The particular circumstances of World War II gave Ho Chi Minh and his followers the opportunity in 1945 to seize, but not retain, independence. In June 1940, when the French government surrendered to Hitler, the colonial regime in Indochina rallied to the collaborationist government established in the French resort town of Vichy. A few days after the fall of France, Japan, already bogged down in its war against China, issued a series of ultimatums designed to bring Indochinese resources under Japanese control. By September 1940, Japan had assumed overall control of Indochina but chose to administer it through the Vichy French. In effect, the countries of Indochina were now subject to what Ho Chi Minh called a "double yoke" of imperialism—French and Japanese.

The Japanese occupation of Vietnam lost its last pretense of legitimacy when France was liberated, forcing the remnants of the Vichy government to flee to Germany and leaving the "Free French" as the sole claimant to French rule in Indochina. So on March 9, 1945, Japanese forces disarmed and interned French troops and administrators and assumed direct control over Vietnam, installing Bao Dai as the emperor of a nominally independent country. In the historic window of opportunity that then opened, a Communist-led Viet Minh "Army of Liberation" under General Vo Nguyen Giap organized an insurrection that by the end of August 1945 had gained control over large parts of Vietnam. Bao Dai's abdication (Reading 5) was followed by Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence on September 2 (Reading 6).

But the new country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, soon found itself engaged in a desperate struggle to maintain its independence in the face of returning French troops, whose effort to reinstall French colonialism was aided by Great Britain and the United States.

1. Vietnam's Revolutionary Tradition*

By Ngo Vinh Long

In this selection, Ngo Vinh Long discusses Vietnam's history of resistance to foreign invaders and opposition to colonialism. US failure to understand this history was one of the many reasons for the later, disastrous American involvement in Vietnam.¹

Ngo Vinh Long, Associate Professor of History at the University of Maine, is the author.


1. For an analysis of the distortions and lacunae in both American popular attitudes toward Vietnam and scholarship, see Marvin E. Gettleman, "Against Cartesianism," in Allen and Ngo Vinh Long, Chap. 11.
of one of the most important works of scholarship on modern Vietnam, Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French, first published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1973 and reissued by Columbia University Press in 1991.

Vietnam is a country of about 128,000 square miles (332,000 square kilometers) stretching more than 1,200 miles (1,930 km) from the southern boundary of China along the eastern coast of the Indochinese Peninsula and curving into the Gulf of Siam between the eighth and ninth parallels. About 80 percent of the country is mountainous, and about 90 percent of its population has been living in the lowland areas for a long time. In fact, the bulk of Vietnam’s population—which increased from an estimated 10 million at the time the Vietnamese court surrendered all of Vietnam to the French in 1884 to about 21 million by the beginning of World War II, then to close to 53 million by the time of the last census in 1980 and to more than 68 million in 1989—has been crowded into the two proverbial rice baskets of the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong River Delta in the south.

The central part of the country, traditionally referred to by the Vietnamese as the shoulder pole for carrying the two rice baskets, is a narrow strip of land that extends from near the nineteenth to the twelfth parallel. It has such poor soil and an unfavorable climate that many of the people there must make a living from the rock quarries and the salt fields. In this region dogs are said to eat stones and chickens rock salt (cho an da ga an muoi). Worse still, on this narrow strip of land from 1965 until the end of 1972 the United States dropped more than 2 million tons of bombs—about equal to the total amount of bombs dropped on all fronts during World War II—and delivered about 3 million tons of high explosives through artillery strikes as well as hundreds of thousands of tons of chemicals. The resulting destruction has kept population density there much lower than that in the northern and southern regions.

In the country as a whole, however, the result of the unprecedented destruction by the bombings (close to 5 million tons) and the artillery strikes (about 7 million tons) is that there is now only about one acre of cultivated surface for every six to seven Vietnamese. Although about 3 million acres of land have been reclaimed since 1975 at great cost in both financial and human terms, millions of tons of unexploded mines and ammunition still lie buried. In the southern half of the country where the United States declared that it came to “nation-build,” U.S. bombing—which amounted to over 1,000 pounds of explosives for each man, woman, and child—was heavily responsible for over 10 million refugees and up to 2 million deaths out of a total estimated population of 19 million by 1972.  

