

A Clash of Republics

The sequence of war in Indochina began as a collision between two new republics, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the French Fourth Republic. Both were strongly influenced by socialist and communist thinking, while at the same time both strove to build a national consensus with nonsocialist nationalist groups. Both aimed at modernizing Indochina through industrialization, trade, and representative institutions. Both were positively inclined toward the idea of building a common political arena for the Viet, Lao, Khmer, and highland minority peoples, so that they could stimulate one another's quest for modernity. Both agreed that an Indochinese Federation should form a part of a new French Union and remain associated with France in a progressive family of nations.

What caused the two republics to clash was not just the question of Vietnamese national independence, although there was an acute conflict between the DRV's quest for recognition of its authority and sovereignty and the French insistence on maintaining French sovereignty—and authority—in the colonies. An equally difficult question concerned the geographical scope of the Vietnamese nation. Although the Vietnamese Revolution in August–September 1945 had its main origin in northern Indochina, in the country the French called “Tonkin,” the revolutionaries were committed to the idea of a united Vietnam stretching all the way down to the point of Ca Mau. They intended to give this united Vietnam a leading role in the modernization of the whole of Indochina, as the biggest and most advanced of three nations.

The French rejected the Vietnamese national idea. They used the term “Vietnam” only reluctantly, and spoke of “Annamites” or “Annamese” instead when referring to the ethnic majority group in the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam and

the colony of Cochinchina. Both Gaullist and leftist colonial reformers were adamant that a modern, democratic Indochina should not come under “Annamite” domination, but build on a balance among five separate units: Cambodia, Laos, Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. To the extent that they accepted the term “Vietnam,” which in the 1920s and 1930s had been the hallmark of noncommunist nationalists under Chinese inspiration, while the communists then mostly spoke of Indochina (Dong Duong), the French tended to see “Vietnam” as a new name only for Tonkin, and possibly the northern half of Annam. The French opposed the unification of the three Viet-dominated regions Bac Ky (Tonkin), Trung Ky (Annam), and Nam Ky (Cochinchina), which the Vietnamese nationalists preferred to call Bac Bo, Trung Bo, and Nam Bo; the use of the term “Bo” was a way of signaling that the north, central, and south regions belonged to the same nation. It was also a problem that in French legal terms, the most economically developed and modern of the Indochinese lands, Cochinchina, had the status of a colony under full French sovereignty, and that this status could be altered only by a decision in the French National Assembly.¹

Cochinchina had been the first part of Indochina to be colonized by France, and it remained the cornerstone of the design made in Paris in early 1945 for a democratic Indochinese Federation under French supervision and guidance. Saigon would be at the center of Indochina’s economic advancement; Hue and Hanoi were seen as more backward and subject to Chinese political influence; Phnom Penh and Vientiane were even more backward and would need French tutelage for a long time to come.

The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, formed in the “August Revolution” of 1945, claimed to represent a sovereign Vietnamese nation, with a right to full independence. Its claim to independence was grounded not just in general principles, but also in recent history. Bao Dai, the French-protected emperor of Annam, with nominal authority also in Tonkin, had gained nominal independence after Japan ousted the French regime in March 1945. When he abdicated voluntarily in August 1945, he ceded his powers to the new Democratic Republic. President Ho Chi Minh did not thus declare but *confirm* Vietnam’s independence in his famous address to the people in Ba Dinh square in Hanoi on September 2, 1945. Shortly before Bao Dai abdicated, his government had obtained from Japan something that France had always refused to concede: sovereignty also in Nam Ky (Cochinchina), hitherto under direct French rule, where the emperor had previously had no say. Japan changed this in early August 1945, before it surrendered to the Allies, and when the revolution took place in all the three Viet lands just after the Japanese capitulation, the revolutionary leaders in Nam Bo’s capital, Saigon, did not set up a state of their own, but saw themselves as the local representatives of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with Hanoi as its capital.

France did not engage with the revolutionary institutions in the south, but



FIGURE 1. The new Democratic Republic of Vietnam's defining moment. Detail from a 1979 painting by Van Tho depicting Independence Day, September 2, 1945, in Ba Dinh Square, Hanoi. A citizen holds a parasol over the head of Uncle Ho Chi Minh, as servants once did for emperors and governors-general. Ho, dressed in plain brown clothes, addresses his people through a microphone and reads his famous Declaration confirming Vietnam's independence, quoting from both the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and the 1791 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. The painting is reproduced here because it illustrates the importance of the Ba Dinh event in the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, not because it accurately reflects what actually happened. Oil on canvas done for the Museum of History's permanent exhibition in 1979, based on a 1945 photograph by Nguyen Ba Khoan and on documentary materials and eyewitness accounts. Courtesy Van Tho and the Museum of History, Hanoi.

intended to establish a new system with a large degree of autonomy for each of five Indochinese peoples. French politicians saw themselves as representing *la France nouvelle*, a New France, with a mission to regenerate, not just France itself, but its former empire as well, which would be transformed into a solidary *Union française*. The French mood was characterized by what one scholar has called “imperialist optimism,” an expectation that metropolitan and imperial—or federalist—constitution-making would proceed hand in hand.² “*La France nouvelle*” was the term used by French socialists, communists, and Gaullists alike for the state they established after Marshal Philippe Pétain was ousted from Vichy and the Germans were driven out of Paris in the summer of 1944, which was led by General Charles de Gaulle until January 20, 1946. It remained “*La France nouvelle*” until the Fourth Republic had been fully established, with a constitution that came into force on December 24, 1946. Some of the most influential French politicians thought that independence should be the long-term aim for the French protectorates overseas, but in order to safeguard the French presence and prevent other foreign powers from taking over the French-ruled territories, they would not grant it immediately. They intended to secure the French presence in the Far East by setting up autonomous or self-governing units as parts of an Indochinese Federation, led by a French high commissioner. Through the introduction of a representative system, based on democratic elections, the Indochinese countries would then gradually be emancipated with a view to eventual independence.

Developments in Vietnam during 1946 were complicated by a legacy of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s promotion of a Chinese role in an international trusteeship he had hoped to set up for Indochina after the end of World War II. Roosevelt had considered Indochina a part of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s military theater of operations in the war against Japan, and he hoped that Chinese troops would play the lead role in liberating Indochina. He had not been willing to let British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten’s South East Asia Command, with its headquarters in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), take responsibility for Allied operations in Indochina, since Mountbatten would be likely to help de Gaulle retain the colony. At the Potsdam conference in July 1945, three months after Roosevelt’s death, and shortly before the Japanese surrender, a hasty compromise was reached, whereby Chiang Kai-shek got responsibility for Indochina north of the 16th parallel, and Mountbatten for the southern half. After the Japanese capitulation, which led to a temporary power vacuum, in which the Vietnamese “August Revolution” took place, British forces landed from the sea to disarm and repatriate the Japanese troops south of the 16th parallel (Cochinchina, Cambodia, the southern half of Annam, and the southernmost part of Laos), while a massive Chinese force crossed the border into the north (Tonkin, north Annam, and most of Laos) to disarm and repatriate the Japanese there.

The division of the Nguyen dynasty’s Annamese heartland made it impossible



FIGURE 2. The global ambitions of the French Fourth Republic. On this map, from the back of a brochure intended to create support for the restoration of French rule in Indochina, lines run from the Cross of Lorraine, symbol of General de Gaulle's Free French movement during World War II, to the various parts of the empire, soon to be liberated. De Gaulle's government, reestablished in Paris in August 1944, planned to revive the former empire as the French Union (*Union française*). Courtesy Annick Guénel.

to revive conservative monarchist policies in Hue after the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai on August 25, so Hue lost its historical role, and Hanoi and Saigon became the two main centers of power. The British helped the French crush the revolution in the south, and establish a new Indochinese administration centered in Saigon and led by de Gaulle's choice as high commissioner, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu. Meanwhile the Chinese occupation authorities tolerated the continued existence of the DRV in the north, with Hanoi serving as capital both of the Vietnamese government and the Chinese occupation authorities. (Until the Vietnamese revolution, Hanoi had been the capital of the Indochinese Union as a whole.) As of January 20, 1946, when de Gaulle suddenly announced his resignation as head of the French government, the Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient (CEFEO) he had dispatched to Indochina under the command of General Philippe Leclerc de Hautecloque was only in control of southern Indochina. In Hanoi, France was represented by the powerless Jean Sainteny, who had been flown in on an American plane from China. He tried to prepare for the arrival of French forces later, while seeking to protect French civilians against local nationalist agitators and Chinese occupation forces.

