May 1968) [Henceforth, Prunier interview.]
\item \textsuperscript{13} Causes, 251; René Defourneaux, "Secret Encounter with Ho Chi Minh." [As told to James Flowers] (Look, 9 August 1966), 32-33. [Henceforth, Defourneaux]
\item \textsuperscript{14} Defourneaux, 32.
\end{itemize}
sulfa drugs and other medicines to the ailing Vietnamese leader. The treatment was effective. Ho was on his feet within ten days. He had many conversations with Defourneaux over the next three months. Ho revealed that he had spent time in New York City and Boston. He told Prunier that he had worked as a waiter in Boston. Prunier recalled that Ho thought that the United States would help him in throwing out the French and in establishing an independent country. . . . He was convinced that America was for free, popular governments all over the world; that it opposed colonialism in all its forms. . . . he seemed sincere in his desire to have our help. . . . He knew American history well, and he would talk about American ideals and how he was sure America would be on his side.  

In speaking about America's colonial record, Ho told Defourneaux,  

I have always been impressed with your country's treatment of the Philippines. You kicked the Spanish out and let the Filipinos develop their own country. You were not looking for real estate, and I admire you for that.  

In a later conversation with Defourneaux, Ho pleaded for American assistance stating:  

Will the United States intercede for me when the French return to Vietnam? . . . . your diplomats speak of helping people with self-determination. Am I any different from Nehru, Quezon - even your George Washington? Was not Washington considered a revolutionary? I, too, want to set my people free.  

During the next four weeks Thomas and his

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15 Prunier interview.  
16 Defourneaux, 33.  
17 Ibid., 33.
American specialists spent their time training about two hundred future leaders of the Viet Minh in the use of the latest American weapons and guerilla tactics. Vo Nguyen Giap, who had become the Viet Minh's master military strategist and tactician, personally handpicked this elite group of soldiers for the specialized training. The Americans supplied the Viet Minh with carbines, M-1's, tommyguns, bazookas, mortars, and grenades. They taught them how to blow up bridges and disassemble railroad tracks. Patti remarked "Some of us may have suspected that in the future the weapons and training might be used against the French, but no one dreamed that they would ever be used against Americans." According to Prunier, it wasn't very long before we had our men firing mortars like experts. They had an uncanny ability to learn and adapt. They learned to pull a rifle apart and put it together again after being shown only a couple of times.

While the Americans were training the Viet Minh, Ho tried to keep his options open for a reconciliation with the French. On July 18, Thomas radioed the OSS and requested that they relay a message to the French in Kunming that Ho was willing to meet with a high ranking French official to

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18 Patti, 129.
19 Prunier interview.
20 Patti, 129.
21 Prunier interview.
see what the French might be willing to offer. Ho particularly wanted to talk to a senior official about de Gaulle's December 8, 1943, Algiers speech in which the General said:

To these people who have affirmed their national feeling and sense of political responsibility, France intends to give a new political order within the French community; in the framework of the Indochinese federal organization, the freedoms of the different countries will be extended and consecrated.

Ho also wanted clarification of a broad non-committal declaration that the Ministry of Colonies had issued on March 24, 1945, concerning the future of Indochina. This declaration, which had been published on March 25, 1945, in the Journal Officiel de la République Française, Ordonnances et Decrét, stated that, after the war, the five countries which make up the Indochinese federation (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos) would be returned to France and form with France and the other members of the commonwealth a "Franunion."

This declaration did not mention independence but did enumerate some reforms and promised Vietnam a special place in the organization of the French Union. On this occasion, however, the French failed to respond to Ho's request for a meeting.

On July 25, Ho again expressed a desire to talk with

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22 Patti, 128.
23 Buttinger, 302.
24 Patti, 550 n. 9.
25 Ibid., 129.
the French. He was allowed to radio a request to the French government which outlined a five-point program of reforms. The terms that Ho proposed were as follows:

We the V.M.L. request the following points be made public by the French and incorporated into the future policy of French Indo-China.
1. That there be universal suffrage to elect a parliament for the governing of the country, that there be a French Governor-General as President until such time as independence be granted us, that he chose a cabinet or group of advisors acceptable to that parliament. Exact powers of all these officers may be discussed in the future.
2. That independence be given this country in not less than five years and not more than ten.
3. That natural resources of the country be returned to the people of the country by just payment to the present owners, and that France be granted economic concessions.
4. That all freedoms outlined by the United Nations will be granted to the Indochinese.
5. That the sale of opium be prohibited.

We hope that these conditions may be acceptable to the French government.

Unfortunately, both of these messages went unanswered and unacknowledged. The intransigence of the French was to cost them dearly in the future. Undoubtedly, Ho was trying to keep all of his options open to ensure the future independence of Vietnam. The French, however, were not interested in these proposals, and "No one in Kunming had the authority to accept these or any other terms."27

Not having heard from the French, Ho felt he had no choice but to forge ahead with his plans for an independent Vietnam. His chance came when the Japanese surrendered on

26 Ibid., 129.
27 Hammer, 129.
August 15. The outcome was the August Revolution.
CHAPTER VIII
THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

Ho was hardly ready for the sudden end of the war. It came in the wake of the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the beginning of August 1945. Nevertheless, he moved quickly to consolidate power in Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon. He realized that he had to show the Allies that his independence movement was both legitimate and strong. Thus, his main aim from August 6, the day the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, was the immediate seizure of power by the Viet Minh. To that end he sent out a call for a conference of Viet Minh party delegates and political leaders. By August 13, the day that news of Japan's offer to surrender reached Vietnam, most of the delegates had arrived at Tan Trao. That evening a National Insurrection Committee headed by Giap came into being. It issued Military Order Number 1 which proclaimed the surrender of the Japanese Fascists and mandated a general insurrection and called "on Viet Minh troops and cadres to seize power before the arrival of Allied troops."

