

# Introduction

Nineteen forty-five is the most important year in the modern history of Vietnam. A thousand years of dynastic politics and monarchist ideology came to an end, never to be revived. Eight decades of French rule lay shattered, although its restoration remained an ominous possibility. Five years of Japanese military occupation ceased. Allied leaders in faraway Potsdam determined that Chinese troops would take the Japanese surrender in Indochina north of the 16th parallel, while British forces did likewise south of that line. Even though the United States remained aloof from these occupation tasks, its indirect influence on the course of events was substantial.

On 9 March 1945, Japanese forces had suddenly dumped the French colonial administration in Indochina, after allowing it to function for thirty-nine months following Japan's December 1941 assaults on British, Dutch, and American possessions in Asia. This Japanese *coup de force*, together with a terrible famine then sweeping north and north-central Vietnam, triggered a whole series of changes in the territory. Five months later, again a surprise, Allied radio stations reported Japan's imminent capitulation. During the last two weeks of August 1945, members of the Indochinese Communist Party (Dong Duong Cong San Dang), the Viet Minh, and associated groups seized power from what remained of the Japanese-sponsored royal government. On 2 September, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Viet Nam Dan Chu Cong Hoa) with himself as president of a provisional government headquartered in Hanoi. The Japanese offered no opposition, and in some places they gave unobtrusive assistance.

Most histories of Vietnam in 1945 stress events in Hanoi, claim a predominant role throughout the country for the Indochinese Communist

Party (ICP), and emphasize revolutionary consciousness over revolutionary spontaneity. This study demonstrates that the reality was much more complicated, and more interesting. The political transformations of 1945 took place in all provincial towns and most rural districts of Vietnam. Particularly in the early stages, from March to June, the ICP was only one force among many provoking change. While most of the upheavals in August were sparked by Viet Minh slogans (created or cleared by experienced ICP members), and while almost everyone came to identify with the Viet Minh flag, soon to become the national standard, many local groups calling themselves Viet Minh had almost no idea of what the organization stood for, much less possessed any connections with the Tong Bo (General Headquarters). The hundreds of "people's committees" and "revolutionary committees" that replaced the assorted royal mandarins and appointed councils soon affirmed their loyalty to the provisional government, yet they were far from being mere appendages of the central authority or fronts for ICP cadres. Many of these committees sought revenge for past injustices or projected radical social revolutionary aspirations, both of which the provisional government tried with only partial success to defer in the interests of mounting an effective defense of national independence.

From another angle this study shows how the political symbols of the various groups active in Vietnam interacted and conflicted, often with surprising results. At this moment of profound uncertainty for everyone, flags, anthems, salutes, slogans, street names, statues, postage stamps, even rubber stamps, possessed inordinate significance. Although at one level these symbols simply represented organizations, at another they took on lives of their own, causing people to act in ways that no leader could predict, much less direct.

Soon after the Japanese coup in March, the provisional government of General Charles de Gaulle in Paris again told the world it would regain Indochina for France. Yet in the following five months, Paris lost touch, failing entirely to appreciate the dramatic changes taking place in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. With the appointment in mid August of a French high commissioner for Indochina, and the radio announcement that French troops were embarking for the colony, armed confrontation with the Vietnamese became almost inevitable. Nine years later, having suffered military humiliation at Dien Bien Phu, France would abandon its quest in Indochina, even as another foreign power, the United States, was preparing to pick up the gauntlet.

Not enough historiographical attention has been paid to the manner in which war and revolution feed upon each other. While it is impossible to

argue that World War II intruded upon Vietnamese society to the degree that World War I undermined czarist Russia, for example, or Japanese aggression disrupted China in the late 1930s, its effects were nonetheless substantial. Wartime economic dislocations ruined the colonial import-export system, upset local class relationships, and raised the specter of famine over half the population. The war was responsible too for the mood of fear, anticipation, and excitement that gripped many Vietnamese from early 1945 on. Violence was becoming commonplace. It seemed a time for quick action rather than patient reflection, for youthful militancy instead of elderly caution. Because the ICP had survived fifteen years of French repression partly by means of quasi-military discipline and secrecy, it was better placed than most political groups to take advantage of these shifts in attitude.

