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The Vietnam War (Part 1)



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THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

The struggle in Vietnam was a 30-year conflict over the essential question of who had the right to determine the government in Vietnam. The legacy left in Vietnam by the faltering French Empire would prove to be one from which the region would never fully recover.

French Colonialism

Vietnam was originally a part of a French colony called “Indochina” in Southeast Asia that included much of the region directly below China and to the east of India. Unlike the British who enabled a lot of local control in their colonies, the French imposed strict rule in all of the colonies. During the colonial era in Vietnam, it was impossible for the Vietnamese people to feel like they were anything other than an oppressed and exploited people.



Vietnamese peasants worked like slaves during French control of Indochina.

Vietnam was a highly desirable colony for its fertile river basins that produced massive amounts of rice and other crops. Some of the richest farmland in all of Asia was located in Vietnam, and therefore Vietnam was an important colony within the French Empire. Most Vietnamese people hated their French masters and were deeply resentful of French rule.

Ho Chi Minh

World War Two had several very important impacts on the status of many nations throughout Africa and Asia. The global struggle had mortally wounded the British and French Empires, who were barely able to maintain control of their own countries in Europe, let alone effectively keep control of colonies throughout the world. Waves of nationalism swept through both countries’ colonies, leading to independence movements in India, Africa, and Asia. The second important impact was the rise of the global communist movement. The Soviet Union had been a major player in the Allied Victory, and the Chinese nationalist movement was so weakened from fighting in World War Two that it also was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party by the beginning of the 1950’s.



Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh was a Vietnamese scholar who had studied abroad and was deeply influenced by the spreading communist movement. He believed that communist rule needed to be established in Vietnam in order to undo decades of colonial rule and unfairness. Ho Chi Minh’s political philosophy was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union’s Stalin and China’s Mao Zedong. Unlike Mao and Stalin, Ho Chi Minh was deeply committed to communist principles and himself chose to live in a gardener’s hut in the palace of Vietnam, rather than the palace itself. However, just like the other communist dictators, Ho was committed to land redistribution and use of force to force submission to the totalitarian state. His policies and government were responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians that exceed a million souls.

Dienbienphu

Eventually, small fights and struggles throughout Vietnam escalated into a full-blown fight between Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh and French forces. While the Vietminh were technically communist fighters, most warriors were more against French imperial rule than they were strong supporters of communism. Most war material for the French was provided by the Americans, who did not want to see a communist government succeed. Vietminh ambushes appeared suddenly against French patrols, inflicted a number of casualties, and then disappeared into the jungles and mountains. The body counts on both sides continued to rise, and the fighting in Vietnam became very unpopular within France. The casualties suffered by the Vietnamese were much higher than those on the French side, but they were also more committed to fighting, since they were fighting for freedom.



At Dienbienphu, the French overestimated the advantage that their air superiority gave them.

In an attempt to secure the countryside, French commanders attempted to establish hundreds of forts throughout the country. These forts were often overrun, with most or all of the soldiers being killed in Vietminh raids. French commanders decided to mass forces around Dienbienphu, deep in Vietnam. The Vietminh slowly gathered their forces, and then

surrounded Dienbienphu. Throughout weeks of fighting, the Vietminh slowly tightened their forces around the French camp, eventually making it impossible for the French to even safely land aircraft. The French used a high number of troops from other colonies in Africa, whose desire to fight in such bad conditions eventually led to large numbers of French fighters refusing to fight. The French were forced to parachute supplies to their surrounded troops, which led to supplies falling into enemy hands just as often as French. After almost two months, the French had to surrender the position, having sustained over 13,000 casualties. It is estimated that Vietminh casualties were almost double that, but the price they were willing to pay for freedom was much higher than the price to keep a colony.

The Geneva Conference

Tired of fighting, the French invited the rest of the world to a meeting that would determine the creation of an independent Vietnamese country. The meeting was mediated by the Soviets and British, both of whom wanted to see a stop to the fighting in Vietnam. The Soviets were concerned that continued fighting between communist and anti-communist forces could eventually lead to an escalation and a war with the United States. The Soviets were more than willing to fight the United States in regions of the world that fit their strategic objectives, but Vietnam was not one such place. Simply put, the Soviets didn't care if Vietnam was communist or not. The British and French just wanted the fighting to stop.

The eventual settlement agreed upon by the Soviets, British, and French was to create a North and South Vietnam with a de-militarized zone between both nations to stop future fighting from occurring. Communist forces would occupy the North, and a military dictatorship would rule the South. The Geneva Conference successfully ended the First Indochina War, and the French forces left North Vietnam, which became a communist nation run by Ho Chi Minh. The problem was that nobody accounted for how the Vietnamese themselves felt about the Geneva Conference. Neither the North Vietnamese nor the Southerners saw themselves as separate countries.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What European nation controlled Vietnam as a colony?
2. What two countries supported the communist forces in Vietnam?
3. Why did the French lose the siege at Dienbienphu?

Write About It

If you were in charge of the Geneva meetings, how would you have set up the new country?

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Answer Key

1. France controlled Vietnam during the time that it was a colony.
2. China and the Soviet Union both supported the communist forces during the Indochina Wars.
3. The French lost the battle of Dienbienphu because they were surrounded and could not get the necessary supplies to continue fighting. Also many of the soldiers from other colonies stopped fighting.

Questions for Further Discussion

Was Ho Chi Minh any better than Stalin or Mao?

Should the United States have supported the French since they were fighting against communists?

How could the Vietnam situation have been resolved better at Genva?

Is there any similarity in how the US has approached Iraq and Afghanistan in the 21st century and how France approached Vietnam? Are there differences?