VIETNAM 1945-1954
REVOLUTION, INDEPENDENCE, PARTITION

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For two thousand years, the Vietnamese have had to resist many foreign aggressions; each time, all energies have had to be mobilized. With their resistance and their love of their country, the Vietnamese gradually formed the Vietnamese nation with its own language, its distinguished culture, basically a history whose main characteristic remains stubborn resistance to all aggressors- Chinese, French, American- no matter how powerful they are[1]. The Vietnamese resistance to the French colonialists, and then to the American imperialists continues, indeed, a tradition that started as early as the first century A. D. with the Trung Sistors.

This essay will deal, briefly, with the Vietnamese resistance to the French after their return to Vietnam in 1945, and the Vietnamese struggle for independence. However, it is the August 1945 revolution and the partition of the country in 1954 that count here. An attempt to discuss and weigh the following important questions will be made: what problems did the August 1945 revolution face? How were they solved? Why did the French withdraw? If the partition of Vietnam was not inevitable, then why and how did it occur? Was it caused by

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1 - See Vietnamese Studies, #21, 1969, pp. 151-152.

men competing for power or by systems struggling against each other for survival? What were the economic results of the partition in the north and the south?

This paper does not carry out a comprehensive enquiry into these questions, but attempts some basic answers and analysis.

To analyze the August 1945 revolution and the partition of 1954, it is necessary to leave the chronological road and to examine carefully the conflicts of interests, hopes of the Vietnamese and fears of the French and Americans which produced this difficult situation and the circumstances from which the partition derived.

Hugnh kim khanh regards August 1945 as "an important turning point in Vietnamese history" for after the capitulation of Japan, several important events followed one another vastly. The Vietnamese communist party held a special conference on August 13-15 "on how to deal with the immediate situation"[(2)]. With the French out of the way after march 9, 1945, the Viet Minh became more active- we will not trace the events of the August revolution since the takeover of Hanoi, Hue and Saigon is well known. We do count the revolution as an important event in the history of the Vietnamese nation[(3)].

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2 - See Huynh Kim Khanh, "The Vietnamese August Revolution reinterpreted," The Journal of Asian STudies, V. 30 (August 1971), p. 761, hereafter cited as Huynh Kim Khanh. This is an excellent article on the August 1945 revolution.

3 - Huynh Kim Khanh stated that "the August revolution was the most significant turning point in the recent history of Vietnam," p. 781.

The communist party came to power in north Vietnam through a war of national liberation against the French. The forces which it could draw on in this struggle were those which, in the case of China, have been called forces of peasant nationalism. It is suitable to divide these categories along elite/mass lines. The peasantry were anti-colonial, anti-French because the Frnech colonial occupation had been a disagreeable experience for the Vietnamese villages[4]. A large portion of the peasantry might have preferred not to take sides, yet the vitality of the communist struggle forced a great many to face two choices- the Vietnamese communists or the French. "In August 1945, the Viet Minh became a broad national movement, uniting large numbers of Vietnamese regardless of their politics, and reaching down to the masses[5]." In terms of the military, the movement had not only Giap's army, but also the young people who had been trained under two Vietnamese army leaders, Phan Ahn and Ta Quang Buu. Both men later became members of the new regime founded in 1945.

"War and Communism," smith tells us, "have shaped the pattern of Vietnamese history since 1945; the first was indeed the opportunity of the second." If the French had not returned to Vietnam after the end of the second world war it is not clear whether the Vietnamese communists would have been the only power in a modern

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4 - For the main economic changes in colonial Vietnam, see charles robequain, The Economic development of French Indochina (London: 1944). Also, John T. Mcalister, Vietnam: The Origins of revolution (London: 1969).

5 - Ellen J. Hammer, The struggle for Indochina 1940-1955 (Stanford: 1968).

independent state of Vietnam[6]. It was the new conflict with the returning French in 1945 to 1954 that made the Vietnamese communists able to take a strong hold on north Vietnam and partly on central Vietnam. Thereafter, by 1958 they became a powerful force in the south of the country as well.