In both war and revolution, opponents are constantly piecing together scraps of information to form pictures, then testing them against preconceived theories or the demands of a particular strategy. What different leaders make of the available evidence depends largely on what they want to believe or fear to believe. Given the high stakes, some underlying optimism is essential. Nonetheless, the group that prepares for the harder alternative, and is willing to act along those lines before the picture is complete, often has the tactical edge. Deferring a decision until one's conceptual or procedural impulses are satisfied can be disastrous in war or revolution. This is unlike "normal" times of peace and social order, when leaders often prefer to delay, to commission another study, in hopes that events will resolve dilemmas for them. As we shall see, the Vietnamese royal government and various noncommunist political groups understood none of these strategic dynamics in 1945, while local ICP activists grasped the essentials, at least intuitively.

The fate of all major revolutions has ultimately been decided on the battlefield, a historical lesson well known to Vietnamese communist leaders, some of whom devoted considerable attention in 1941-44 to building up armed guerrilla units adjacent to the Chinese frontier, only to have them destroyed or dispersed by the French. Following Japanese internment of the French colonial forces in March 1945, however, "Liberation Army" squads and platoons proliferated, and by July the royal government's Civil Guard (Bao An Binh), formerly the colonial Garde indochinoise, refused to patrol the hills and countryside north of Hanoi without Japanese accompaniment. In mid August, when it became obvious that Japanese troops were no longer going to participate, Civil Guard units in this region disbanded or went over to the Viet Minh. From Hanoi southward, most Viet Minh groups pos-

essed few firearms, but because the royal government was too divided to mount a last-minute defense, and most Civil Guard units were unwilling to shoot down demonstrators, the existing system collapsed with very little bloodshed. Power went to those who planted a Viet Minh flag on a government office, held the keys to the Civil Guard armory, or controlled the telegraph key. Thousands of people were imprisoned, leaving the issue of what to do with them for subsequent resolution.

At this point Vietnam had experienced an insurrection of national proportions, but not yet a revolution (although people would soon speak proudly of the "August Revolution"). In most places former colonial employees continued to function, landlords still collected rents, owners of enterprises still told workers what to do, wives deferred to husbands, teenagers obeyed parents. But all such relationships had been thrown into question, and acute awareness that the country was under threat of French reconquest helped to stimulate further alterations. Every citizen's behavior, no matter how innocuous, began to be subjected to the ultimate political litmus test by neighbors: was it patriotic or treasonous? As in all wartime situations, freedom was surrendered to necessity.

The Viet Minh demonstrated its ability prior to the August national insurrection to mobilize resources in one region, north of Hanoi. Now it needed to multiply that capacity tenfold, channeling popular energies away from petty recriminations and toward defense of the Fatherland (To Quoc). Battle would be joined in the south in late September, with the center and north coming in later. Already in the period covered by this book, however, the harsh symbiosis between war and revolution was becoming apparent: 1945 was the first act of an epic, tortuous drama extending over the next thirty years, with influences felt even today throughout Vietnamese society.

Although charting the internal fate of the Vietnamese Revolution was undoubtedly the main reason I embarked on this study, it soon became apparent that other things were happening in and around Vietnam during 1940–45 that deserved scrutiny as well. Vietnam had to be seen in regional and global context, not in isolation. Five foreign powers—France, Japan, China, the United States, and Great Britain—took a direct interest in this territory during World War II. Each government approached the land and its people from a different point of view, with different operational objectives. Moreover, none of these states had a constant, single policy toward Vietnam: always there were several different interests at work, sometimes contradicting each other, sometimes achieving temporary consensus. This was most obvious in the case of Vichy France versus Free France, with

important consequences for colonial administration in Indochina. Even among the Free French, there were significant differences. Among the Japanese, Imperial Army officers and civilians dispatched to Indochina from various ministries often disagreed with each other, even worked at cross-purposes. In China, the regional leaders of Kwangsi and Yunnan pursued separate policies vis-à-vis Indochina, and neither agreed with the central government in Chungking, to the point where events in Indochina became an extension of the turbulent politics of southern China. Americans disagreed over whether or not France should retain Indochina as a colonial possession after the war. Great Britain was the most consistent foreign actor regarding Indochina, despite occasional divergencies between Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the Colonial Office, and South East Asia Command (SEAC), located in Ceylon.

During World War II, Indochina became one focus of sustained arguments among the Allies over the future of colonies in general, over China's role as a major power, even over the character of postwar Europe—notably, France's relative strength or weakness. These issues then influenced events in Vietnam, at first only slightly, given Japanese military preponderance, but later with considerable strength, as it became apparent that Allied victory was certain.

