

Decolonisation of French Indo-China

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France also had to cope with demands for independence from its colonies. On 2 September 1945 in Hanoi, soon after the end of the Second World War, Ho Chi Minh, head of the communist nationalist movement the Viet Minh, seized power and decreed the country's independence on behalf of the provisional government, officially proclaiming the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Emperor Bao Dai was forced to abdicate.

From October 1945 to January 1946, French troops reoccupied Cochin-China. On 6 March 1946, Jean Sainteny, French Commissioner of the Republic, signed an agreement with Ho Chi Minh that provided for the recognition of Vietnam as a free state within an Indo-Chinese Federation and as part of the French Union.

But this agreement did not last: on 1 June 1946 by High Commissioner Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu's proclamation of the Republic of Cochin-China. On 23 November 1946, in view of the increasing tensions and in a bid to restore French authority in northern Indo-China, the French Navy bombed the port of Haiphong, claiming some 6 000 victims. On 19 December, the Viet Minh launched a counter-attack on the European districts in Hanoi, massacring dozens. Ho Chi Minh went undercover to fight the French. This was the beginning of an eight-year-long war. The French troops set themselves the difficult task of reconquering land held by the Viet Minh and gradually became embroiled in a protracted colonial struggle fought far from French soil that claimed many lives.

From 1949 onwards, Tonkin, Annam and Cochin-China were grouped together in the new state of Vietnam, part of the French Union and ruled from the city of Saigon by Emperor Bao Dai, who had returned to Vietnam in April 1949.

To justify this colonial war before the bar of world opinion in general and before the US Administration in particular, France defined it more as a fight against communism than as a colonial war. From late 1949, the Chinese positioned troops along the Vietnamese border. The Soviet Union and Mao Tse-Tung's communist China stepped up their support to the Viet Minh troops by sending weapons, equipment, instructors, etc. In response to this threat and with the Korean War beginning in June 1950, the United States declared that it was willing to give material aid to the French war effort by supplying arms. The war in Indo-China was in line with the US policy of containment and became a front line in the struggle against communist expansion.

But France was gradually losing its grip in Indo-China. It suffered heavy defeats and military casualties. After being forced to surrender at the fortress of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954, France realised that it could not continue fighting this costly war far from its shores on the sole ground of anti-communism.

The Geneva Accords of 21 July 1954 put an end to the conflict and France was obliged to leave the country. Vietnam was divided into two parts: whilst northern Vietnam fell under the communist control of Ho Chi Minh, a nationalist dictatorship took power south of the 17th parallel. Laos and Cambodia were officially recognised after proclaiming their independence in 1953. But unlike France, the United States refused to accept the outcome of the Geneva Conference and remained firmly behind the cause of independence for South Vietnam.

Once France had freed itself from the powder keg that was Indo-China, it lost an important part

of its colonial prestige, fuelling the independence movements already active in French North Africa.