What seems quite fantastic to most observers of Vietnam is how such a tiny nation, which is so stretched out geographically and economically, could have stood up to the U.S. military onslaught. What made the population there fight on in spite of such tremendous destruction and dislocation? The explanation by U.S. policymakers and mainstream scholars has been that the South Vietnamese had been coerced and terrorized by the North Vietnamese Communists and their henchmen in the South, the Vietcong. The North Vietnamese, in turn, were egged on by the Red Chinese. U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, for example, explained on 7 April 1965, “Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking.”

It has been convenient for U.S. policymakers and mainstream historians to refuse to acknowledge the real enemy in order to justify the U.S. war effort as well as the failure of that effort, but many serious students of Vietnamese history have realized over the years that the total disregard of the realities of Vietnam had doomed the U.S. intervention from the start. Joseph Buttinger, a noted Vietnam historian and an early mentor of President Ngo Dinh Diem of the so-called Republic of Vietnam (“South Vietnam,” as U.S. policymakers have called it since 1954, although no Vietnamese anywhere ever used the term themselves), wrote in 1977:

It is bad enough not to take into consideration that the Vietnamese people had struggled for over two thousand years against being absorbed by China, and had for almost one hundred years fought against colonial rule in order to regain independence. Much worse still was not to know, or knowingly to disregard, the fact that as a result of French colonial policies in Indochina the whole of Vietnam had become Communist by the end of World War II.

I say the whole of Vietnam, not only the North—something which, in spite of thirty years of French and American propaganda, remains an undeniable historical fact.

French Conquest and Consequences: 1850–1945

Although a number of books have detailed the long struggle of the Vietnamese against the French that finally led to the triumph of the revolutionary forces in 1945, it is necessary to summarize a few pertinent facts here in order to

3. Quoted in Harrison, p. 4.
give the reader a background for a better understanding of developments since the end of World War II.

On 31 August 1850 a French naval squadron came to the central part of Vietnam and attacked the port city of Da Nang, partly because it was accessible by sea and partly because it was only about thirty-five miles (fifty-six km) south of the imperial city of Hue. This started a war of colonial conquest that, aided by the policy of appeasement by the Vietnamese court, resulted in the takeover of the country in stages until its total annexation by the French in 1884. There were at least three reasons for the appeasement policy. First, the Nguyen court at the time was so unpopular that there was an average of 400–600 revolts and peasant uprisings against it per year. Hence the court wanted to reserve all its resources and energy for putting down these uprisings, which it perceived as the main threats to its survival. Second, the court did not fully understand the intentions of the French, thinking that since they came from so far away they would be interested only in obtaining certain trade advantages rather than conquering the country and occupying it by force. Third, the imperial forces, which marched in tight formations into battles, were no match for the long-range French rifles and cannons, and so the court thought it should avoid casualties for its own troops as well as buy time by making compromises with the French. But appeasement only whetted the appetite of the French, and as a result they kept on forcing the court to make one territorial concession after another, starting with the southern provinces of the Mekong Delta.

The people and the scholars continued to fight back, however, using guerrilla tactics to frustrate the French, in spite of the fact that the court, under treaty obligations to the French, ordered all popular resistance groups to withdraw from the conceded provinces. The quality of the popular resistance can be seen in the following account of a French historian and eyewitness in 1861, at the beginning of the intense armed struggle in the Saigon–Bien Hoa area, foreshadowing the experiences that U.S. troops were to encounter more than 100 years later:

One would like to put the finger on the main cause for the appearance of the bands which, during the rainy season, seemed to circulate freely around our columns, behind them when they advanced, ahead of them when they returned to their point of departure. They seemed to come up out of the ground. We imagined that there must be some central point from which they fanned out, some point where they had food and other supplies. That is why we concentrate on Bien Hoa. After Bien Hoa—Vinh Long. The fact is that the center of resistance was everywhere, subdivided ad infinitum, almost as many times as there were Annamites. It would be more exact to consider each peasant fastening a sheaf of rice as a resistance center. The
trouble with fighting on a terrain where the enemy can live and hide is that the war becomes personal; it changes its aim and name—and becomes repression.6