The confrontation between the DRV and the French Fourth Republic thus took different forms in north and south Vietnam. In the south, the French quickly assumed control and refused to accept any representatives of the DRV. In the north, the revolutionary Vietnamese government controlled the state apparatus and most of the provinces, but in an uneasy relationship with the Chinese military, which forced the Vietnamese communists to share power with the leaders of two China-oriented anticommunist parties, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Viet Nam Nationalist Party), or VNQDD, and the Viet Nam Cach Menh Dong Minh Hoi (Vietnamese Revolutionary League), or DMH. Ho Chi Minh's DRV government thus formed a double aim: on the one hand, to secure the republic in the north by building political and administrative strength and developing a strong army, and, on the other, to promote the struggle against France in the south. After a series of initial defeats, the Vietnamese military forces in the south regrouped and adopted the strategy and tactics of a protracted guerrilla struggle. While seeking to repress the insurgents in the south, the French engaged in parallel talks with Chiang Kai-shek's government in Chongqing and the DRV government in Hanoi with a view to obtaining the withdrawal of all Chinese troops from northern Indochina, so that French forces could return to the only part of the French empire that had not yet been reoccupied. On October 4, 1945, the French government appointed Jean Sainteny as commissioner of the French Republic for northern Indochina (Tonkin and North Annam). He held his first important, but inconsequential, talks with Ho Chi Minh on December 1, 1945. It was assumed by everyone in Hanoi that France would at some point reestablish its military presence in northern Indochina, although this would require China's consent.

This book does not aim to analyze in any depth the arguments and positions developed by the DRV and the new French Fourth Republic in the negotiations between them in Hanoi, leading to a preliminary agreement on March 6, 1946, in the failed negotiations at Dalat in Vietnam's central highlands in April–May, or at Fontainebleau south of Paris in July–September. Neither will the book go deeply into the military aspects of the war in the south. The focus will be on the question of peace and war between France and the DRV in its northern heartland. The book dwells on two periods of crisis: February–March 1946 and November–December 1946, the first leading to a temporary peace, the second to a long-drawn-out war.

NOT YET COLD WAR

It is easy to forget that 1946 was before the real onset of the Cold War. The wartime alliance between the Western powers and the Soviet Union was still in fresh memory. Stalin was not yet generally perceived as an autocratic villain. In Paris, the Allies were haggling over the peace treaties with Italy and the Axis satellites. No one knew as yet that the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan would be proclaimed the following year, and Germany was still occupied territory, divided into four occupation zones. In Asia, the United States had not committed itself to supporting Chiang Kai-shek in his war with the Chinese Red Army, but urged him to negotiate. To the extent that they had time to think about Indochina, both Harry S Truman and Chiang Kai-shek looked favorably on the recently formed DRV, hoped the French would recognize it, and that noncommunist Vietnamese nationalists would gain a greater say in its affairs. The Vietnamese communists were collaborating uneasily with a plethora of noncommunist nationalist groups, both within and outside the Viet Minh front. Back in Europe, the French Communist Party was also in government, in a coalition with the socialists (SFIO), the radicals, and Christian Democrats (MRP), and was represented on the committee that coordinated French Indochina policy. It was a period of opportunity, with open front lines.

By February 1946, the new French Republic did not yet have a constitution, although several drafts had already been considered and rejected in the one and a half years that had passed since Paris was liberated by the Free French forces of General Leclerc, an aristocrat whose original name was Philippe de Hautecloque, but who preferred to use the more popular name Leclerc. He had commanded the forces who liberated Paris in August 1944, enabling General Charles de Gaulle to install his provisional government in the French capital. De Gaulle's France demanded recognition as one of the world's four great powers, won a permanent seat on the new United Nations Security Council, and intended to play an independent role in relations with the "Anglo-Saxons" and the Soviet Union. Eager to align France with the emerging Western camp, British and American policy-makers sought to avoid measures that might offend French feelings or strengthen the French communists,

as well as to help secure fundamental French interests such as the need for coal. The Russians felt a similar need to treat France with care. They wanted to keep France out of the emerging Anglo-American alliance and thus applauded some of the independent French policies in Germany.

In Asia, the Vietnamese August Revolution was a part of a nationalist wave, which in the wake of Japan's capitulation brought India, Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia their independence. It was also a part of a communist drive that in 1949 triumphed in China, but was defeated militarily in Malaya and stalemated in Korea. These outcomes, however, could not be foreseen in 1946. The war in Indochina began long before this part of the world claimed the sustained attention of the leading statesmen in Moscow and Washington. When occasionally Vietnam was taken into account, it was seen in relation to their overall relations with France. This is why a study of the outbreak of the First Indochina War must concentrate on the bilateral Franco-Vietnamese relationship, while paying close attention to the role of the main third party, Nationalist China, and not exaggerating the importance of the roles played by the USSR and the United States.

It is time to introduce the two clashing republics, their parties, and their leaders.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Although the DRV took over many buildings and personnel from the French colonial administration and from Bao Dai's State of Vietnam, it was primarily the creation of an Independence League, the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet Minh for short), and its leader Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969). "Ho Chi Minh" was a name adopted during World War II by a man who was known to most of his countrymen as Nguyen Ai Quoc (He Who Loves His Homeland). Quoc had been the founder and main exile leader of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), which he established in 1930. During World War II, he operated in the border region between China and Indochina, assisting the Chinese authorities, and also the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS), with intelligence from inside Indochina. His aim was to liberate Indochina from the French and Japanese "double yoke."

When local nationalist and communist groups seized power in all of Vietnam's major cities and administrative centers in August 1945, they did so under the banner of the Viet Minh, which had been organized and led by Ho Chi Minh, first in southern China and, after 1941, from secret headquarters on the Vietnamese side of the border. There was originally no central leadership of the revolution, which happened as a spontaneous chain reaction, with one city or town inspiring another, and numerous Viet Minh committees being formed, both with and without the participation of organized communists. In the days after the Japanese surrender on August 15, Viet Minh's top leaders were marching down to Hanoi from liberated areas in the mountainous region, with no means of communicating with the local revo-

lutionary leaders elsewhere. Ho and his main collaborators were welcomed by Hanoi's local leaders when they arrived, and they then formed Vietnam's first republican government. A delegation went from Hanoi to Hue to obtain the emperor's abdication, and when he gave up his throne voluntarily, he was invited to Hanoi to serve as the new government's Supreme Advisor. With his age, experience, and personal charm, Ho Chi Minh stood out as the obvious candidate for the presidency of the new republic. He would simultaneously hold the offices of president and foreign minister. For the first time, the name Ho Chi Minh made headlines throughout the world. When Ho appeared before the masses in Hanoi on September 2, 1945, asking through a modern microphone "Can you hear me?" and getting a roar of approval in response, only a few in his audience knew for certain that he was the famous communist Nguyen Ai Quoc. Less than two months after the proclamation of the republic, the Research and Intelligence Service of the Department of State in Washington issued a 90-page intelligence survey containing biographies of sixty-nine prominent nationalist leaders in French Indochina. Ten pages were reserved for Ho Chi Minh, who was presented as "Nguyen Ai Quoc (now known as Ho Chi Minh; alias Ly-Thuy; Mr. C. M. Hoo)." The report affirmed with great certainty that Nguyen Ai Quoc was the same person as Ho Chi Minh and said he was the most experienced and intelligent of the "Annamite nationalist-communist leaders . . . with a remarkable degree of organizing ability."³

Nguyen Tat Thanh, the later Nguyen Ai Quoc and Ho Chi Minh, and so on, claimed to have been born in 1890. This may be true, and most authors accept it as his birth year, although the birth date given, May 19, is clearly not correct. It was chosen for him in 1946 because the republic wanted a public celebration before its president went on a high-profile visit to France. At the age of twenty-one—if we accept 1890 as his birth year—Thanh left Indochina to work his way around the world on a French ship. After having visited England and America, he went to Paris, where he took part in the foundation of the French Communist Party and argued the cause of the oppressed colonies through articles in small leftist publications. In the 1920s, he spent some time with the Comintern in Moscow and participated in the organizing of its Southeast Asian department. Then he worked with Comintern networks in China and Siam, and in 1930, he played the decisive role in uniting different factions of the Indochinese communist movement and founding the ICP.