In 1945, however, "the transfer of power was accomplished smoothly and with practically no bloodshed," according to Hynh Kim Khanh[7]. The power throughout the country fell into Viet Minh hands, with the exception of some provinces next to the Chinese border. Most other regions of Vietnam, however, came under the control and power of the People's Revolutionary Committees. On August 19, Hanoi was taken, and Hue and Saigon followed on August 23 and 25. The last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, Bao Dai, formally gave up his court on August 30. Thus, the Vietnamese Nguyen Dynasty which came to power in 1802 and was founded by the Emperor Gid-Long came to an end in 1945. Bao Dai gave up his throne and expressed his support to the new Vietnamese regime. On. September 2, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the success of the Revolution, and the independence of the Vietnamese nation. He presented to the nation a government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam[8].

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6 - Ralph B. Smith, Vietnam and the west (Ithaca, New York : Cornell university press, 1971), p. 114.

7 - See Huynh Kim Khanh, p. 762.

8 - For the declaration of the Vietnamese independence by Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1945, see Bernard B. Fall, ed., Ho Chi Minh on revolution: Selected writings 1920-66 (New York: 1962), p. 143-45.

The new Vietnamese government was declared as noted. "But what was the real strength of the new regime? What obstacles were likely to confront the Demoncratic Republic of Vietnam?" These very important questions were posed by Jean Chesneaux in his Contribution a l'histoire de la nation Vietnamienne[9]. According to Chesneaux, the Ho Chi Minh government seemed to have faced at first "few difficulties of an interior character."[10] What kind of inside problems faced the new regime in Vietnam and how did the now regime act to solve these problems? Huynh Kim Khanh tells us that "the famine caused difficulties for revolutionary mobilization in some northern provinces, several Viet Minh cadres, following the command of the party to stay close to the masses, died of starvation."[11] After the declaration of the independence, the frightful threat of famine had still to be avoided. As Chesneaux pointed out, "du fait de la confusion militaire et politique de l'ete, la recolte de l'automne a ete tres insuffisante au Tonkin. Et la maisson suivante n'est attendue qu'au 'cinqueme mois', en juin."[12] Thus, the serious threat of famine was a real and difficult test for the new Vietnamese regime established by Ho Chi Minh, "for here the Ho Chi Minh government had to prove itself before the people as a whole."[13]

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9 - Jean Chesneaux, Contribution a l'historie de la nation Vietnameinne (Paris), p. 234.

10 - Ibid, p. 234.

11 - Huynh Kim Khanh, p. 776.

12 - Chesneaux, p. 237.

13 - See chesneaux, the French edition, p. 237. "Car it s'agit pour le government Ho de faire ici ses preuves devant le people tout entire." See also the English edition, translated (Sydney: 1966), p. 164.

How did the new regime act in" response? On November 15, 1945 a "central committee for intensive and rapid agricultural production" was established to act for the improvement of agricultural production and for the national salvation. Production was rapidly increased. In Tonkin itself production of sweet potatoes increased along with other crops. The famine was averted, and the new regime passed a serious economic test(14). Yet it still had a long way to go.

To the Vietnamese the goal was very clear, but the way to it was mined. The French had decided to return to Vietnam; the western powers in general wanted the old order to be reestablished after the defeat of Japan. No one believed in this more strongly than the French who had expected that the war might somehow prepare Indochina for independence although they had not even recognized a need to grant "modest political reforms" in the area. Moreover, the French believed that Colonialism was best for the peoples of Asia and that it should not be ended just because of the ambitions of nationalist intellectuals(15).

Despite French beliefs and actions, the Vietnamese were on their way to full independence. After all, the French came to Indochina, Syria and Algeria by force-no one who lived there had asked for their presence. In 1945 the French decided to reconquer Vietnam by force again. To the Vietnamese leaders, this attitude was no surprise. They had no choice but to start a Vietnamese war of

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14 - For a more detailed and useful discussion, see Jean Chesneaux.

15 - Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Political History (New York: 1968), pp. 211-212.

independence. A preliminary convention was signed on March 6, 1946 that permitted peaceable entry of French forces to Tonkin and recognized Vietnam as a free state within the French union. Nevertheless, French authorities declared that hostilities in December 1946 demanded military action and that no negotiations would be undertaken with the government of Ho Chi Minh.