From 1861 to 1897 popular armed struggles organized by various scholars and local leaders raged on in spite of a combination of repression by the French and the court. But since the court had betrayed the people and robbed them of the only possibility for unified actions on a nationwide scale, almost all popular armed struggles were suppressed by 1897. From then until the beginning of World War I the French were able to firmly establish their colonial structures for the political domination and economic exploitation of the country.7

Administratively the French divided Vietnam into three regions, or “countries” (pays) as they called them. The southern region, which extends from the southernmost tip of the peninsula to the twelfth parallel and which was now called Cochin China, became a direct French colony and was ruled by a French governor. The central region and northern region, renamed Annam and Tonkin, respectively, became “protectorates”—in other words, the French “residents” in Hue and Hanoi were now supposedly ruling these regions through the Vietnamese court and the traditional elites. In fact, however, they had stripped the court of almost all of its power, including all residual rights over the land.

Landgrubbing and Landlessness

In the century before the French arrived, the distribution of wealth in the country was not as equitable as the names of the Nguyen land policy suggested: “equal-field land system” or “personal share land system.” Nevertheless, every family had land to till that it could call its own. As soon as the French occupied a certain area after fierce struggles with the local populace, they confiscated the land belonging to the locals and gave this land to themselves and their Vietnamese “collaborators.” Tens of thousands of acres of peasants’ lands changed hands this way. Many of the French owned from 3,000 to 70,000 acres of land. But even after several decades of expropriation and usurpation by the French and their Vietnamese collaborators, most peasants still owned their own land.

After the turn of the century, however, the French and the collaborators increased their theft of peasants’ land. Rice exporting was the biggest and most


profitable way of making money for the French and the Vietnamese ruling class. By the 1920s and 1930s over half of the peasants in Tonkin and Annam were completely landless, and about 90 percent of those who owned any land owned next to nothing. In Cochin China about 75 percent of the peasant population was landless, and the majority of the current landowners (who were nearly 80 percent of all landowners) now owned almost nothing. According to official French statistics, at least 44 percent of the land in Tonkin, 39 percent of the land in Annam, and 88 percent of the land in Cochin China was owned by landlords.

Because most Vietnamese peasants became landless or nearly so, they had to work as agricultural laborers and as tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Agricultural workers were paid wages. Most of them owned no land and were unable to become tenants or sharecroppers. Most of the small landowners used agricultural workers, and many medium and all big landlords used tenant farmers and sharecroppers. By the late 1920s and early 1930s tenant farmers and sharecroppers worked about half of the cultivated surface in Tonkin and Annam. French estimates showed that in Cochin China some 80 percent of the paddies were worked by tenants and sharecroppers. A large portion of the remainder was worked by wage laborers.

In Tonkin, and generally in Annam, tenant farmers had to give the landlords approximately half their gross income (in cash or in kind, depending on the terms) and had to pay for all the expenses of cultivation. The sharecropper, meanwhile, had to pay from 50 to 70 percent of his crops, besides all production costs. In addition, there were expensive gifts and services to landlords. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers who did not bring gifts or provide services frequently fell out of favor.

In Cochin China, the terms of tenancy were as bad as in the other regions. There was relatively little sharecropping; tenancy was the ubiquitous fact of life. Rents typically ranged from 50 to 70 percent of the tenants' crops and yet, as Le Thi Huynh Lan, a woman reporter for Phú Nu Tân Văn (New literature on women) wrote in 1929, that was not enough:

But this is not all, since the landlords do not let the tenants go freely tilling the land and gathering the paddies to pay the rent. They force the tenants to work for a whole month without any compensation. They force them to borrow 50 piasters which is to be paid by 100 gias [forty liters each, or 300 piasters at the current price] of paddy rice at harvest time [that is, six months later]. They force them to present white rice for offerings during holidays in the fifth months . . .