The first People's National Congress convened on August 16, the day after the surrender. It consisted of over sixty delegates who represented almost every political organization in Indochina including members of minority

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1 Vu, 418; Dunn, 16.
races. It approved the resolution for the general
insurrection. In the next two days

it adopted a ten-point program, a national flag . . . a
national anthem, and elected the Viet Nam Committee for
National Liberation, headed by Ho Chi Minh as
President, to act as the provisional government pending
national elections.²

Ho convinced the congress to adopt a policy that called for
the Viet Minh to seize control from the Japanese and Kim's
puppet government before the arrival of Allied troops.³ He
also persuaded it to welcome Allied forces that were coming
to disarm the Japanese troops. Ho showed off General
Chennault's autographed photo and claimed he had American
backing for his cause. He also distributed the six pistols
that Helliwell had given him to various Viet Minh leaders.
To them, these pistols seemed to indicate Ho had U.S.
support.

Meanwhile, the local "People's Revolutionary
Committees," which were located in the villages and counties
of almost every province in North and Central Vietnam, took
over the political and administrative networks and started
to exercise power.⁴ The transfer of power was accomplished
with ease. It was rapid, and peaceful with virtually no
bloodshed. In many places, the local leaders were so eager

² Patti, 135.

³ Ibid., 135; he quotes from Nguyen Khac Vien, The Long
Resistance (1858-1975) (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing
House, 1975), 100.

⁴ Khanh, 761.
to assume power that they acted without instructions from the ICP. Rural areas were taken over first, and then the Viet Minh moved into the cities. The Viet Minh audaciously presented itself as the united front of all nationalists and patriots, and it fearlessly declared that it was the Vietnamese arm of the victorious Allied forces.\(^5\)

Within ten days, the Viet Minh had jurisdiction over most of Vietnam. Hanoi was secured on August 19, now commemorated as the day of the "Success of the Revolution." The Kim government collapsed. In Hanoi the Japanese permitted the Viet Minh to occupy all important public buildings with the exception of the Bank of Indochina, which the Japanese Army still guarded. Hue, the old imperial capital, was taken over on August 23, and Bao Dai was asked to resign. On August 25 he gave up his throne, assumed the name of Citizen Vinh Thuy, and pledged his support of the Viet Minh regime. His abdication was a godsend for the Viet Minh. In turning over the imperial seal and the lineaments of his office, Bao Dai effectively demonstrated to the tradition-minded Vietnamese that an important historical shift of power had taken place, and that the new Democratic Republic of Viet Nam had the mandate of heaven.\(^6\) Saigon was occupied on August 25.

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\(^5\) Buttinger, 296.

\(^6\) Sacks, 153; he quotes from Tran Huy Lieu, "The Emperor's Golden Sword," in *Factual Records of the Vietnam August Revolution*, by the Viet Nam Cultural Association for National
Never before in its history had Vietnam seemed so united. The Japanese were the only force that could prevent the Viet Minh from taking power, and they remained neutral. Their inaction made the victory of the Viet Minh possible.  

On August 16 the Deer team, which had finished training the Viet Minh, left with a unit under the command of Giap. The delegates to the party Congress, which had convened that same day, were further impressed by Ho's "apparent" American military assistance. In this deceptive manner Ho's forces were able to present "themselves as the Vietnamese arm of the victorious Allies." The Deer team accompanied Giap's troops all the way to Hanoi located about 75 miles south of Tan Trao. Some forty miles from Hanoi, General Giap and his troops, along with Thomas and his Deer team, engaged in a battle with the Japanese at Thai Nguyen. They were still clashing with the Japanese on August 23, a week after Japan surrendered, because the Japanese troops in the field had not received word that the war was over. In fact, the Japanese did not surrender Thai Nguyen to the Viet Minh until August 28.

In July 1945 the United States, Great Britain, and the

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Liberation (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), 25-32.

7 Buttinger, 298.

8 R. H. Smith, 335; Buttinger 312.

9 Patti, 167; Boettcher, 72-73.
Soviet Union had met at Potsdam. They agreed that Indochina would be divided at the 16th parallel to facilitate the Japanese surrender. The Chinese army was to occupy the area north of the parallel and the British the southern area. France was not in a position to object to this plan because of her weak status with the Allies. Nevertheless de Gaulle opposed the Potsdam agreement. He wanted French troops to liberate the French colonies. He believed that China sympathized with the Viet Minh and had no wish to permit restoration of French control in Indochina. In speaking with Truman, he said France was "not eager to see British troops replace the Japanese in the southern part of Indochina or Chinese troops in the north." But he also knew that "our direct administration could not be re-established." As it turned out, however, the British reoccupation of Cochinchina insured France's return to the south. Britain was also a colonial power and was sympathetic to France's desire to retain her colony.