The French Sûreté (Security Service) had been chasing him for years when he was arrested by the British in Hong Kong in 1931. They considered French requests for his extradition to Indochina, where he would surely have been executed, but decided against doing so. The international communist press provided the disinformation in 1932 that he had died from tuberculosis,⁴ but the British actually released him in January 1933 and let him embark on a Chinese ship bound for Shantou. Eventually, he made his way to Moscow, where he attended the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in the summer of 1935, but not as leader of the In-

dochinese delegation. This was the Congress that decided to form broad popular fronts to stop fascism, a policy subsequently also adopted by the ICP, although it had settled for a more sectarian strategy at its second congress in Macao, held earlier in the year.⁵ During the short period of the French socialist Léon Blum's French Popular Front Government 1936–37, the nationalist and communist parties in Indochina were permitted to work legally. Ho Chi Minh made no attempt to return to his homeland in this period, however; he got stuck in Russia until October 1938, surviving Stalin's purges, and then went to Xian in northern China.⁶

Toward the end of 1937, the ICP again came under heavy repression, and many of Ho Chi Minh's collaborators, such as Le Duan, Duong Bach Mai, and Tran Huy Lieu were arrested before the party went underground in 1939. Much of the party was destroyed when the French repressed a rebellion based in the south in 1940, but a new party leadership was constituted in the Hanoi region, where the lead ideologue of the ICP for the next forty years, Truong Chinh (Dang Xuan Khu), who had been released from prison under the French Popular Front government, and who edited the party's clandestine regional newspaper in Tonkin from 1940 on, managed to operate clandestinely throughout the whole of World War II without being captured. At a Central Committee meeting held in 1941 to reorganize the party after its leadership structure in the south had been smashed by the French, Truong Chinh was elected secretary-general, a function he would keep until 1956—and resume for a few months in 1986.⁷ Others, like Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap fled to China in 1940, where they eventually joined up with Ho Chi Minh. These two men would remain his closest confidants among the younger generation. Pham Van Dong would play a key managerial and diplomatic role and lead the Vietnamese delegation that negotiated in France in summer 1946. Vo Nguyen Giap was the founder and commander of the Vietnamese National Liberation Army and, as such, played the main role in the two crises under study here, beside Ho Chi Minh himself.

Vo Nguyen Giap was born on August 21, 1911, in Quang Binh, central Vietnam and, when these lines were written in 2009, was still occasionally receiving visitors in his villa in central Hanoi. He studied at the best French secondary schools in Hue and Hanoi, and he was already engaging in political work as a teenager. In 1937, he joined the ICP, while studying law and teaching at a private school in Hanoi. After the violent repression of the revolt instigated by the southern branch of the ICP in Cochinchina in 1940, he found life untenable in Hanoi, too, left his young bride and unborn child and went into exile in China, where he met Ho Chi Minh, and gave up an idea to visit to the Chinese communist capital Yenan. He followed Ho Chi Minh into the mountainous border region of Cao Bang province in northern Vietnam, learned the local minority languages, and formed lifelong friendships with many local leaders. In December 1944, he founded the National Liberation Army of Vietnam. In the first government formed by Ho Chi Minh after the Au-

gust Revolution, Giap was minister of the interior; as of March 1946, he chaired a National Resistance Committee, headed a Vietnamese delegation that held futile negotiations with French representatives at Dalat in Vietnam's central highlands in April–May, and served as minister of defense from November.

During most of World War II, French Indochina remained a French colony, under the administration of Admiral Jean Decoux, who accepted the establishment of Japanese bases in the country and stayed loyal to Marshal Pétain in Vichy. Decoux remained in control of Indochina's internal affairs and was able to repress the activities even of pro-Japanese nationalist parties. He followed an antimodernist policy, seeking to raise the prestige of the Lao, Cambodian, and Annamese monarchs, under French protection, with strong emphasis on traditional values, and attempted to establish a basic moral affinity between Confucianism and Pétainism.⁸ French Indochina's collaboration with Japan was the main reason why President Franklin D. Roosevelt could allow himself to adopt an anti-French policy in the Far East and promote the establishment of an international trusteeship to replace French colonial rule.⁹ On March 9, 1945, some of the basis for this anti-French U.S. policy disappeared when Japan suddenly struck against the French colonial army and toppled Decoux's administration. The Allies had long since driven Pétain out of France, and Decoux's regime looked like an anomaly. The new French government of General de Gaulle had established secret contacts with influential elements of the Decoux administration, however, and this had not gone unnoticed. The Japanese feared a U.S. invasion of Indochina, and that the French would assist the invaders. This was why they overthrew the Decoux regime on March 9. The majority of the French colonial troops were quickly defeated and placed in concentration camps, but some French forces were able to avoid capture by fleeing to China. The Japanese then set up a puppet regime in Hue under Emperor Bao Dai. De Gaulle used the Japanese coup to push for a change in Roosevelt's Indochina policy. Then Roosevelt died, and just a few days afterward, U.S. Secretary of State Edward Stettinius promised his French counterpart to respect France's sovereignty in its Southeast Asian colonies. Still, Truman did not ask de Gaulle's advice when agreeing at the July conference in Potsdam to divide Indochina into Chinese and British military theaters, with no military role for France.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Japanese coup greatly facilitated the political work of Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh league. Viet Minh established a "liberated zone" in the north of Vietnam and expanded its network to much of Indochina, while continuing to provide assistance to Chinese and American intelligence organizations and helping downed American pilots. Ho Chi Minh even received an American OSS mission at his headquarters in north Vietnam.¹¹

The Japanese, in this late phase of the war, had little interest in fighting the Viet Minh and restricted themselves to holding the main cities and communication lines. They allowed Bao Dai's government to appoint a number of reform-oriented Viet-

namese to leading administrative positions, and the Viet Minh seized the opportunity to infiltrate the public administration. Since August 1944, the Viet Minh leadership had been planning to seize power in Indochina in the final phase of the Pacific War. "We shall not even have to seize power by force, for there will be no power anymore," a document dated August 6, 1944, asserted.¹² The news of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Soviet attack on Manchuria in mid-August 1945 gave the signal for the "August Revolution." Revolutionary activists seized power quickly, first in Hanoi, later in Hue and Saigon. Then Ho and Giap arrived in Hanoi, and when Bao Dai abdicated in Hue, Ho Chi Minh was able to deliver his famous declaration, confirming Vietnam's independence, on September 2, with a U.S. officer in the first row below the podium and U.S. airplanes circling in the sky above. The Japanese did not want to spill any blood in preventing the Vietnamese Revolution. The war was lost, and most of them returned to their barracks, although several thousand soldiers and officers deserted in order to serve as military instructors or even combatants in the Vietnamese Army. Those who remained in their barracks would soon receive British orders to assist in quelling the revolution in the south and dutifully carried out the task. Japanese thus fought and died on both sides.¹³

The military power vacuum that emerged after the Japanese capitulation and lasted until the arrival of British and Chinese occupation forces three weeks later made the Vietnamese Revolution possible. Ho Chi Minh could not have anticipated the Japanese surrender. He and Giap had been preparing their forces for a general uprising in support of an expected Allied invasion. The Japanese surrender took them by surprise, but the fact that they had established themselves as leaders of an Independence League and a National Liberation Army made them obvious leaders of the new republic. Truong Chinh, the ICP's secretary-general, took a more backstage role.