When the harvest comes, the landlords send their thugs to guard the threshing grounds. As soon as the rice is threshed, the thugs clean up everything. What is left for the tenants are the piles of hay. All they can do is hold their brooms and rakes and look on with tears in their eyes. . . . Any tenant who lacks good manners [that is, those who protest] would immediately have his house pulled down and would be evicted from the estate. . . . What
I have just told you is only one-tenth of what actually happens. There are many more things piling up on the tenants' heads...  

The situation in Annam and Tonkin was summarized by Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, who later became the secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party and defense minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, respectively, in their detailed account of the working and living conditions of the Vietnamese peasants:

Every year the agricultural worker must go hungry for seven or eight months, the poor peasants for five or six months, and a number of middle peasants are short of food for three or four months. During these months they eat just one meal a day, sometimes one meal every two days. They eat... anything they can find to fill their stomachs. In the countryside near harvest time we see emaciated, pale faces with glassy eyes, foam-specked lips. These are the faces of hunger; the poor with bloodless faces carry a sickle looking for work.

Reasons for Hunger

One reason for this sorry state of affairs was that there were few employment opportunities outside of the agricultural sector. Another reason was the horrible pay and working conditions in the mines, plantations, and industrial and commercial enterprises. In 1929, the peak year for employment during the colonial period, French official sources listed 52,000 workers in all Indochinese mines, 81,000 workers in the agricultural plantations, and 86,500 workers in all other industrial and commercial enterprises throughout Indochina. There were actually many more workers than the official statistics showed because the French records counted only card-holding employees, while in fact two or three employees sometimes held one card. This was because each worker was responsible for

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8. "Canh nha que" (The Scene in the countryside), Phu Nu Tan Van, 15 August 1929, pp. 1-6. This was the largest magazine in circulation in Indochina at the time.


10. For a detailed breakdown of the number of workers, see Résumé statistiques relatif aux années, 1913-1940 (Hanoi, 1941), p. 9, and Annuaire statistiques de l'Indochine, 1941-1942, p. 278. These sources were published by the colonial government. For the number of workers in commercial, industrial, and agricultural enterprises, see Rene Bunout, La main d'oeuvre et la législation du travail en Indochine (Bordeaux: Delmas, 1956), p. 9. Official French statistics for 1930 listed 49,000 persons in the rubber and other agricultural plantations in Cochinchina. But Bunout (p. 112) estimated that if women and children workers were included, about 100,000 persons worked in the rubber plantations alone.
about seventeen hours of work a day. No one worker could maintain this pace. Family members, relatives, and friends had to substitute at least twice a week. But even if the number of workers was two or three times larger than the official French estimate, this was still too small to make a difference in terms of absorbing the unemployed rural laborers. Besides, as colonial statistics testify, even a very "active" card-holding worker (in other words, several persons working one job) received an annual income of only 44 piasters in Tonkin, 47 piasters in Annam, and 55 piasters in Cochim China during the late 1920s, which was barely enough for the rice consumption of a single person. Even a dog belonging to a colonial household cost 150 piasters a year to feed.

Besides underemployment, there was chiseling. The workers explained this situation in a letter to the editor published in the 5 December 1936 issue of Dong Phap (Eastern France):

Each male worker gets a little more than two dimes [20 cents] to three dimes a day and a woman or girl worker gets only 18 cents. Even so, when the time comes for us to receive our pay we seldom get the full amount. The larger parts of our wages are taken by the supervisors and foremen... [and] our salaries are already too low. How can we survive with all these fines and cuts? Moreover, food prices increase every day and we have become hungrier and hungrier.

A number of Vietnamese studies have shown that 37 to 50 percent of some workers' earnings were taken.