Although Ho had known Stalin in the early 1920s, the Soviet Union was not interested in Indochina's fate after the war and did nothing to aid Ho or the Viet Minh. According to McLane, no reliable evidence has come to light showing Soviet involvement "in any way in the wartime

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10 Sullivan, 40.
11 de Gaulle - Salvation, 243.
12 Ibid., 261.
strategies of the Vietminh or in Communist tactics during the August uprising."\textsuperscript{13}

In fact, United States intelligence agencies at the time could find no evidence linking Ho to Soviet Communism. In July 1948, a report of the Intelligence and Research Division of the United States State Department stated that the

Dept has no evidence of direct link between Ho and Moscow but assumes it exists, nor is it able evaluate amount pressure or guidance Moscow exerting. We have impression Ho must be given or is retaining large degree of latitude.\textsuperscript{14}

In the fall of 1948 the same State Department office conducted a survey of Communist influence in Southeast Asia. Confirmation of Kremlin-directed conspiracies was found in virtually all countries except Vietnam. The report's evaluation was most telling. It stated

If there is a Moscow-directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly [sic] so far. Possible explanations are:
1. No rigid directives have been issued by Moscow.
2. The Vietnam government considers that it has no rightist elements that must be purged.
3. The Vietnam Communists are not subservient to the foreign policies pursued by Moscow.
4. A special dispensation for the Vietnam government has been arranged in Moscow.

Of these possibilities, the first and fourth seem most likely.\textsuperscript{15}

When the war ended, the Soviets were more interested in

\textsuperscript{13} McLane, 266-267.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., A-6.
their own internal affairs and in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union needed time for economic reconstruction and political stabilization. From a strategic standpoint, Stalin feared a revitalized Germany, which motivated him to build a buffer zone along the Soviet Union's East European border. He also wanted to cultivate alliances with western European nations.\(^\text{16}\) His main aims in the Far East were to recover territories lost to Japan during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, and to obtain reparations from the Japanese. In China, he supported a coalition government of the Kuomintang and the Communists. He appeared to be more interested in dismantling Japanese industrial plants in Manchuria than in helping fellow Communists like Mao Tse-Tung, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party.\(^\text{17}\)

Concerning the rest of Asia, Stalin was non-committal, although he did support Roosevelt's postwar plan that Indochina be governed by an international trusteeship.\(^\text{18}\) By and large, the Soviets did not want to take a stand on the colonial question after the war because they were too busy binding up the wounds inflicted upon them by the Germans. Also, Stalin was assiduously courting de Gaulle and did not want to antagonize him over the Indochina issue. Thus, with a foothold in Cochinchina under British auspices, and Stalin

\(^{16}\) Vu, 507.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 508 & 511.

\(^{18}\) FRUS - Cairo and Teheran, 485.
courting de Gaulle, France was assured a good chance of recovering her colony.
CHAPTER IX
THE OSS TEAM IN HANOI

As the war came to an end in August 1945, Allied authorities were concerned about the fate of POW's in Japanese hands when the war ended. They feared that the defeated Japanese might cut off provisions and take reprisals. The OSS was directed to prepare plans for a rescue operation. By late January 1945, it had organized commando units known as Mercy Teams that would parachute into POW camps after the surrender to "provide for the prisoners' safety, prevent any maltreatment, and clear nearby airfields for quick air evacuation."¹

Patti was in charge of the Mercy Team that landed in Hanoi on August 22. He and his team were accompanied by Jean Sainteny, chief of M.5, the French intelligence unit in Kunming (a division of SLFEO), and four other Frenchmen. Sainteny had been a Hanoi banker, a French resistance leader, and was the son-in-law of Albert Sarraut, a former Governor General of Indochina. After landing at Gia Lam Airport, Patti's group was escorted into Hanoi by the Japanese. Along the way Patti noticed hundreds of Viet Minh flags and huge banners with English slogans that hung from the trees. The banners denounced French imperialism and proclaimed "Independence or Death," "Vietminh for

¹ Patti, 141.
the Vietnamese," "Down with French Imperialism," and "2,000,000 people died under French domination."²

Patti set up his headquarters in the Hotel Métropole. As soon as the local Vietnamese learned about the presence of the Frenchmen, an unruly and hostile crowd surrounded the hotel. The Japanese commander suggested to Patti that it might be best for the Frenchmen to be housed in the Governor General's Palace where the Japanese could protect them. This was acceptable to Sainteny, who did not realize that, once ensconced in his new quarters, he would become a virtual prisoner of the Japanese. They refused to let him leave the Palace grounds. Later on Sainteny would claim that this was an "American plot" to prevent reestablishment of French control over Indochina. On September 1, the Japanese sentries at the Governor's Palace were replaced by Viet Minh guards. Sainteny and his men then became virtual captives.³

As Patti settled in at the Hotel Métropole, Ho "and his guerrillas, accompanied by Major Thomas's OSS group, were making their triumphant march to Hanoi."⁴ After Thomas and his men made contact with Patti, they made plans to return to China. Before Thomas and his men left, "Ho gave them a warm send-off. 'I want to thank each of you for what you

² R. H. Smith, 349; Causes, 264.
³ Patti, 157-158.
⁴ R. H. Smith, 349.
have done for us,' he said. 'We are truly grateful.'