Bao Dai's abdication invested the DRV with essential national legitimacy, forcing those nationalist groups who looked on Ho Chi Minh with suspicion to seek a role within the framework of the new republican institutions. The alignment of forces inside Indochina was favorable to the Viet Minh's cause. A majority of the people were united in support of independence. The alignment of forces internationally, however, was not similarly beneficial. No foreign country even considered recognizing the DRV; it took many a long time even to learn of its existence. The world took French sovereignty in Indochina more or less for granted, and the Vietnamese Revolution was barely noticed in the international communist press.¹⁴ General de Gaulle's French government left no doubt about its intention to dispatch an expeditionary force and to reestablish French rule in Indochina. De Gaulle made known immediately after the Japanese surrender that he had appointed Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu as high commissioner and General Leclerc as commander of a French expeditionary force. The Central Committee of the ICP was correct in pointing out, as its spokesman said in a speech at Ba

Dinh square in Hanoi, September 2: “the easier the seizure of power, the more difficult to preserve it.”¹⁵

The Corps expéditionnaire français was still far away when the August Revolution took place, however, so the troops first on the spot to accept the Japanese surrender were British and Chinese, although a few French representatives parachuted in to represent the sovereign power and establish contact with French officers and soldiers in Japanese prisons and concentration camps and with the thousands of French civilians who had been living under precarious conditions since March 9. When Lord Mountbatten’s British South East Asia Command had been established in 1943, no formal agreement had been reached on responsibility for Allied operations in Indochina. The British had wanted Indochina to come under Mountbatten’s responsibility, along with Thailand and Burma. The Americans, under the influence of Roosevelt’s trusteeship plan, had wanted it to be part of Chiang Kai-shek’s theater of operations. Indochina was a matter of interallied dispute on several occasions, so when the British-American Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed at Potsdam in July 1945 on a compromise, this came as the result of a protracted quarrel. The compromise solution of splitting Indochina into two theaters had a profound and long-lasting influence on Vietnamese history.¹⁶

Some twenty days after the Japanese capitulation, and a week after Ho Chi Minh’s independence proclamation, British troops arrived by ship in Saigon, while a huge Chinese army marched across the northern border. The British wanted to transfer power to French forces as soon as possible, but some of the Chinese commanders planned to resist French reoccupation of Tonkin and establish a China-friendly regime in Vietnam. On September 23, French soldiers from the Japanese prison camps, rearmed by the British, staged a coup in Saigon and took control of all main public buildings. This led to a wave of killings in the next days, including a massacre on French civilians at the Cité Héraud. On October 5, General Leclerc arrived in Saigon. French, British, and Japanese forces now jointly “pacified” the country, with Japanese troops used for the toughest operations. By February 1946, with British help, the French had gained control of all big towns and main communication lines and a majority of the villages south of the 16th parallel.¹⁷ If the United States had conceded to the British at Potsdam in July and placed the whole of Indochina under Mountbatten, the French would most likely have been able to oust Ho Chi Minh’s revolutionary government from Hanoi in the fall of 1945, thus immediately provoking general warfare.¹⁸ It was the presence of a large Chinese army that allowed the Viet Minh to establish itself as the leading force in the new republic, with a legitimate claim to representing the southern part of the nation as well.

What was the Viet Minh? It was a nationalist front organization with many non-communist members, but under communist domination, most clearly at the level of the top leadership. Before World War II, the Vietnamese communist movement had been ravaged by factional strife between internationalists who saw themselves

as part of a global class struggle and nationalists who were inspired by Lenin's thesis about the right of nations to self-determination and looked to the Soviet Union for guidance in the anti-imperialist struggle. Ho Chi Minh was one of the latter and benefited during World War II from the general swing of communist parties toward accommodating national symbols and promoting national resistance against fascism, militarism, and imperialism. In the first ten years after the ICP was founded in 1930, its main leaders were based partly in exile, partly in the Saigon area, but after the southern rebellion was crushed by the French in 1940, a new leadership established itself in the north around Truong Chinh, Hoang Van Thu, and Hoang Quoc Viet. They were infrequently in contact with Ho Chi Minh's movement in the Chinese border region, which from the beginning was dominated by leading members of the ICP. After the Japanese overthrew the French colonial regime on March 9, Viet Minh groups were quickly set up in provinces and districts throughout northern Vietnam, and among the ethnic Viet in Laos as well, but southern Vietnam followed a different path. The communists there had their own front organization, the Vanguard Youth, which was tolerated by the Japanese and had no contact with Ho Chi Minh. Its leader, a freemason and medical doctor named Pham Ngoc Thach, cooperated openly with Japanese authorities, while at the same time keeping in constant touch with clandestine communist leaders.¹⁹ The ICP as such also operated more openly in the south than in the north, and it was divided in two mutually hostile factions. In the "August Revolution," the northern Viet Minh won out. The Vanguard Youth dissolved, and the role of the ICP became more discreet in the south as well.

On November 11, 1945, at Ho Chi Minh's instigation, according to the party veteran Hoang Tung, the ICP made a move that would later expose it to serious criticism in the international communist movement: it publicly *dissolved* itself. Ho had had to plead strongly with Secretary-General Truong Chinh to get him to endorse such a heretical move, Hoang recalls.²⁰ Vietnamese communists would always later claim, just as the French did at the time, that the dissolution was a sham. The party had simply gone underground and continued to operate in the guise of "Marxist Study Groups," or, as Truong Chinh called it, the "Organization [*Doan the*]." He and some other party leaders, like Hoang Quoc Viet, Nguyen Luong Bang, and Hoang Van Hoan, worked from the shadows, while others in the party's inner circle, like Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, and Hoang Huu Nam, held positions exposed to the public eye. Nguyen Luong Bang for some time served as the nominal leader of the Viet Minh front. It seems possible, although this remains to be established, that the dissolution of the ICP was more real than is generally assumed. Party work was probably neglected in 1946–47, if not by Truong Chinh, then by many of those who dedicated their time to official state functions. The French intelligence archives from this period contain heaps of captured Viet Minh and DRV documents, but very few documents emanating from any "Com-

munist Party” or “Organization.” There was no party newspaper after Truong Chinh’s *Co Giai Phong* was closed down, just a theoretical monthly review, *Su That*, which was so theoretical that its real impact is likely to have been limited. If the ICP operated in disguise, the disguise must have seriously hampered the growth and functioning of the party as such, perhaps even prevented it from wielding much influence on many important decisions.²¹

The dissolution of the ICP was publicly explained in terms of an exceptional opportunity to gain national independence; the need for national unification without any class or party distinctions; the will to prove that the communists were able to make great sacrifices and to place the interests of the fatherland above those of class and party; and the desire to avoid misunderstandings both in Vietnam and abroad.²² In reality, however, the reason was the need to reassure the Chinese occupation authorities. This was difficult, but ultimately successful. While Chiang Kai-shek engaged in open warfare with the communists in China, his forces in northern Indochina tolerated the communist-dominated DRV and encouraged cooperation between it and the anticommunist parties VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi.

From 1941 to March 1946, the Viet Minh went through several phases. First came the clandestine phase from 1941 to March 1945; then there was a second phase from March to August, when the fall of the French colonial regime created great opportunities for spreading the word and setting up Viet Minh groups in many parts of northern Indochina. Third came the phase from August 1945 to March 1946, when the Viet Minh and the institutions of the new republic overlapped. The period under study in the present book, from March to December 1946, was a fourth phase, when elaborate attempts were made to draw a line between the DRV as a state and the Viet Minh as a political front organization.²³ One reason for making the distinction between party and front was that the VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi, whose leaders had been rivals of Ho Chi Minh’s in southern China during the whole of World War II, got their share of the political power, with control of certain ministries and also certain regions, which they occupied with their own separate armies. Most of them rejected invitations to join the Viet Minh front and were considered likely traitors by the communist leaders. A broader front, the Lien Viet, was founded in order to pull them into the fold, and create a wider national consensus, but this met with only limited success, and the communist-led national liberation movement continued both nationally and internationally to go by the name Viet Minh. It included a small Socialist Party and a more influential Democratic Party, which would both continue to exist as communist “fellow travelers” right up to 1990, when these two parties were dissolved.