Even without the cuts, fines, and various types of "squeeze" by the supervisors and foremen, Vietnamese workers never actually received their full daily wages. Colonial capitalists did not pay wholly in cash. A large part of wages came in goods like rotten rice, decaying fish, and spoiling vegetables and greens at prices far above market rates. The price of these goods was automatically deducted from

15. Ngo Van Hoa.
wages. Workers who did not go to the company stores to pick them up would lose their money.\(^{16}\)

In the mines and plantations, workers also had to pay for living in shacks built by the companies. The usual charge was at least a month's pay. Workers also paid for all their tools—hoes, hammers, baskets—and paid for damages. In the mines and rubber plantations workers were also frequently severely punished for even the slightest "infractions" and hence they called these places "hell on earth." Few escaped from that hell. The usual punishment for workers who ran away was death by torture, hanging, stabbing, or some other means that made examples of the "criminals." Because of this—and overwork, inadequate food, and terrible housing—the mortality rate was about 30 percent according to the rubber companies' own records. By the end of World War II the workers stopped calling the plantations "hell on earth" and substituted the name "slaughterhouses." The mining areas also became known as "death valleys" by those who worked there. French and Vietnamese descriptions generally indicate that the workers there suffered more deprivation and poverty than their counterparts in the plantations. Usually peasants did their best to stay away from the mines and plantations altogether, even though they had to subject themselves to unemployment and hunger as already described above.\(^{17}\)

In 1945, in an article entitled "The Starvation Crisis of the People," a famous Vietnamese agronomist wrote:

\[\text{All through the sixty years of French colonization our people have always been hungry [original italics]. They were not hungry to the degree that they had to starve in such manners that their corpses were thrown up in piles as they are now. But they have always been hungry, so hungry that their bodies were scrawny and stunted; so hungry that no sooner than they finished with one meal than they started worrying about the next; and so hungry that the whole population had not a moment of free time to think of anything besides the problem of survival.}\]

\[\text{18. Nghiem Xuan Yem, "Nan dan doi" (The starvation crisis of the people), Thanh Nghi, no. 107 (5 May 1945), p. 18.}\]

\[\text{Revolutionary Struggles: The Early Decades}\]

In spite of the overwhelming social and economic difficulties described above, by the mid-1920s several revolutionary groups began to organize peasants, workers, and intellectuals in the struggle against the colonial regime and its collaborators. On 3 February 1950, at a unification meeting in Kowloon (China), the three Communist parties of Vietnam convened on 6 January by meeting adopted a political platform and strategy for the association, peasants' association for Liberation, the Imperialist Alliance. In its antifederalism (in other ruling class) were the party. The Party subsequently change soon emerged as the undisputed to 1931, under the banner, and coordinated massive parts of the country. In the out of a total of twenty-on lasted for over a year. In the alliance brought about by out in many provinces but two provinces of Nghe An and moved a year, with the use of "pacification" starvation, to be able to rec.

As a result of the arrest whom were Communist the revolutionary movement a period of setbacks during 1935, the Party began to rel new period of struggles ca this period the Party trained colonial administration, the up of the people's peace. Whereas the Comm workers and peasants durin; ership to other strata of th.

\[\text{19. For discussion and original doc}\]

\[\text{20. For detailed discussion of this and Peasant Rebellion in Central}\]

\[\text{no. 4 (1976), pp. 15–85; also see H}\]
Communist parties of Vietnam merged into a single party under the name of the Vietnam Communist Party (Dang Cong San Viet Nam). The meeting had been convened on 6 January by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later President Ho Chi Minh). The meeting adopted a political program, strategy, and shortened rules as well as regulations and strategy for the development of mass organizations such as workers’ associations, peasants’ associations, Communist Youth League, Women’s Association for Liberation, the Red Relief Society, the Self-Defense Militia, and the Anti-Imperialist Alliance. In its political program, the Party stated that anticolonialism and antifeudalism (in other words, struggle against the landowning Vietnamese ruling class) were the principal and inseparable tasks of the revolution. The Party subsequently changed its name to Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and soon emerged as the undisputed leader of the Vietnamese revolution. From 1930 to 1931, under the banner of independence and democracy, the ICP organized and coordinated massive peasant demonstrations and workers’ strikes in most parts of the country. In the southern part peasant struggles broke out in fourteen out of a total of twenty-one provinces and, in spite of brutal French repression, lasted for over a year. In the central part, as a result of the firm worker-peasant alliance brought about by the ICP, struggles against the French not only broke out in many provinces but seizure of administrative power also occurred in the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. It took the French colonial administration over a year, with the deployment of divisions of soldiers and airplanes and with the use of “pacification methods” such as crop destruction, relocations, and starvation, to be able to reoccupy the two provinces.