On August 23 Patti met with General Tsuchihashi to discuss the Allied POW's. Tsuchihashi said that he would have to consult with Tokyo before allowing Patti to have access to them. This took about forty-eight hours. Patti first visited the Citadel, which housed around four thousand French prisoners. Leaving the Citadel, he then visited the POW camp located at Gia Lam airport, where all the Indian and British POW's were kept. Patti found that most of the POW's were in good shape both mentally and physically. The condition of POW's in Indochina was better than that of others in the Pacific theatre because the French people smuggled medicines, food, and other supplies into the POW camps. Returning to the Métropole, Patti was surprised to learn that an unidentified Frenchman had stopped by the hotel and left a note indicating that there was an American prisoner at the Citadel. They subsequently learned that this American, a flight crewman downed in 1943, was posing as a Hungarian citizen in the French Foreign Legion to escape Japanese detection. Patti obtained his release on August 28 and the man was flown home several days later.

On August 26 Patti met with both Ho Chi Minh and Vo

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5 Ibid., 350.
6 Dunn, 132.
7 Patti, 177-178.
Nguyen Giap in Ho's Hanoi headquarters. Ho brought Patti up to date on what was occurring in Hanoi and Saigon. He was clearly worried about Sainteny's presence in Hanoi and believed it boded ill for his newly established Provisional government. He was also concerned about the impending arrival of Chinese troops, who would put a strain on the meager resources of the country. Patti assured Ho that he would forward his concerns to OSS headquarters in Kunming.⁸

Sainteny asked Patti to set up a meeting with Ho. Ho agreed as long as Patti would be present, but he also decided to send Giap in his place. The meeting was held on August 27 and Sainteny immediately got off on the wrong foot. He complained to Giap about the Viet Minh's recent stand that France was no longer welcome in Indochina. Giap stood up to him and told Sainteny that he did not come to the meeting to be lectured, but that he was willing to exchange views with the French representative. Sainteny stated that France would grant most of the Vietnamese requests. When Giap pressed Sainteny for specific proposals, however, Sainteny only replied with more generalities and vague promises. The meeting ended with both sides realizing that their differences could not be solved amicably.⁹

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⁸ Ibid., 201-202.
⁹ Ibid., 208-209.
Patti met with Ho again on August 29. At that meeting Ho informed Patti that he would proclaim September 2 as Independence Day. Ho told Patti that the draft of their independence declaration needed some polishing and asked him for assistance. Patti was astounded by the opening words, which were copied directly from the American Declaration of Independence. He then helped Ho polish the draft, as several words from the American Declaration had been transposed.\(^\text{10}\)

On Independence Day (September 2, the same day that Japan signed the formal surrender papers aboard the \textit{U.S.S. Missouri}) Patti and his men made their way to Ba Dinh Square where the official ceremonies were to take place. Ho had invited Patti to sit on the official platform with other dignitaries, but Patti declined to do so as he wanted to mix with the crowds and be an observer. Ho was introduced and stepped up to the microphone. The crowd cheered for several minutes before Ho raised his hands and called for silence.\(^\text{11}\) He began his now-famous proclamation for Vietnamese independence with the following words:

\begin{quote}
All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights; the right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve Happiness.\(^\text{12}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 223.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 249.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 250; he notes that this is a literal translation and that it may be at variance with that of most historians who were not present to hear Ho's delivery, but it is the agreed
Ho then paused and asked his listeners: "Do you hear me distinctly, fellow countrymen?" The crowd roared back: "Yes!" Ho continued:

These immortal words are taken from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a larger sense, this means that: All the people on earth are born equal; All the people have the right to live, to be happy, to be free.\(^{13}\)

Ho then shifted to the Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the "Rights of Man and the Citizen" and told his audience that it "also states: 'All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights. Those are undeniable truths.'\(^{14}\)

Ho continued his speech with a castigation of French colonialism based on the grievances stated in the American Declaration of Independence against colonial rule. He proceeded:

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.\(^{15}\)

Next, he bitterly denounced the French saying that

In the field of politics, they have deprived our translation of Vietnamese linguists on Patti's staff and that of English educated Vietnamese translators present on that occasion.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 356.
people of every democratic liberty. They have enforced inhuman laws; they have set up three distinct political regimes . . . to wreck our national unity and prevent our people from being united. They have built more prisons than schools . . . , fettered public opinion . . . , forced us to use opium and alcohol . . . , fleeced us . . . , impoverished our people . . . , robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our raw materials . . . , monopolized the issuing of bank notes and the export trade . . . , invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty . . . , hampered the prospering of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers.16

Recognizing prophetically that the French would continue to oppose Vietnamese independence, Ho warned his people that

From the autumn of 1940, our country had in fact ceased to be a French colony and had become a Japanese possession. . . . The truth is that we have wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French.17