The consequences of this policy have been the aggravation of an existing economic crisis and a constantly stiffening resistance on the part of Vietnam. "Relations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam und France were then at a crossroads[16]." Then, on December 19 President Ho called on the Vietnamese people to "rise up," to resist the enemy, to save their Vietnam[17]. During the summer of 1946 General Giap had consolidated control of the Viet Minh over Vietnam, yet the Vietminh was not in a good or powerful position. It was unprepared for military struggle with the French. Ho himself had tried to delay the conflict with the French; however, a conflict was ineviable, so the Communists had no Choice but to fight[18].

When the French decided to regain control of northern Vietnam in 1945, they had little conception of the sort of war they would have to fight. As Smith pointed out, the French had to deal with two problems: first, to recover and maintain control of the population

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16 - Vo Nguyen Giap, People's war, people's army (New York: 1967), p. 17.

17 - Ibid., p. 18.

18 - See William J. Duiker, "Building the United front: The Rise of communism in Vietnam, 1925-1954," in Joseph J. Zasloff and Macalister brown, eds., Communism in Indochina: new perspectives (Toronto: 1975), pp. 22-13.

in the rural areas, and second to fight a "rebel" army. That army was "small and not very powerful at the beginning, but with Mao's methods of war, the Vietnamese were able to strengthen it year after year[19].Mao's methods of war can be clearly seen in Vo Nguen Giap's People's war, People's Army. The emphasis was on guerrilla war[20].

The Communists intended to use the basic strategy that was already employed in China[21]. The chief goal during the first years of the war was to gain control over the rural areas and not to defend or capture new territory[22].

During the first ten months of 1947, the military factors were favorable to the D.R.V forces, and the first stage of war was one of French offensives. Launched on a wide scale throughout the Vietnamese nation, these attacks met very strong, stubborn resistance[23]. By November 1947 the French forces believed that the had won the war, but General Giap had only withdrawn to the hills and mountains and paddy fields to harrass the French troops with guerrilla warfare and village militia[24].

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19 - Smith, p. 116.

20 - See vo nguyen Giap.

21 - Duiker, p. 22.

22 - The only case study of "people's war" is, of course vo Nguyen Giap's People's war, People's Army, however smith in his study produced a fine and useful discussion on this matter, pp. 116-17. See also Duiker, pp. 22-23.

23 - For a general discussion, see Chesneaux.

24 - See chester A. Bain, Vietnam: The Roots of conflict (New Jersey: 1967), p. 114. it is not our concern here to trace the war of independence, year after year. We just glance at it, for it is important and demands separate study.

In 1950 large scale military support from the Soviet Union and China permitted the D.R.V. forces to undertake major offensives. As time went on the victory seemed to be on the Vietnamese side. The Dien Bien Phu battle of 1954 was intended to end the war. On May 7, General De Castries surrendered with 16,200 men. The French were forced to admit defeat at last. "The French gave up because they could not afford to go on[25]. "The war, in France itself, became very unpopular. In the same year, on November 9, the Algerian Revolution had begun involving France in the seven-year French- Algerian war.

The 1954 Geneva Conference took place immediately after the French military disaster at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, but the preliminary peace negotiations started early in 1953 when the Vietnamese and Korean war had merged "with the global East-West struggle." The sessions devoted to Indochina's problem included representatives of the U.S.S.R., China U.K., France, the Indochinese countries and the U.S. as an observer. As usual, Great Britain had settled upon the division of Vietnam as a possible solution to the problem, even before the conference opened, although there were warnings that partition would offer the communists a release.

An International Commission composed of India, Poland, and Canada was established in Vietnam to supervise the implementation of the agreement, which were primarily aimed at preserving peace in the area. The Geneva agreements provided only for a temporary separation of two zones to allow regroupment of military forces; nevertheless, division occurred. Why? What went wrong?

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25 - Bain, p. 116.

One of the most significant developments since the conclusion of the Geneva agreement was the end of the French colonial presence in Indochina; another was the provisional division of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel. There was the hope of unifying the country via general elections in July of 1956, but when the time arrived, no elections were held.

The actual partition of Vietnam was the work of the great powers at Geneva. The existence of non-Communist elements and the state framework in the south of Vietnam seemed to aid the powers in their decision[26]. The partition of Vietnam between South and North that resulted from the Geneva settlement of 1954 was in fact a reflection of cold war confrontations in the world at large at that time. It was "temporary" for once the external pressures of the cold war were taken off Indochina as a whole, the national consciousness of the Vietnamese people would assert itself and enable them to live in harmony--and this is what Vietnam needs--and independence under a single government chosen by the Vietnamese themselves[27].