As a result of the arrest and imprisonment of some 16,000 persons, most of whom were Communist cadres, and the death of thousands of village inhabitants, the revolutionary movement in Vietnam under the leadership of the ICP suffered a period of setbacks during the Depression years of 1932–1934. Beginning in 1935, the Party began to rebuild its organizations and infrastructures and began a new period of struggles called the “1936–1939 democratic campaign.” During this period the Party trained millions of people in the struggle against the French colonial administration, fascism, and war, and for democratic liberties, the improvement of the people’s living conditions, and the maintenance of world peace. Whereas the Communist Party exerted its leadership mainly over the workers and peasants during the 1930–1931 period, it was now extending its leadership to other strata of the urban and rural population. As a result, a broad

19. For discussion and original documents relating to this event, see Tran Huy Lieu et al., Tai lieu tham hao lich su: cach mang can dia Viet Nam (Reference Documents: Modern Vietnamese Revolution) (Hanoi: Ban Ngheen Cau Van Su Dia xuat ban, 1986), vol. 5, pp. 98–102, and vol. 6, pp. 51–62, 134–140. For a detailed treatment in English, see Huynh Kim Khanh, pp. 90–141.

Looming War and Worsening Oppression

The danger of war and of Japanese aggression had become evident to the ICP in 1938. Right after the Munich Conference of September 1938, for example, the Regional Executive Committee of the ICP in the northern region of Vietnam decided to send many of its cadres into the countryside to carry out underground work and to set up bases in anticipation of enemy repression that would come mainly in the towns. In October 1938, the ICP, in a public manifesto, denounced France and Great Britain for their policy of capitulation to fascist pressures, called attention to the danger of Japanese aggression, and exhorted all groups and social strata, including the democratic French, to join the ICP-sponsored Indochinese Democratic Front in order to fight for freedom, peace, improvement of the people’s living conditions, and the defense of Indochina. Effective defense of Indochina, the ICP maintained, could only be achieved with increased democratic liberties and decreased exactions by big colonial interests.

The French colonial administration, however, was at this time largely interested in the defense of the mother country, France itself. In 1938 it forced the Vietnamese population to buy 40 million piasters worth of bonds in order to buy war materiel for France. Early in 1939, 10 million piasters of new taxes were levied to build air bases and finance other war preparations. Paris also decided that Indochina should supply France with 1.5 million soldiers and workers, or fifteen times as many as the number required during World War I. It was also early in 1939 that the Japanese occupied Hainan Island, about 150 miles from the Vietnamese port of Haiphong, and advanced their troops in mainland China southward, close to the Vietnamese border. The bankrupt policy of the French, therefore, only served to rally more and more people into the ranks of the ICP.

On 1 September 1939, fascist Germany attacked Poland. On 3 September, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. As World War II started, democratic and progressive movements in the colonies were subject to swift and merciless repression. In Inc., series of decrees dissolving progressive newspapers. Since prehensive program as well French terrorism and reprehensible Government Council reason for the attack on the against the communist orga the communists so that Ind We have no right not to win.