In closing, Ho appealed to the Allies, who had acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations at Teheran and San Francisco. "Viet-Nam has the right to be a free and independent country - and in fact is so already."18

After Ho's speech, Giap spoke to the assembled crowd. He knew that the revolution had come too quickly and that it had not yet been adequately tested. He understood the many divisive tendencies in Vietnamese society, so his

16 Ibid., 356-357.
17 Ibid., 358.
18 Ibid., 359.
speech stressed unity over and over. He later wrote, "Uncle Ho Chi Minh always insisted on our paying particular attention to the question of national unity."\footnote{Giap, 61. The term "Uncle," used in reference to Ho, was an indication of both familiarity and respect.}

As if to highlight the independence ceremony and validate to the Vietnamese people that the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam had Allied backing, two American fighter planes overflew the celebration with their white-starred insignia plainly visible. The Viet Minh wasted no time in declaring this flyby was proof that the United States government supported their regime. The truth, however, is that this coincidence was probably brought on by pilot curiosity.\footnote{Dunn, 22.}

Patti left Hanoi on September 4 for Kunming, where he reported on the momentous events of September 2 to his superiors. Apparently, no one in the OSS paid any attention to Ho's Declaration of Independence. Patti returned to Hanoi a few days later when, on September 13, he learned that the OSS was shutting down its operations in Kunming and would be moving its headquarters to Shanghai. On September 25 Patti was informed that President Truman had signed Executive Order 9620 terminating the Office of Strategic Services effective October 1, 1945.\footnote{Patti, 328 & 353.}
On September 30, his last night in Hanoi, Patti was invited to have dinner with Ho. Giap was there but left shortly after the meal was over. Ho expressed his uneasiness that the United States would stand by and let the French reimpose colonial rule over Vietnam. He hoped that the United States could restrain the French because colonialism was a thing of the past. Ho also expressed great concern about the Chinese occupation forces, as he feared they would loot Vietnam and exacerbate the country's poverty.²²

For the first time Ho told Patti about his past. He mentioned that he had two brothers and a sister and that he had been close to his mother. Their conversation lasted far into the night with Ho finally telling Patti that the Vietnamese would "long remember the United States as a friend and ally."²³ Patti included this information in his reports. Whether or not it was noticed is unknown. In any event, American policy towards Vietnam remained inchoate. Patti stated flatly that "Theater headquarters and the American Embassy were unimpressed with my early reports on the nature and significance of the Viet Minh."²⁴

²² Ibid., 366-370.
²³ Ibid., 374.
²⁴ Ibid., 125.
CHAPTER X
THE OSS TEAM IN SAIGON

The situation in Cochinchina in the late summer of 1945 was different from that in the north. In Tonkin the Viet Minh's control was unchallenged, but in the south other groups were vying for power. Besides the Communist Party, there were the Trotskyites, and the pro-Japanese Phuc Quoc and Dai Vet. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao were powerful politico-religious sects and were probably the best organized of all the political parties, including the Viet Minh. They decided to support Ho for two reasons. Both realized that the Viet Minh were stronger and had a fear of becoming politically isolated. The Communist Party seemed to have the best program for Vietnam's future.1

The Viet Minh "welcomed all political elements, ethnic groups, national minorities, women, and social classes in a democratic front."2 The southern Communists, however, resisted any association with non-Communist parties. Thus, because of the geographical separation of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin, the Communist Party in the south was somewhat isolated from the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party in the north during the war years. This changed at the August 13 Tan

1 Patti, 184.
2 Ibid.

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Trao Conference when Ho and his men asserted their control.3

On August 25, the Viet Minh set up the Committee for the South to function as Cochinchina's first native government. It took over power in Saigon swiftly and peaceably. Headed by Tran Van Giau, its first aim was to maintain order, as it was determined to make a good impression on the Allied representatives expected to arrive within the next few days. Both the French and the Trotskyites rejected its pleas for peace. The Trotskyites, who were hostile towards the Viet Minh, continued to preach "immediate and violent revolution" because they were opposed to French rule under any guise and felt that Ho Chi Minh had betrayed the cause for independence.4

Meanwhile, the Japanese in Saigon made no effort to assist the French in regaining control over their colony. They did nothing to prevent the spread of Viet Minh authority. Decoux, who was being held in captivity at Loc Ninh, about 75 miles north of Saigon, urged General Tsuchihashi to release him and his compatriots. He argued that only the French could "maintain order, ban arms dealing, [and] safeguard the currency."5 General Tsuchihashi refused. In the meantime the Japanese released arms and equipment to the Viet Minh because they hoped to

3 Ibid.
4 R. H. Smith, 337; Patti, 524.
5 Decoux, 340.
provoke fighting between the Vietnamese and the Allies.\textsuperscript{6}

A seven member OSS team arrived in Saigon on September 2-3, 1945. Its commander was twenty-eight-year-old Major A. Peter Dewey, an officer of extraordinarily broad experience and accomplishments. His father had been a conservative, an anti-New Dealer and an isolationist Republican from Chicago. Dewey's father, like Patti's, was a friend of "Wild Bill" Donovan. Dewey, fluent in French, had fought with the Polish army in France against the Germans in 1940. He joined the American army in 1942 and served as an intelligence officer in Africa and Arabia. In 1943 he became a member of the OSS while in Algiers. In 1944 he led a mission behind the lines in southern France that led to the capture of 400 Germans.\textsuperscript{7}