"It is one thing to divide a country on a map," Duong Van Minh wrote, "but it is not easy to divide a people to sever bonds of family, culture, and history. The Vietnamese people are one; they cannot be separated into northerners or southerners"[28].

Jean Chesneaux stated that "it seems clear that nobody at the time of the conference envisaged the division of the Vietnam nation

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26 - Smith, p. 120.

27 - See Dennis J. Duncanson, "Vietnam as a nation-state," MAS, V. III (1969), p. 117.

28 - Quoted in Duncanson, p. 117.

into two distinct and rival states. Such however, is the present situation"[29]. In the events of 1954 there was no straightforward agreement that indicate the existence of two regimes in Vietnam. Nothing that happened at Geneva in the summer of 1954 affected the sovereignity of Vietnam. The agreement was basically a military one and provided only for a temporary separation of two zones for the purpose of regroupment of military forces. The only mention of political arrangements was a reference to the elections which would eventually decide on unification of the two zones.

Everything in the Geneva Conference referred to one Vietnam. According to Vietnamese Studies, "the unity and territorial integrity of a single Vietnam were recognized. There was a provision for free and democratic general elections... it was not at Geneva that Vietnam was unified; the Geneva Conference merely consecrated a thousand-year-old historical reality, the existence of a Vietnam one and indivisible". Vietnamese Studies also regards the 1954 Geneva agreements as a contribution to international law, "defining in more precise terms the notion of national rights and the rights of peoples to self-determination." To the Vietnamese, however, these rights arc the outcome of almost a dentury of a hard, stubborn struggle by the Vietnamese people against outsiders. In this sense, a historian should analyze and understand the 1954 settlement.

The Geneva documents do not include anything that could be interpreted by any international lawyer, as smith puts it, as a transfer of sovereignity. And, of course, there was no statement that the

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[29] - Chesneaux, the English edition, p. 210.

sovereignity of Vietnam should be divided. From the communist point of view the independence of Vietnam derives from the events and declarations of the August 1945 Revolution. If we accept that and perhaps we should thaen what the French did thereafter was illegal, for the French were no longer the sovereign authority.

However, the problem was that when the Geneva conference decided to create two military zones in Vietnam, there were already two governments in Vietnam, each claiming to be the sovereign authority. The cease-fire settlement produced conditions in which Hanoi's government and Saigon's government could continue to exist, and the decision not to hold elections until 1956 gave both governments a chance to consolidate their positions. Moreover, the decision to allow migration from one zone to another also had an effect. A million non-commmunists left Tonking for south Vietnam. It was believed that the Saigon regime was responsible for all Vietnamese who were not communists.

The problem of geography was also a division factor. One-sixth of Vietnam is settled by peasants who are ethnic Vietnamese, concentrated in the Red River area and the Mekong delta--one in the north the other in the south. These areas have maintained a language free of dialects, a good thing for national unity, but a factor which helped the development of strong regional consciousness in both the north and south.

As a result of colonital withdrawal the Vietnamese found themselves with a nation, but a separated nation. It was not an inevitable division, but one caused by two systems struggling against

each other for survival. International ideologies were the dividing factor. Vietnam now needs a high degree of harmony between the south and the north to reunite its soil, just as in Ireland where harmony between the south and the north is much needed. The partition of Vietnam was a deplorable end to the Vietnamese struggle against outsiders, as was the division of India. A historian should perhaps accept and recognize it as a fact, but he should also know that that it is a tragedy and could have been avoided.

Let us ask a final question: what is the aftermath of the partition? The division of the Vietnamese nation in 1954 has affected economic conditions throughout Vietnam. Under French colonial control the economic development of Vietnam had been largely directed toward French political and economic objectives, not toward improving the economy of Vietnam itself. Therefore there was a need to develop the country's economic status. However, the partition left the communists in control of the north and the republic of Vietnam independent if it could be called so in the south. Relations between the two parts were unfriendly with the south opposing all contact. Saigon allowed no trade, no private travel, no cultural contacts. The north was more industrial, the south chiefly agricultural. The south provided the north with as much as a half millions tons of rice a year while the north could provide the south with industrial goods. Now both countries had to find new markets, damaging both economies still further.