To ensure that Indochinization increased the number of police and securial laborers were also q and “communist suspects” to supply France with 3.5 r coffee, and sugar, 600,000 taxes were increased, and Indochina almost doubled, 1940. Workers’ wages were 72 hours a week and strictly governor general of Indoc ever-worsening exploitation increased; peasants’ lands serve in the military and pe carts, and horses were requ that the land could be used 1939, tens of thousands of France. In the first eight m shipped to France to becom

Double Colonization and

On 10 May 1940 Hitler capitulated to the German I French soldiers were disarm

21. For the most detailed study of the 1930s in English, see Ngo Vinh Long, “Peasant Revolutionary Struggles in Vietnam in the 1930s” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978). For the “Popular Front” period of 1936–1939, also see Huynh Kim Khanh, pp. 218–231.


merciless repression. In Indochina, the French colonialists immediately issued a series of decrees dissolving all democratic organizations and closing down all progressive newspapers. Since the ICP was the only party that had developed a comprehensive program as well as solidly built bases, it became the focal point of French terrorism and repression. On 4 January 1940, in a speech before the Indochinese Government Council, Governor General Georges Catroux explained the reason for the attack on the ICP: "We have launched a total and swift attack against the communist organizations; in this struggle, it is necessary to annihilate the communists so that Indochina may live in peace and remain loyal to France. We have no right not to win. The state of war forces us to act without mercy."22

To ensure that Indochina remained loyal to France, the French colonial administration increased the Indochinese armed forces to 100,000 and doubled the number of police and security service agents. Scores of so-called "camps of special laborers" were also quickly set up to detain thousands of political prisoners and "communist suspects." As soon as the war started, Paris ordered Indochina to supply France with 3.5 million metric tons of foodstuffs, 800,000 tons of tea, coffee, and sugar, 600,000 tons of rubber, and 500,000 tons of cable. Existing taxes were increased, and new taxes and duties were imposed. The budget of Indochina almost doubled, from 80 million piasters for 1938 to 134 million for 1940. Workers' wages were reduced drastically; working hours were increased to 72 hours a week and strictly enforced as a result of the 10 April 1939 decree by the governor general of Indochina. In the countryside, peasants were subjected to ever-worsening exploitation and oppression. Rents, interest rates, and taxes were increased; peasants' lands were expropriated; peasant males were rounded up to serve in the military and perform corvée (unpaid, forced) labor; paddy, boats, carts, and horses were requisitioned; and rice and maize crops were uprooted so that the land could be used for planting jute and castor-oil plants. By the end of 1939, tens of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers and workers had been sent to France. In the first eight months of 1940 another 80,000 Vietnamese youths were shipped to France to become cannon fodder.23

**Double Colonization and Liberation**

On 10 May 1940 Hitler attacked France. A month later the French ruling class capitulated to the German fascists, declaring Paris an "open city." Two million French soldiers were disarmed and a puppet government headed by Marshal Phi-

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lippe Pétain was set up at Vichy. The French defeat caused great confusion among the colonialists in Vietnam. Any attempt whatsoever to resist Japanese aggression fizzled out, and the colonial administration readily yielded to all Japanese demands. On 22 September 1940, the Japanese attacked Lang Son (about 15 miles [24 km] south of the Vietnam-China border) and landed 6,000 troops at Do Son (near Haiphong). After some minor engagements with the Japanese near the Vietnam-China border, Governor General Jean Decoux surrendered Indochina to the Japanese.

Faced with these great changes in the international and internal situation, on 8 February 1941 Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam to assume direct leadership of the Vietnamese revolution. He made Pac Bo (Cao Bang Province) his base of operation. In May 1941 he convened the eighth plenary session of the ICP's Central Committee in Pac Bo, which decided that the most urgent task at the time was to liberate the country from Franco-Japanese domination. To this end, Ho Chi Minh proposed to change the name of the National Front Against the French and Japanese Fascists into Vietnam Independence League (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh or Viet Minh for short) to rally all social classes and political and religious groups. For the next four years, until May 1945, the ICP and its Viet Minh Front (adopting as its emblem the gold-starred red flag that had first appeared in the Mekong Delta in 1930) concentrated their efforts in setting up ever-increasing numbers of guerrilla bases and in expanding their infrastructure among the population to include even the landlords and bourgeoisie to fight against the French and the Japanese.