A number of historiographical questions have continued to be argued in the years since all these events took place. Perhaps the earliest polemic was between French defenders and denigrators of Admiral Jean Decoux, governor-general of Indochina until March 1945, which eventually broadened into a more fruitful debate over the wisdom of sending British and Free French teams to Indochina to prepare for an Allied invasion. Almost as early, French writers began to accuse the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) of having had power thrust into its hands by the Japanese, who were said to have delighted in embarrassing the white man even as they grudgingly surrendered to the Allies. DRV writers not only rejected these charges vehemently, but claimed that Viet Minh units had often fought the Japanese heroically, even that Vietnam had conducted a war against Japan. Later, French authors criticized the United States for undermining French sovereignty in Indochina and for providing timely support for Ho Chi Minh. Some Americans accepted these accusations proudly, adding that the United States should have done more to back the Vietnamese; others emphasized the effective collapse of America's anticolonialist pretensions since the first months of 1945. From about 1960 on, historians in Hanoi debated whether the "August Revolution" was primarily political or military in character, and whether actions in the countryside or the cities were

more consequential. Eventually, Party arbiters told everyone that all four factors were more or less evenly balanced, an answer that had more to do with Hanoi's 1960s preoccupations with outmaneuvering the Americans than with any reality in 1945. More recently, a few Vietnamese intellectuals have suggested that "revolution" needs to be rescued as a historiographical category, instead of being used to describe everything the Party has done from 1930 to the present.

I have tried to contribute to those debates unobtrusively, without diverting the reader's attention from the 1940–45 period. To be frank, some of the arguments are now of mere antiquarian interest. Rereading my notes from hundreds of Communist Party commemorative articles on the "August Revolution," for example, I found only fifteen or twenty that had stood the test of time, providing useful data and insights. The rest spun political angel hair and repeated historical shibboleths. There is a serious need in Vietnam for fresh research on 1940–45, combining rigorous archival investigation with extensive interviewing before participants die. So far, despite a somewhat less repressive environment for intellectuals since 1986, Vietnam's historians have avoided the challenge.

Curiously, certain significant aspects of the 1940–45 story have never received much attention from historians anywhere. The importance of China has often been ignored or downgraded in both Vietnamese and Western studies. I have tried to redress this deficiency, while often frustrated by the paucity of primary source materials. The Vietnamese royal government that was permitted by the Japanese to function between April and early August 1945 has generally been overlooked or disparaged, when it deserves to be examined seriously. Regional disparities in developments up to early September 1945 warrant frank discussion; Vietnamese writers have tended to paper them over in the interests of producing "national history," while Western writers seem to have lacked the stamina to locate and read the necessary documents. I do not accept the prevailing wisdom that "the Party" was in charge of "the Revolution" from 1930 or 1941 onward. Ironically, communist and anticommunist Vietnamese have agreed with each other on that assertion—the former using it as the linchpin of Party legitimacy to the present day, the latter painting a picture of clever, insidious betrayal of Vietnamese national interests on instructions from Moscow. I shall demonstrate that no one was in control. After 9 March 1945, events took on spontaneous momentum, without any guiding hand. Local Communist Party members and Viet Minh adherents were successful more because of their ability to react quickly to sudden changes than because of any adherence to a master plan.

Each of the first five chapters of this book opens with vital events of 9 March 1945 as seen by a particular set of historical actors, jumps back to the years 1940–44 to provide context for their behavior, then carries the narrative through to the end of July 1945, when matters were coming to a head in Vietnam even without any inkling of imminent Japanese surrender. The purpose of this seemingly labyrinthine structure is to be able to view the same geography and the same period from a number of disparate perspectives. People of diverse backgrounds and intentions contested for hegemony, adjusted their outlooks and behavior, or refused to change. Leaders acted on the basis of insufficient or contradictory information. Often historians are too eager to create a seamless web, to tell a single story, when in fact people saw the world in dissimilar ways, talked past each other, and acted in ignorance of relevant developments elsewhere. Telling multiple stories poses obvious stylistic problems, yet it helps us to remember that history is made up of numerous possibilities, not pseudoscientific necessity.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Franco-Japanese relationship that dominated politics in Indochina from 1940 until the coup of 9 March 1945. We see how military events far beyond Indochina's borders first brought the two parties together, then eventually forced them apart. Ironically, the Japanese need not have attacked the French in March 1945, given American lack of interest in invading Indochina and Governor-General Decoux's sincere desire to return the colony intact to Paris at the end of the war, no matter how intense his dislike of the Free French. Even after they took over, the Japanese permitted many French teachers, technicians, and businessmen to continue working, until mounting Vietnamese antagonism made it too dangerous for them to do so.