In the first phase, Viet Minh was organized through two parallel hierarchies, one vertical, with elected leaders, and one horizontal, with leaders appointed from above. The vertical system consisted of different types of organizations: parties, youth organizations, women’s organizations, religious organizations, the army, and so on.

The horizontal system was based on a hierarchy of committees, each covering a geographic area. Politically, control from the top was rigid, but in practical matters, each committee enjoyed considerable freedom of action.

In each region, the vertical and horizontal systems were united at the top by a Viet Minh committee. Its chairman was appointed from above, but a certain number of members were elected as representatives of the vertical organizations. On the national level, the Central Committee included representatives of all the vertical organizations, representatives of each of the three Vietnamese regions, and the leaders of special organizations, such as the armed forces, the propaganda bureau, and the financial organization. Until the August Revolution, Ho Chi Minh chaired the Central Committee, but when he became president of the republic, Nguyen Luong Bang took over as chair. The Central Committee elected a Direction Committee (Tong Bo), or political bureau, which took care of the Viet Minh's day-to-day leadership. In his highly influential and generally reliable *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (1952), Philippe Devillers lists the following eight persons as the probable Tong Bo members in 1946: Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, Tran Huy Lieu, Hoang Quoc Viet, Ho Tung Mau, and Nguyen Luong Bang.²⁴

In the second phase, after the August Revolution, the horizontal system simply replaced the old indigenous administration in the French protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, which had already been thoroughly infiltrated by communists. They now took control of the state apparatus by appointing new personnel and setting up People's Committees. This is how the Viet Minh came to overlap with the state. On January 6, 1946, Vietnam held its first national elections, but in most areas only the Viet Minh fielded candidates. Voters could choose from a number of names on the ballots, and those receiving the greatest number of votes were elected. Before the elections, the Chinese generals brokered a deal between the Viet Minh and the two China-oriented nationalist parties VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi, allowing the latter to designate seventy unelected delegates to the National Assembly. This made the Viet Minh look more like one of three parties than an over-riding national consensus organization, yet the Viet Minh remained dominant, and although the VNQDD and DMH were awarded some nominally important positions in the government, they were never given real control.

It is of special interest to examine decision-making at the top level, and the division of roles between the ICP, or "Organization," the Tong Bo Viet Minh and the Government Council (cabinet).²⁵ This also interested the French intelligence services, who thought that the Tong Bo was meeting at least once a week. In addition, it had another weekly meeting with key officials in all important ministries. At this meeting, Tong Bo decisions were, according to French intelligence, "communicated for execution," although discussion of them was allowed. If this is correct, the Tong Bo must have held more power than the Government Council. It seems more likely, however, that the French confused the Tong Bo with the Standing Bureau of the

Communist Party. In French intelligence reports, there are few mentions of the ICP, and none of any Central Committee, whereas later Vietnamese historiography claims that all strategic decisions were taken by the party. This may indicate that a historical reinterpretation has taken place, where party meetings have been invented, but it seems more likely that the French were fooled. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the party was able to uphold its basic functions after its formal dissolution, but one particular document, to which we shall return in a later chapter, is of particular importance for what it reveals about the party. This is an organizational directive conceived by Truong Chinh and formally issued on December 22, 1946, three days after the outbreak of war in Hanoi. The front page of the directive carries only the title of the document and no name of any organization. But the second page starts with the greeting “Comrades C.S.,” with “C.S.” meaning “Cong San” (communists), and has a foreword signed “T.V.T.U.D.C.S.D.D.,” which any Vietnamese communist would recognize as “Standing Bureau of the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party.”²⁶ This proves that Truong Chinh’s Standing Bureau did exist.

The relationship between the “moderate” and “extremist” tendencies within the Vietnamese leadership fascinated the French intelligence services. Their informers claimed there were two factions vying for power, and this prompted the French to try to provoke a split. Ho Chi Minh was seen as moderate. The special services knew that he worked closely with two other moderates, his party comrade Hoang Huu Nam and the socialist Hoang Minh Giam. The intelligence services disagreed among themselves on the role of Vo Nguyen Giap, but most saw him as a leading extremist. If the French were right to point to internal differences among the Viet Minh leaders, their attempts to sow dissension were always futile. The cohesion and discipline of the Vietnamese communists, enhanced by loyalty to Ho Chi Minh, proved to be extremely solid.

As of February 1946, Ho had been president of the DRV for five months. It had required great personal skill to remain in power. He continually had to negotiate with opposing nationalist parties, Chinese generals and advisors, the remaining Japanese officers, and French representatives arriving by plane or by parachute. Ho’s charm and talent for gaining the friendship of his adversaries played an essential part in the Vietnamese effort to deal with China and France. General Leclerc, Commissioner Jean Sainteny, Minister Marius Moutet, and Prime Minister Georges Bidault, if not Admiral d’Argenlieu, were all addressed as “Dear friend” in Ho’s letters, and he surely must have found the proper terms to ingratiate himself with the Chinese generals as well. Those who met the communist veteran with the long, white beard often testified to the profound impression he left on them. “An autodidact of great intelligence, having acquired through dedicated work a vast culture, certainly sincere in his convictions, absolutely incorruptible, [and an] ardent patriot, Ho Chi Minh is undisputedly a powerful character,” a French officer wrote in 1947. “His

tenacity, his energy, his devious abilities, [and] his long experience with Bolshevik methods make him a dangerous revolutionary chief, who, in order to attain his aim, the unlimited independence of Vietnam, will not retreat before any of the means employed to stop him.”²⁷

In his memoirs, Jean Sainteny likewise evokes Ho’s “vast culture, his intelligence, his incredible level of activity, his asceticism and his absolute incorruptibility.” Professor Paul Mus, one of the best-informed French specialists on Vietnam, who had played a role in French “psychological warfare” during World War II,²⁸ told a contact in 1947 that Ho was an “actor of genius,” and, like any such genius, could act only on the basis of his sincerity. In his memoirs, Vo Nguyen Giap, himself more cold and calculating, notes the fabulously persuasive force of his master. But Giap does not see the importance of Ho’s sincerity. In Giap’s rational brain, Ho’s charm is reduced to a tool: “Uncle Ho had an extraordinary flair for detecting the thoughts and feelings of the enemy. With great shrewdness, he worked out a concrete treatment for each type and each individual. . . . Even his enemies, men who were notoriously anti-communist, showed respect for him. They seemed to lose some of their aggressiveness when they were in his presence.”²⁹ Giap stirred awe and admiration, but Ho inspired devotion.

During the high tide of world communism in the mid twentieth century, Ho Chi Minh was ranked among the world’s outstanding communist leaders: Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, and Castro. From the vantage point of 2009, he seems the only one to stand a chance of surviving the test of history without being morally discredited. Even the dull historian whose favorite pastime is to page through dusty documents cannot escape Ho’s magnetism. His letters and telegrams are always out of the ordinary. So among those who have been struck by Ho Chi Minh’s shrewd charm, one must also count the historian.

THE NEW FRANCE

La France nouvelle did not have any similarly cohesive leadership. Until January 20, 1946, it was led by the towering figure of General Charles de Gaulle, whose lifespan (1890–1970), overlaps almost exactly with that of Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969). De Gaulle played an essential role in designing the decision-making system for Indochina that remained in place through the whole of 1946. When he resigned as prime minister (*président du Conseil*) on January 20 and withdrew to his native Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, the Fourth Republic went through a difficult period of constitution-making, with four successive coalition governments in less than one year. Two persons stand out, however, as particularly important in seeking to lay the foundation for a viable French Union and a reformed French Indochina: the socialist Marius Moutet (1876–1968) and the Christian Democrat Georges Bidault (1899–1983).