The struggle against the French and the Japanese from 1941 until 1945 required extremely patient organizing because these foreigners would not stop at any means to try to destroy the revolutionary movement. An example was the policy of rice collection, the purpose of which, as resident Jean Chauvet of Tonkin expressed it, was to cause hunger and starvation among the population in order to dampen their revolutionary spirit as well as to bring in the necessary food supplies for the French themselves and the Japanese. The result of this policy was an unprecedented famine that killed 2 million persons out of a total population of about 8 million in the northern region alone. The famine conditions in Tonkin were described in the 28 April 1945 issue of Viet Nam Tan Bao, a Hanoi newspaper, as follows:

When we entered the villages we saw the peasants miserably dressed. Many of them had only a piece of mat to cover their bodies. They wandered about aimlessly in the streets like skeletons with skin, without any strength left, without any thoughts, and disease. Their rice had all. They did not have any pot whether poisonous or not vegetation around them... for the whole village to coo themselves.

In spite of such odds, the fight back and to attack French to obtain the necessary food the details here. We can only period that began on 13 August issue an order to the arr general insurrection by attack strongholds. As soon as the organizations and guerrilla at From 14 to 18 August the ad: and province of twenty-seventy-hionary power was established. The administrations of the out a few days longer, but th Within a period of only two were completely liberated, er hundreds of years of mon appear. Vietnam, the administration of This August Revolution, as th significant symbolic importar thousands of people assembled yellow flag with three red stri hoisted. Emperor Bao Dai, th the abdication act, which said nation rather than to be the I to Tran Huy Lieu, represents: the gold seal and sword (the abolition of the monarchy in

24. For the Viet Minh's founding manifesto, see Reading 4 — eds.
without any thoughts, and totally resigned to the ghosts of starvation and disease. Their rice had all been taken away from them by the government. They did not have any potatoes or corn. They were forced to eat everything, whether poisonous or not, they did not care. They had eaten up all the vegetation around them. . . . When a dog or a rat died, it was the occasion for the whole village to come around to prepare it and parcel it out among themselves.

In spite of such odds, the Viet Minh managed to organize the population to fight back and to attack French and Japanese granaries and rice transport systems to obtain the necessary food to feed the hungry population. We cannot go into the details here. We can only summarize the last stage of the struggle during this period that began on 13 August 1945 when the Viet Minh’s Insurrection Committee issued an order to the armed forces and the people to immediately launch a general insurrection by attacking and taking over all urban areas and enemy strongholds. As soon as the order for general insurrection was issued, people’s organizations and guerrilla and self-defense units everywhere moved into action. From 14 to 18 August the administrative centers of almost every village, district, and province of twenty-seven provinces were attacked and taken over, and revolutionary power was established in many of them almost immediately.

The administrations of the three major cities of Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon held out a few days longer, but the victory of the Viet Minh was swift and bloodless. Within a period of only twelve days, from 14 to 25 August, fifty-nine provinces were completely liberated, ending almost a century of colonial domination and hundreds of years of monarchical rule. For the first time in the long history of Vietnam, the administration of the entire country was in the hands of the people. This August Revolution, as the Vietnamese called it, was capped by two events of significant symbolic importance. On the afternoon of 30 August before tens of thousands of people assembled at the southern gate of the Imperial Palace, the yellow flag with three red stripes was lowered, and the yellow-starred red flag was hoisted. Emperor Bao Dai, the last ruling monarch of the Nguyen dynasty, read the abdication act, which said in part: “I prefer to be a citizen of an independent nation than to be the king of an enslaved country.” He then handed over to Tran Huy Lieu, representative of the revolutionary provisional government, the gold seal and sword (the symbols of royal power) and formally declared the abolition of the monarchy in Vietnam.  

Two days later, on 2 September, before a crowd of over half a million assembled at the Ba Dinh square in Hanoi, President Ho Chi Minh introduced the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and read the Declaration of Independence, which states in part:

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains which for nearly a century have fettered us and have won independence for the Fatherland... 

The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer our country.

We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam....

The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to safeguard their independence and freedom.

A. Letter of Nguyen Ai

To his Excellency, the Secretary Delegate to the Peace Conference

Excellency,

We take the liberty of setting forth the claims of the victory.

We count on your great and whenever the opportunity arises, We beg your Excellency's respect.