Chapter 2 describes the changes that took place among the Vietnamese population even as both the French and the Japanese endeavored to keep everyone quiet and hard-working. Governor-General Decoux, cut off from any metropolitan assistance, promised a bright future for the "Annamites" if they cooperated with him in wartime, a reward remarkably similar, older Vietnamese pointed out wryly, to pledges made by the French during the 1914–18 war, only to be cast aside afterward. Nonetheless, tens of thousands of Vietnamese did take part in the youth and sports organizations that Decoux encouraged as an antidote to Japanese martial arts displays and assertions of Asian racial superiority. Meanwhile, after two decades of looking to the West, Vietnamese intellectuals rediscovered their own history and rural origins. Following the 9 March coup, Vietnamese were able to expand the legal limits of politics by means of public rallies, marches, and lightly censored newspaper articles. The new royal cabinet eventually

persuaded the Japanese to relinquish territorial jurisdiction over Cochinchina and the three cities of Hanoi, Haiphong, and Tourane (Da Nang), but it was unable to do anything about the famine that had begun in northern Vietnam before the Japanese takeover, nor did it know how to deal with underground Viet Minh propaganda or the increasing number of assaults on local officials. It is important to understand how the royal government came under serious challenge some weeks before the Japanese surrender in mid August.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the ICP, undoubtedly the most determined, aggressive Vietnamese organization of the time, as well as the various Viet Minh groups that emerged with increasing frequency from late 1944 on. Although small, dispersed, and beleaguered early in World War II, the ICP still possessed considerable experience and public prestige derived from mounting lively challenges to French colonial exploitation in the 1936–40 period. In 1941–42, Ho Chi Minh set the course of both the ICP and the Viet Minh, at least for the northern part of the country, before he was imprisoned by the Chinese Nationalists. Returning to Vietnam in September 1944, Ho turned the attention of his young lieutenants to building armed propaganda teams, establishing village-level support groups, and spreading the basic Viet Minh credo by word of mouth. With the sudden demise of French administration in March 1945, the ICP saw its opportunity, infiltrating Garde indochinoise units and legal youth organizations, urging people to break into rice warehouses, and stitching together a “liberation zone” in six northern provinces. The Japanese saw little reason to intervene, except in those few places where Viet Minh groups were rash enough to ambush Imperial Army patrols or truck convoys. As the Vietnamese public began to sense Allied victory over the Axis, those of their compatriots who had identified with the antifascist cause years before, when Berlin and Tokyo had looked invincible, took on the aura of prophets. In operational terms, however, the inability of ICP and Viet Minh leaders in the north to reestablish communications with comrades further south led to significant differences of strategy and tactics.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine Allied policies and activities in regard to Indochina up to the end of July 1945. For Chinese and American generals, Indochina represented a troublesome Japanese staging area for possible flank attacks on major Allied air and ground bases in western Kwangsi and Yunnan. For more than four years, both the Allies and the Japanese found it convenient to keep the border region quiet, even to engage in regular cross-frontier commerce. However, American bombers increasingly brought the war to Indochina, curtailing air, sea, and ground trans-



port and reducing its value as logistical hub for Japanese operations to the west and south. Politically, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made Indochina a test case of Allied intentions respecting postwar international trusteeships over colonial territories. Prime Minister Churchill resisted any Indochina trusteeship proposal, seeing it as the thin end of the wedge in regard to British colonies, and an issue certain to inflame the sensitivities of the French after their wartime humiliations in Europe, but he avoided making an issue of it so long as Roosevelt was alive. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, commander of SEAC, tried with the sparse resources available to him to signal British and Free French concern about the future of Indochina. With the Japanese coup, both China Theater and SEAC lost most of their intelligence sources inside Indochina, which led China Theater quickly to expand links with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh—a sensible military decision that nonetheless went contrary to Washington’s increasing readiness to uphold French sovereignty.