In a speech to the French National Assembly on March 18, 1947, Minister for

Overseas France Marius Moutet looked back on the previous year, and admitted that he had been convinced that Ho Chi Minh was sincere in his wish to cooperate with France: "I am a man who is accustomed to his kind. I am old enough to know them," he claimed. He was sufficiently experienced to know that what a "Far Easterner" says should never be accepted as if it were "words from the Gospel." Still, he was sure that Ho had been impressed by France, which had treated him as a "real head of state."³⁰

Marius Moutet was fourteen years older than Ho. He was elected for the first time to the French National Assembly in 1914, with strong support from the socialist pioneer Jean Jaurès. After the war, he specialized in the colonial question and called for a generous policy of assimilation, denouncing the practice of brutal repression in the colonies and advocating respect for democratic liberties. When the socialist Léon Blum formed his Popular Front government on June 4, 1936, he chose Moutet as minister of colonies, a portfolio he kept until April 10, 1938. At his instigation, France banned the use of forced labor in all the colonies and carried out a number of legal reforms protecting social and democratic rights. Moutet was the first French colonial minister to appoint a black person, Félix Eboué, to an important post in the colonial administration, as governor first of Guadeloupe, later of French Equatorial Africa. In 1940, after the French defeat by Hitler's army, Moutet was one of ninety members of the French National Assembly who voted against the motion to yield full powers to Marshal Pétain. Then he went underground. After the Liberation, Moutet was elected to the Constitutive Assembly and took charge of the Ministry of Overseas France on January 22, 1946, after de Gaulle had resigned. Moutet had actively opposed de Gaulle's wish for a "presidential republic" with a strong executive. Like most other veterans of the French Third Republic, Moutet wanted a constitution with a powerful National Assembly that could effectively control the executive.

During World War II, de Gaulle's and Vichy's colonial policies were actually quite similar. While Vichy sought to strengthen its overseas empire to compensate for its limited power in Europe, de Gaulle wanted to use the colonies as a base for making a contribution to the Allied cause. They thus had a common interest in maintaining the firmest possible foothold in the colonies, yet Pétainists and Gaullists fought each other bitterly in the colonies during the war, and Governor-General Jean Decoux eagerly purged the Indochinese administration of Gaullists. While Pétain and Decoux openly expressed an authoritarian ideology, de Gaulle worked closely with representatives of the political Left and Center, communists, socialists, radicals, and Christian Democrats. After the war, when Admiral Decoux was received by de Gaulle in Paris for a brief encounter, the general was in Decoux's words "more than cold; he was glacial, as it suits the 'First Resistant of France' when receiving a common governor-general from the abhorred Vichy regime."³¹ At that time, Moutet did not yet wield much influence on French colonial policy, but pro-

gressive thinkers in the Ministry of Colonies, led by the liberal Gaullist Henri Laurentie, were working out recipes for major colonial reforms, replacing the “Empire” with a “Union,” the “protectorates” with “federated” or “associated states,” and “colonies” with “autonomous” or “self-governing” countries.³²

Decoux’s collaboration with the Japanese had made it difficult for de Gaulle to seek American recognition of French sovereignty in Indochina, and de Gaulle had no means of sending troops to the Far East without access to Allied shipping. He sought to build a resistance movement among French civilians and military personnel in Indochina, without Decoux’s knowledge, and intended, just like Ho Chi Minh, to lend effective assistance to the Allied war effort once American or British forces were ready to take Indochina from Japan. At the news of the Japanese coup on March 9, 1945, de Gaulle took immediate diplomatic action. He demanded Allied help for French “resistance groups” in Indochina, transportation of a French expeditionary force to participate in the war against Japan, and Allied recognition of French sovereignty. When the United States bickered, based on Roosevelt’s well-known prohibition against doing anything in support of the French cause in Indochina, de Gaulle asked U.S. Ambassador Jefferson Caffery what the United States was “driving at.” Did it want to push France into becoming “one of the federated states under the Russian aegis”?³³ Subsequently, those French troops who had been able to avoid Japanese capture and escape to China did receive some belated air drops from U.S. General Claire Chennault’s 14th Air Command in China.

On March 24, 1945, de Gaulle issued a governmental declaration, which had been prepared for more than a year in the Ministry of Colonies, in particular by the brilliant colonial administrator Léon Pignon, who had served his first stint in Indochina during 1933–36. This declaration laid the foundation for French postwar Indochina policy. It aimed at the creation of an Indochinese Federation with a significant degree of autonomy for each of its five parts.³⁴ The declaration stated that Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos were separated by “civilization, race and tradition.” A French governor-general (the title soon changed to high commissioner) would head the Federation and serve as the “arbiter of all.”³⁵ The March 24 declaration was at first considered to be liberal, and the first comment on it in the Viet Minh’s main clandestine newspaper was actually positive.³⁶ However, most Vietnamese commentators, both in Indochina and France, reacted against the declaration for refusing to recognize Vietnam’s national unity.

Once learning of the Japanese capitulation on August 15, de Gaulle appointed his trusted officers General Leclerc as commander in chief of the Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient and Admiral d’Argenlieu as high commissioner for Indochina. Leclerc left first, to secure the British occupation forces’ respect for French sovereignty and a quick transfer of responsibility from the British commander in Saigon, General Douglas Gracey. D’Argenlieu took more time to prepare, and set out systematically to implement the March 24 declaration. Thus, when

de Gaulle resigned on January 20, leaving state affairs in the hands of the party politicians, a military and Gaullist-oriented hierarchy had been firmly established in Indochina. The new French government under the socialist Félix Gouin (January 23–June 12, 1946) had other things to do than change the system and replace the personnel that de Gaulle had put in place in the colonies. This meant that the New France was represented in Indochina by two general officers whose views were significantly less progressive than those of mainstream French politicians. Leclerc and d'Argenlieu were torn from the outset between their loyalty to de Gaulle, their concern about the racist attitudes of French settlers who had suffered from Japanese and Annamite mistreatment, and their uneasy relationship to modernizing, progressive impulses emanating from the metropole. The modernizers were supported by many of the young officers and civil servants who went out after the German capitulation to serve in Indochina.

De Gaulle had dominated French foreign policy at the expense of the former leader of the French internal resistance movement, Foreign Minister Georges Bidault. Bidault always felt that he lived in the shadow of the tall general, and he would later confide that the day de Gaulle left office had been “the most beautiful day” in his life.³⁷ For later generations, the rivalry between Bidault and de Gaulle looks like one between a dwarf and a giant, and this was certainly de Gaulle’s own view, but not all French were Gaullists, and many sympathized with Bidault. Just like de Gaulle, he saw himself as more than an ordinary politician. He had a national mission. Bidault hated de Gaulle’s guts, and the general responded in kind. A famous photograph from the victory parade after the reoccupation of Paris in August 1944 shows the tall, imposing general overshadowing the featureless Bidault, who was gently told to march one step behind.

While de Gaulle had to wait twelve years from January 1946 before the nation called on him again, Bidault enjoyed some of the most influential positions in the French Fourth Republic. He was foreign minister from September 1944 to July 1948, with the exception of a brief—but in our context essential—interlude from December 18, 1946, to January 22, 1947. While Bidault enjoyed little freedom of action as long as de Gaulle held the premiership, he exerted considerable authority once Félix Gouin took over. Then, in June 1946, when Gouin resigned, amid heated constitutional debates, Bidault assumed the premiership himself, in addition to continuing to serve as foreign minister. Hence he became France’s most powerful political leader. Bidault exemplifies an important aspect of French foreign policy decision-making in the Fourth Republic: consistency. This may surprise those who know that the country had no fewer than twenty-five governments between the formation of de Gaulle’s first in 1944 and his return to power in 1958, but a few key politicians, notably Georges Bidault and Robert Schuman of the Christian Democratic party (MRP), occupied either the Quai d’Orsay (Foreign Ministry) or the Hôtel Matignon (the prime minister’s office) almost continuously. The governments

they took part in developed consistent strategies of economic reconstruction and European integration, and showed consistency also in their doomed attempt to reform and hold on to the French empire.³⁸