Dewey and his team were on their own. He could expect no logistical or military help from the British. His primary mission was to free American POW's who were being held in the area, but he and the team also had instructions to search for air crews that had disappeared in action over Indochina, survey American missionary property in Indochina, locate and inventory all property of the United States government, investigate war crimes against the Allies, identify and track down Japanese war criminals, confiscate


\textsuperscript{7} R. H. Smith, 337-338.
or microfilm all Japanese documents and code books, and, most important, conduct political surveillance for the State Department.\textsuperscript{8}

After being headquartered on the outskirts of the city in an old mansion owned by the President of the Bank of Indochina and occupied during the war by a Japanese admiral, they quickly located over 4,500 Allied POW's, of which 214 were Americans. They managed to have the American POW's evacuated by September 6. At that time they were ordered to "remain in Saigon to 'represent American interests.'"\textsuperscript{9}

On September 12 the first British troops, Indian Gurkhas, arrived in Saigon. A small contingent of French paratroopers accompanied them. Many of them wore American issue uniforms which made it difficult to distinguish them from Americans. SLFEO agents, who had arrived on September 6 with the British Force 136 from India, met the paratroopers and took them directly to the ammunition dumps, the port facilities, and military warehouses where they relieved the Japanese and took control. The French then directed the Japanese prison commander to free several hundred Legionnaires, officers, and NCO's. These newly freed men were taken to the arsenals, armed, and instructed to scatter throughout the city to organize

\textsuperscript{8} Patti, 272; R. H. Smith, 338; Spector, 65.

\textsuperscript{9} R. H. Smith, 338.
French citizens for taking over Saigon.¹⁰

Major General Douglas D. Gracey of the British Army arrived in Saigon on September 13 with the rest of his troops - 1,800 officers and men. Gracey was a traditional British colonial officer. As far as he was concerned, Indochina had been a French colony before the war, and he was determined to return it to France because colonial peoples do not "declare themselves independent without the consent of their rulers."¹¹ As General Chennault wrote several years later, "The British . . . were determined then to uphold the colonial system in the Orient and regarded a French defeat in Indochina as injurious to their own imperial prestige."¹² Within hours of his arrival, Gracey ordered the Japanese to disarm the Vietnamese and to dislodge the Committee for the South from the Governor General's Palace in Saigon. The French lost no time in hoisting the French flag over public buildings.¹³

Dewey had been in constant contact with members of the Committee for the South since his arrival. He tried to act as a liaison between the French and Vietnamese, but the French blocked most of his efforts. Negotiations broke

¹⁰ Patti, 298-299.
¹¹ Ibid., 308.
¹³ Patti, 309.
down completely following Gracey's orders to disarm the Vietnamese. Gracey put pressure on Dewey to break off meetings with the Committee of the South because the Vietnamese might interpret his actions as "evidence of official American support for the independence movement." On September 14 Gracey ordered the OSS team to "cease all intelligence activities until its mission in Saigon was clarified." Dewey ignored this order.

In response to Gracey's crackdown, the Committee for the South called for a general strike on September 17. Jean Cédile, the High Commissioner of France for Indochina, asked Gracey for permission to arm some 1400 French POW's, who had been in prison since the March 9th coup. Gracey turned him down. Instead, Gracey ordered the local Japanese commander, Field Marshall Terauchi Hisaichi, to take action to restore order, even if his troops had to fire upon the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, Cédile approached Dewey and asked for his good offices in persuading the Viet Minh leaders to end the strike.

Dewey met with Giau and others on the night of September 18. They told Dewey that it was too late for further cooperation. The next day Gracey shut down the Vietnamese press. During the ensuing twenty-four hours

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14 Spector, 67.
15 Ibid.
16 Patti, 311-312.
there were many acts of sabotage, vandalism, plunder, and assault. On September 21 Gracey proclaimed martial law. Cédile again went to Gracey and appealed for him to arm the French POW's. This time Gracey not only agreed but also allowed the French POW's to be rearmed. The French quietly began to take over the city from the Japanese during the afternoon of September 22.17

That night, Dewey met with Doctor Pham Ngoc Thach, a member of the Executive Committee for the Committee for the South and learned that they intended to stage a mass demonstration the next day. Dewey cautioned Thach that such a demonstration was not permitted under martial law and that there might be bloodshed. 18

The next morning the French began a massacre in the city. Cédile's troops reoccupied more public buildings in Saigon. As one of the Saigon OSS team members noted

In a pre-dawn attack on September 23, this force looted the arsenal and embarked on a program of massacre and brutality against the generally defenseless Annamese population, secured control over a large part of Saigon, and became the nucleus of the French forces which were to later arrive. 19

French troops shot down Viet Minh sentries at City Hall. Saigon's French colonial population rejoiced at the retaking of the city and lost all restraint. Banding together in

17 Ibid., 314-316.
18 Ibid., 316.
gangs, French men and women roamed Saigon's streets in search of any Vietnamese who dared to show themselves. No one was spared. Hundreds of men, women, and children were savagely beaten and many were taken to nearby jails. The French and British military stood by without raising a hand to stop the rioting. As one OSS officer later reflected, "For one who has been there, the conclusion is inevitable that the French have learned almost everything under Hitler except compassion."  