The last three chapters are devoted entirely to August and the first days of September 1945. Here it is possible to bring the different narrative threads together, demonstrating how various players interacted with one another during these momentous five weeks. Newly available archival materials of the period allow us to reevaluate scores of published sources, separating substantive wheat from ex post facto ideological chaff. Chapter 6 describes conditions in Vietnam just before word arrived of Japanese capitulation, together with the climactic sequence of events in Hanoi from the 17th to the 19th of August. Chapter 7 takes the reader through the provinces, as well as Hue and Saigon, during the latter half of August. We see that the “general insurrection” carried quickly to every corner of the country, yet its meaning and immediate consequences were far from uniform. As always, Vietnam’s unusual geography intruded as silent partner. Chapter 8 swings attention back to Hanoi, especially the rapid formation of a state apparatus and the arrival on the 22d of the first Allied representatives. It concludes with detailed descriptions of the huge 2 September meetings in Hanoi and Saigon to celebrate Vietnamese independence, one gathering proceeding without a hitch, the other degenerating into mob violence that deeply embarrassed Ho Chi Minh’s provisional government.

Within a few days of these mass meetings, Chinese troops would arrive in Hanoi, and British and French troops in Saigon. Ho Chi Minh and the provisional government would come under tremendous pressure, all the while encouraging grassroots mobilization against enemies real and imagined. A brief Epilogue describes this historical denouement.

While it might have been preferable to pursue events to December 1946, or even July 1954, this would have meant sacrificing much of the detail of 1945. Specialists will be aware that no book has ever examined a selected episode in the history of Vietnam in depth. There are studies of the outbreak of the Indochina War in December 1946, the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu, and the 1968 Tet Offensive, yet no one has succeeded in portraying under one cover the opposite sides of those confrontations. Juggling not just two sides but seven or more has been a major historiographical challenge in this work. Readers will have to decide whether or not the effort was quixotic.

The year 1945 was a critical one throughout the world, shaping much of what has happened since. The month of August was particularly important for Asia. From the windswept plains of Manchuria to the outlying islands of Indonesia, existing institutions disintegrated, and prevailing attitudes were called into question. People understood it to be a turning point of great magnitude, even if few presumed to know where they were going. Vietnam was not alone in experiencing this transformation, just as Vietnamese revolutionaries were hardly unique in determining to take advantage of the unparalleled opportunities offered to them. Nonetheless, each location was different, each set of circumstances unique. Readers familiar with events in China, Korea, Malaya, Singapore, or Indonesia in 1945 should find much here to compare and contrast.

Although much smaller in scope, the Vietnamese Revolution deserves to be placed alongside the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions for purposes of critical comparison. It is a prime example of radical revolutionary upheaval in a colonial setting, with ample archival and published sources for historical investigation. This book should thus be of interest to all students of revolution, even though it treats only the opening stages of the Vietnamese experience and does not attempt to mount a cross-revolutionary analysis.

There is ample material here too for those who focus explicitly on the relationship between state and society. States often wish to give the appearance of a single coherent entity, quite distinct from society. This is most obvious in a colonial state, where power, being largely derived from outside, is presented as omnipotent, unchallengeable, and external. The reality is different, of course, with society overlapping with the state in many significant ways, producing a more fluid, ambiguous, inconsistent pattern. It is at the beginning of the independence period, when the process of self-definition, relabeling, and reorganization is so vital, so transparent, that we can appreciate how contentious the rationales employed by states

to define and present themselves are.<sup>1</sup> During 1945, Vietnam went from colonial state to royal government to democratic republic in six months, offering us a choice opportunity to observe the collapse of state/society boundaries and preliminary attempts to reconstitute them.

In June 1945, eighty-three political prisoners in the Hanoi central jail petitioned the royal government for release, in words that echo through the corridors of time. After itemizing the terrible conditions of their incarceration, and suggesting that government claims to independence could hardly be valid if patriots like themselves remained in jail, they concluded passionately:

We hope that all the inequities and sufferings in our lives will collapse in the near future, just like French power.<sup>2</sup>

Within months these activists would be in a position to attempt to achieve such lofty ambitions for the entire country.

1. For a brief discussion of this issue, see E. Roger Owen, "State and Society in the Middle East," *Items* (New York) 44, no. 1 (Mar. 1990): 1-14.

2. Letter to minister of justice, 25 June 1945, in AOM, INF, GF 13.