The “most beautiful day” in Bidault’s life, January 20, 1946, also heralded the return of Marius Moutet to the Ministry of Colonies at 27 rue Oudinot. He now got a new title, minister for Overseas France. One month earlier, he had written several programmatic articles on Indochina for the socialist daily *Le Populaire*, stating that France must retain its presence in both Asia and Africa, but not against the will of the local populations. France had made a considerable effort on behalf of the Indochinese people, but had not done enough. More was needed to invest the word “colonialism” with positive new connotations.³⁹ According to Moutet, American or Russian domination would not be any better than French colonialism, and he took a clear stand on two core issues in the emerging clash with the DRV, unity and independence. He stated, in consonance with de Gaulle’s declaration of March 24, that “geographically, ethnically, politically, the main characteristic of Indochina is diversity. It consists of five countries: Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, Laos, and Cochinchina.”⁴⁰ He did not attribute any legal status to Ho Chi Minh’s revolutionary government, even if he believed it might be possible to come to terms with some of the Viet Minh leaders. He denounced the Viet Minh for its opposition to French authority and for “believing [itself] to have constituted” a government: “One does not improvise a government, a legislation, an administration in a heterogeneous country where the public is not yet capable of knowingly [*consciemment*] expressing its preferences.”⁴¹

This statement provides a key to his thinking: Moutet conceived of colonialism as emancipation of uneducated peoples. He expanded on it in August before a socialist gathering in the city of La Rochelle, on France’s Atlantic coast: “As a young socialist militant, I called for the liberation of the working class. Today, the French working class has the means to liberate itself: it has conquered political and social rights. It is now our task to widen this liberation by fighting for the peoples that we are to educate and to support. It was to this need for liberation and emancipation that I devoted myself already in 1936 as minister in the Popular Front government.”⁴²

This idea of educating other peoples was written into the foreword of the French constitution that was adopted in a referendum on October 13, 1946: “Faithful to her traditional mission, France intends to lead the peoples whom she has taken care of to the freedom to administer themselves and democratically manage their own affairs.”⁴³ In this constitution, which had been long in the making and entered into force only on December 24, 1946, the idea of emancipating other peoples so that they could become autonomous and eventually perhaps independent was juxtaposed with rival ideas of assimilating elites from the colonies into French culture to the point where they could be accepted as full French citizens. French debates over colonial issues had often been battles between those who saw the colonial re-

lationship as a nexus between one developed and a number of undeveloped peoples and territories, and those who regarded it as a bond linking the metropole to its citizens around the world. Yet this conflict had little impact in the process of colonial reform following World War II. It was generally agreed that some colonies would develop into independent nations, while others would be integrated in France through assimilation. When the colonized peoples demanded total and immediate independence, the assimilationists and the emancipators rejected it in unison. The Catholic nationalist Bidault and the socialist emancipator Moutet agreed on the crucial aspects of French colonial policy in 1946.

Marius Moutet has been considered a weak leader betraying his own and his party's peaceful socialist ends by giving in to the influence of Bidault and the admiral de Gaulle had sent to Indochina.⁴⁴ This is only partially true. Moutet was easily influenced by others, and loath to take political risks. There are, however, two factors that tend to modify the image of the "weak leader." First, Moutet never expressed the anticolonial attitudes that were held by many other French socialists in 1946–47, notably by the party's young secretary-general, Guy Mollet. Moutet never wished to give in to Vietnamese demands for independence and unity, and in fact supported the main aspects of High Commissioner d'Argenlieu's Gaullist policy. Moutet's actions were thus more consistent with his views than has sometimes been assumed. Second, it was not just his personal leadership that was weak. His position in the decision-making system that de Gaulle had created for Indochinese affairs was weak as well. It benefited Bidault, not Moutet.

The Ministry of Overseas France was directly responsible for most French overseas territories, but not for Indochina. Moutet wanted to direct French Indochina policy himself—any minister wants real control—but by decree of February 21, 1945, de Gaulle had set up an independent body to coordinate the reoccupation of Indochina called the Comité interministériel de l'Indochine (Interministerial Committee for Indochina; hereafter, Cominindo). Gouin and Bidault preserved the Cominindo, and chaired it themselves, just as de Gaulle had done. Gouin, however, let Moutet take the real decisions, while Bidault wanted to steer French Indochina policy in the same way that de Gaulle had done.⁴⁵ The Cominindo members were the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs (Georges Bidault); minister for Overseas France (Marius Moutet); minister of the army (Edmond Michelet); minister of aviation (Charles Tillon); minister of finance (Robert Schuman); the chief of staff (General Alphonse Juin), and the chief of intelligence (Henri Ribière). Moutet was the only socialist and Tillon the only communist among them. The other three political appointees belonged to the MRP, whose views tended to dominate the committee. The Cominindo had the right to summon other key persons for its sessions, and this gave a minister without portfolio, Alexandre Varenne, a Radical politician who had been governor-general of Indochina in 1925–27 and served as chairman of the Union pour la défense de l'oeuvre française en Indochine (Union for the De-

fense of French Achievements in Indochina; UDOFI), an almost permanent presence in the meetings. The Cominindo had its office in the Ministry of War at 16 rue St. Dominique. As many as twenty-six persons were employed there at the most, and the office was headed by a secretary-general, who was better informed about Indochinese developments on a daily basis than anyone in the Ministry of Overseas France. The only other branches of government that were in direct communication with Saigon were General Juin's Chiefs of Staff (EMGDN) and Ribière's intelligence service (SDECE).

All nonmilitary dispatches and cables to and from Indochina went through the office of the Cominindo. Its secretary-general decided on the distribution of information to the ministries, organized the weekly advisory meetings of representatives from the same ministries, and summoned the ministers themselves when important decisions needed to be made. Under de Gaulle, this position was held by François de Langlade, a businessman with experience in Indochina and as plantation owner in British Malaya. In 1946, after an interim period with a secretary-general who did not leave any mark on French policy, the young Pierre Messmer took over.⁴⁶ Although a Gaullist more than a leftist, he was a typical representative of the New France, eager to adjust to changing times. (Messmer would serve as French prime minister in the years 1972–74.) After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, de Gaulle had designated Messmer as commissioner of the Republic for Tonkin, where he would seek to defend French interests in the face of Chinese occupation, but when Messmer parachuted into Tonkin, he was captured by the Viet Minh and held prisoner until he was able to escape. By that time, the young businessman Jean Roger, son-in-law of the second most important of all French governors-general in Indochina, Albert Sarraut (1911–14, 1917–19), and whose code name in the French Resistance was Jean Sainteny, had on his own initiative assumed the role de Gaulle had assigned Messmer. Sainteny had led a French intelligence mission in south China and got himself to Hanoi on board an American airplane. In September 1945, he was received by Ho Chi Minh, and the two men established a lifelong relationship, which Ho shrewdly and charmingly turned into a friendship. Sainteny was assisted by a local French socialist, Louis Caput; a dubious character, Jacques Bousquet; and also by the highly experienced colonial administrator Léon Pignon, who had come to Hanoi after drafting the declaration of March 24, 1945, to serve as assistant to General Marcel Alessandri, commander of the French troops who stayed in China after their escape from Tonkin in March–April 1945. When assisting Sainteny, Pignon seems to have preferred a rather discreet backstage role. Perhaps his task was to make sure that Sainteny kept in line with French policy. After some hesitation in Paris, Sainteny was formally appointed commissioner of the French Republic for Tonkin and North Annam, the function that had been intended for Messmer before he was captured by the Viet Minh. In spite of this unpleasant experience, Messmer did not become a hard-liner. In March 1946,

before taking over as secretary-general of the Cominindo, he published an article advocating a liberal policy in Indochina, going as far as to “understand” the Vietnamese arguments for unification of north and south, and urging France to adopt a neutral position so that the local population could decide.⁴⁷ In April, he would annoy French authorities in Indochina by using the familiar *tu* and allowing General Vo Nguyen Giap to do the same when they were chatting with each other at a Franco-Vietnamese conference in the central highland town of Dalat.⁴⁸

The secretary-general of the Cominindo occupied a central, but not a powerful position. It was the politicians who decided, and when they did not, the decisions were made in Saigon instead of Paris. The young Messmer could not impose any policy on Saigon without basis in a formal Cominindo decision, and while Gouin and Bidault chaired the committee, it tended to avoid making decisions. When it did, it mostly approved what the high commissioner in Saigon had done. Gouin and Bidault were so preoccupied with other matters that they were unable to closely follow events in Indochina. Bidault also seems to have preferred to leave the initiative to the high commissioner rather than to permit the minister for Overseas France to direct French policy.