Dewey tried to see Gracey to protest French behavior, but Gracey refused to see him. Cédile told Dewey that the rioting was none of his business and that the Americans were to blame for the state of affairs. The next day Gracey declared Dewey persona non grata and ordered him to leave the country as soon as possible. The rest of the OSS team was allowed to remain in Vietnam. Dewey made arrangements to fly to Ceylon on September 26.  

The Vietnamese reaction to these atrocities was to regroup under the leadership of the Viet Minh. They saw no alternative but to wage war. Frenchmen were attacked on September 24 and many buildings were burned or sacked. The

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20 Patti, 317.


22 Patti, 317.

23 Ibid.
Viet Minh and their sympathizers blamed members of the Binh Xuyen, a gangster-type of political sect, for one particularly horrible bloodbath. It was alleged that on the night of September 24/25 the Binh Xuyen entered the French-Eurasian residential district known as Cité Hérault located in the north-central section of Saigon and massacred more than one hundred and fifty French colonials, mostly women and children. An equal number were taken away and were later tortured, mutilated, and killed. Although Japanese troops guarded the area, they stood aside and let the mob pass through because they were sympathetic to Vietnamese aspirations for independence. It should be noted, however, that the Binh Xuyen seldom engaged in any activity that did not return a profit, and this atrocity was totally out of character from their usual behavior. French intelligence later learned that this slaughter was the work of the Trotskyites. At the same time of the massacre, the Vietnamese also set up roadblocks around Saigon and refused to let any colonials leave. Frenchmen who tried to leave the city were shot.  

Dewey's flight out of Saigon was scheduled to depart at 9:30 A.M. on September 26. Captain Herbert J. Bluechel drove Dewey to the airport, where they learned that the plane would not leave before noon. About 11:00 A.M. Dewey learned that a member of his team, Captain Joseph R.  

24 Ibid., 319; Dunn, 203.
Coolidge, had been ambushed and wounded the previous evening. Dewey and Bluechel visited briefly with Coolidge at the hospital and returned to the airport around 12:15 P.M. The plane had not arrived. They decided to return to OSS headquarters for lunch since it was only a ten minute drive.

Dewey was driving the jeep when they came upon a roadblock about five hundred yards from OSS headquarters. Both men were familiar with the roadblock and had negotiated it several times, including that morning when they left for the airport. Dewey slowed down to about 8 miles per hour when, without warning, a hidden machine gun opened up on them at point blank range. Dewey was killed instantly. He was the first American to die in Vietnam.

The jeep overturned and Bluechel scrambled to safety. He shot several approaching Vietnamese and ran to OSS headquarters for cover. The Vietnamese attacked the Headquarters, which was not flying an American flag, for several hours. The telephone lines were cut, so Bluechel radioed OSS headquarters in Ceylon. It contacted the British in Saigon, who sent Gurkhas to reinforce the Americans. The Vietnamese then withdrew. Dewey's body was never recovered. Bluechel later reported that Dewey

\[25\] Patti, 320.
\[26\] Ibid.
\[27\] Causes, 287.
was ambushed and killed through being mistaken of being of a nationality other than American. If the jeep in which he was riding at the time of the incident had been displaying an American flag, I [Bluechel] feel positive that the shots would not have been fired. A flag was not being displayed in accordance with verbal instructions issued by General Gracey. . . .

Because the French had been issued American uniforms, it is most likely that Dewey and Bluechel were mistaken for Frenchmen. Arthur Krock summed up the irony of his death:

Lieutenant Colonel Dewey of the Office of Strategic Services was not meant to perish in the way he did - from the gunfire of insurgents in a strange land who mistook him for a French officer, and therefore a symbol of what they consider their oppressor. . . . Peter Dewey boldly met every risk which high spirit, total absence of physical fear, and hatred of autocracy impelled him to seek. He survived these, to be shot from ambush by natives whose protest against foreign dominion he had examined with the sympathy he felt for all who are thus subject. It is one of the first American casualties in the bodeful era of peace-making that has released passions as violent as those of war.

The OSS moved its headquarters into downtown Saigon to the Hotel Continental shortly after Dewey's death. Navy Lieutenant James R. Withrow, Jr., a veteran of OSS operations in India, took over. Shortly after his arrival,

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28 Ibid., 284. This is a quote from OSS Document MLB-2739-A dated September 30, 1945.

29 Peter M. Dunn, who is very pro-British and pro-French, claims in his book, The First Vietnam War, that the French were "outfitted by the British, as contemporary photos show" (p. 215), but offers no other proof to corroborate his assertion. Dunn is the only source I have found that differs from other contemporary accounts, which state that the French were in American uniforms.

The French were reinforced by regular units under the command of General Jacques Leclerc and began the reconquest of Cochinchina. The OSS merely observed the reconquest and reported the results to Washington. Truman disbanded the OSS less than a week after Dewey's death, and there was little the team could do but await orders to return to the United States. George Sheldon, a 25-year old OSS officer stationed in Saigon, was impressed by the Vietnamese resistance. Later he wrote, "The Vietnamese have had French rule and they have had their own, and their stand is that 'France can make Viet Nam a cemetery, but not a colony.'"