In 1945, the official rationale for setting up the Cominindo had been that the military aspects of Indochina’s reoccupation could not be handled under the authority of the minister of colonies.⁴⁹ When the southern half of Indochina had been reoccupied, and France entered into an agreement with Ho Chi Minh on March 6, 1946, the Cominindo lost much of its *raison d’être*, and Moutet’s ministry took over some of its functions. In September 1946, its staff was reduced to seventeen. The Cominindo was, however, preserved, and its secretariat in the War Ministry continued to centralize official communications with Saigon. Moutet would state later that the interministerial system had led to a “dispersion of responsibilities that has been harmful to sound administrative management.” He had found himself deprived of his normal functions and the “means of action that he should have at his disposal.”⁵⁰ Since the prime minister did not actively use his authority, the main effect of the Cominindo system was to strengthen the autonomous power of the high commissioner in Saigon.

THE PENTAGONAL FEDERATION

Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu, high commissioner in Indochina from August 1945 to February 1947, was not born or brought up to assume political functions in the twentieth century. His aristocratic manners, pompous speeches, love of ritual, rigid principles, and badly hidden disdain for the politicians who succeeded his hero General de Gaulle made him the prime mover of French intransigence vis-à-vis Vietnam, in the eyes of both contemporary observers and later historians. D’Argenlieu belonged to the New France only to the extent that its principles had been

laid down by de Gaulle, and he certainly bears much of the responsibility for the policies that led to the French Indochina War, but he also served as a scapegoat for the actions and inaction of Bidault.

D'Argenlieu had served in the French Navy during World War I, then been a monk in a Carmelite monastery in the interwar period. He was mobilized as a Navy reserve officer in 1939 and subsequently rose to high rank in de Gaulle's Free French Naval Forces. His admiration for de Gaulle was so great that the general could trust in his loyalty unreservedly. This became a problem when de Gaulle resigned. As will be evident to any reader of d'Argenlieu's posthumously published *Chronique d'Indochine* (1985), he continued to regard de Gaulle—and not the party politicians temporarily occupying government offices in Paris—as the genuine embodiment of France. D'Argenlieu would return to his monastery in 1947.

The Vietnamese saw d'Argenlieu as the archetypal reactionary colonialist. Giap has described him as a “defrocked priest” with “small, wily eyes under a wrinkled forehead and [with] thin lips.” After having spent some time with him, Giap retained the memory of an “experienced, cunning, arrogant and mean man.”⁵¹ It was said of d'Argenlieu in France that he possessed one of the most brilliant minds of the twelfth century. General Jean-Etienne Valluy, who succeeded General Leclerc as commander of the CEFEO in July 1946, was more indulgent in describing the admiral as “not at all haughty, although a little formal and distant.” D'Argenlieu was among the few on whom Ho Chi Minh's charms did not work. In one of their meetings, Ho said to him: “*Mon amiral*, I appeal to your Christian sentiments . . .” The monk cut the communist short: “*Monsieur le Président*, please excuse me, but we are here to discuss serious matters.” The most serious matter that d'Argenlieu could imagine was the Indochinese Federation. D'Argenlieu, Valluy later declared, was passionately attached to his “pentagonal [five-country] federation,” as prescribed in de Gaulle's governmental declaration of March 24, 1945.⁵²

In d'Argenlieu's conception, the Federation would be controlled by a council consisting of ten representatives from France and ten from each of the five member states.⁵³ The main attributions of the federal council would be to vote the federal budget, decide on taxes, and pass laws proposed by the Federal government. This government would be headed by the high commissioner himself, assisted by commissioners with the same attributions as ministers in an independent state. There would be commissioners of political affairs, finance, foreign affairs, justice, education, health, information, and so on. The commissioners would hold weekly cabinet meetings, chaired by the high commissioner, with the commander in chief (Leclerc, later Valluy) as his deputy.⁵⁴ The commissioners would have all important governmental services under their authority: army, police, customs service, post, radio, and so on. This did not leave much room for the autonomy of each constituent state, but d'Argenlieu wanted to sign written conventions with each of the five in order to define their places within the Federation. He was particularly eager to de-

velop an autonomous Cochinchina, since it had the biggest economy and also the greatest number of French residents (*colons*). In Cochinchina, a certain number of rich and educated locals had already acquired French citizenship through assimilation. As soon as the local revolutionaries had been driven out of Saigon's public buildings on September 23, 1945, the question of institutionalized cooperation between the French residents and members of the indigenous establishment came up. The declaration of March 24 said the local governments in each of the five Indochinese countries should be developed or reformed, and that appointments should be open to all citizens. On the French side, the closest collaborators of former Governor General Decoux in the Vichy period had to go back to France, but those who could claim some kind of "Resistance" background were welcome to serve as civil servants along with new young administrators from France.

In 1946, the number of French civil servants in Indochina rose to 14,000. In 1939, there had been some 3,500.⁵⁵ One reason for the rise was that the revolution had removed the old mandarinat; another was that many among the local educated classes supported the Viet Minh. D'Argenlieu frequently complained of lack of personnel.⁵⁶ The French *colons* and some members of the local indigenous elite jointly established a Consultative Council. The leading figure on the local side was Dr. Nguyen Van Thinh, president of the Democratic Party (not the same Democratic Party as the one that was part of the Viet Minh), a passionate antirevolutionary and influential with the local elite of landowners. He found it difficult, however, to induce other upper-class Cochinchinese to join his council. They feared being stigmatized as collaborators. Yet on February 12, 1946, the Consultative Council formally constituted itself, with four French members and eight "notables." The French members wanted to integrate Cochinchina into France as a *département*. The Cochinchinese members disagreed, however, preferring autonomy.⁵⁷ Both the old and the new French civil servants, and also some indigenous French citizens, felt threatened by the prospect of Cochinchina being merged with Vietnam. They also feared the social changes that the communists might bring about.

Ho Chi Minh was once asked for his view on the planned Indochinese Federation. He replied that Vietnam would willingly accept a federation of an essentially economic nature, but was determined to prevent the prewar French *Gouvernement général* from resurfacing in the guise of a federation.⁵⁸ This was a rather precise description of d'Argenlieu's aim, although there was one important difference between the prewar governor-general and the postwar high commissioner: The fact that the Cominindo was chaired by the premier and not by the minister for Overseas France made the high commissioner more independent of Paris than the governors-general had been.

De Gaulle's resignation in January 1946 came as a shock to most Frenchmen in Indochina.⁵⁹ They felt the general was leaving his troops before they had fulfilled their mission to liberate all French territories. D'Argenlieu and Leclerc had come a

good part of the way. A revolutionary government in Cambodia had been taken into custody, so the young King Norodom Sihanouk could once more receive sound French advice. Cochinchina and southern Annam had been reoccupied, and the local rebels there been almost crushed. Only the southernmost part of Laos had been reoccupied; most of the country was under Chinese occupation, but the French had good reason to believe that their traditional relationship with the king of Luang Phrabang would enable them to reestablish their presence in the central and northern parts of Laos as well. The situation in Chinese-occupied Tonkin and northern Annam caused more worry. The DRV government had even organized so-called national elections on January 6, and Frenchmen in Saigon worried that a government without de Gaulle might not have the fortitude to reoccupy northern Indochina and get rid of the Chinese occupation forces. Would a government led by the socialist Félix Gouin be strong and decisive enough for the delicate task of reestablishing a French presence in a country engulfed in revolution, under Chinese occupation, and controlled by communist nationalists? A three-pronged approach would be needed: negotiations with the DRV; preparation of a military operation, and negotiations with China.