The day after Dewey's death, Gracey arrested the Japanese commander in Saigon, Marshall Terauchi, threatened to have him tried as a war criminal, and ordered him to aid the British in fighting the Vietnamese and restoring order. Terauchi complied with Gracey's order. Gracey finally managed to obtain a truce with the Vietnamese on October 1, but it did not last. On October 16 the Vietnamese made a last stand in Saigon. British, French, and Japanese troops forced them to abandon the city. The first Indochina War had started.

The American advisory role in postwar Indochina left a strong legacy of French bitterness and mistrust toward the

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32 Boettcher, 56.
United States. The French would view our collusion with the Viet Minh as one of the main reasons for their postwar difficulties in Vietnam. They conveniently overlooked the fact, however, that Washington had agreed, more than three months before V-J Day, that the French should return to Indochina. The French refused to admit that American aid to the Viet Minh had been immaterial. In their shortsightedness they failed to realize that the "very existence of the Viet Minh was largely a response to French exploitation and oppression." It would take the Viet Minh another nine years to defeat the French. They were victorious at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954. It then took them many more years to defeat the United States and reunify their country.

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33 Spector, 72-73.
CHAPTER XI
CONCLUSIONS

The United States failure to recognize the nationalist movement in Vietnam in 1945 was an oversight for which Americans, along with the French, would pay dearly. Ho Chi Minh was clearly an intelligent, articulate, and charismatic leader who truly admired the ideals of democracy. That Ho was inspired by the example set by the United States in the Philippines was well known inside and outside of government circles. Yet, when World War II ended, the United States was not concerned about the fate of Vietnam - a small underdeveloped nation located in the Pacific's backwaters.

Despite Roosevelt's keen interest in Indochina during the war and his desire to see it placed under an international trusteeship, Europe's reconstruction received first priority in the minds of most U.S. leaders charged with formulating postwar geopolitical strategy. Also, after the war, the fear of Communism was uppermost in the minds of most American politicians and diplomats. In his "Long Telegram," dated February 22, 1946, George F. Kennan had warned the United States that Communism was a political force committed fanatically to the belief that . . . it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to
be secure.¹

Those thoughts, coupled with the fact that our aim during the war had been to concentrate on the European theater before we turned to the Pacific, precluded any serious concerns about Southeast Asia's fate or real understanding of the Viet Minh.

Why did the U.S. go along with the French reoccupation of Indochina? First, France had been instrumental in the success of the American Revolution. The United States could ill afford to turn its back on her in her time of need following World War II. The U.S. knew that it would be foolish to ignore her position in postwar Europe and that she would play an instrumental part in the reconstruction and rearmament of Europe. Therefore, it silently acquiesced to the return of her Indochina colony, and Ho Chi Minh's nationalist movement was sacrificed on the altar of expediency.

The failure of influential men such as Dean Acheson and John Foster Dullas to see the nationalistic motives of either Mao Tse-Tung or Ho Chi Minh was a major part of the "Red Scare" that pervaded the United States during the immediate postwar era. Ultimately, it led to the Domino theory justifying U.S. military involvement in

Vietnam. High American officials were willing to overlook Chiang Kai-shek's corruption and France's maltreatment of its Indochinese colony as long as they were anti-Communist. The manner in which Vietnam, and Korea too, were divided at the end of the war to facilitate the surrender and evacuation of the defeated Japanese smacked of imperialism. Little did the U.S. realize in 1945 that its cavalier way of dividing up smaller countries would result in three major wars within the next thirty years. Just as the U.S. had done at the end of World War I, it brushed off the pleas of minorities seeking independence in favor of continued support for colonialism.

The United States failed to realize that the people of Indochina had become politically sensitized. The Vietnamese struggled not for Communist ideology, but to throw the white man out. OSS men like as Archimedes Patti could understand the new nationalist fervor in Vietnam and reported it to their superiors, who either ignored the information or failed to pass it on to those who would grasp its import. Because Vietnam was not an important cog in the world of geopolitics, it was easy to overlook. But how the U.S. could have ignored a leader who used parts of our own Declaration of Independence in his Independence Declaration defies logic and remains one of those mysteries that will never be adequately explained.

If the events of 1945 Vietnam can teach the U.S.
anything, it is that independence movements such Ho Chi Minh's should not be overlooked, even when there are larger geopolitical concerns which need its attention. The U.S. failure to recognize that Ho Chi Minh had the support of his people led to two tragic wars and ultimately caused France and the United States much misfortune.

If only someone had paid attention to Patti's reports; if only someone had realized that Ho, at heart, was a nationalist; if only someone had recognized that Ho's grievances against the French were legitimate; if only there had not been such an overwhelming aversion to Communism in the postwar era; and if only Communism had been seen as a tactic of liberation for oppressed peoples, the world might have been different. History, however, continues to go its own way without taking note of the "ifs" posed by historians.
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He served in Vietnam from 1969-1970 as a combat infantryman and medic. He owned and operated a real estate company in Charlottesville until retiring in 1989. He now resides in Richmond.