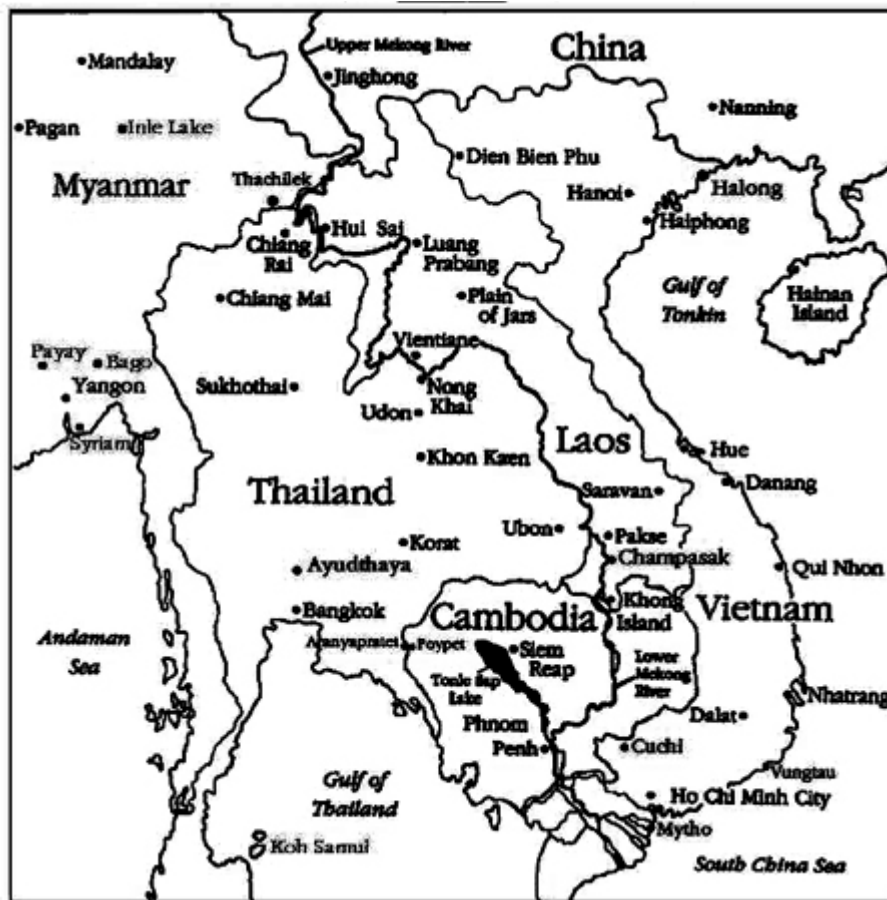


## French Indochina

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French Indochina after the Second World War

**Q. When and why did the French colonize Indochina?**

A. The colonization of the various territories which later made up *Indochine française* took place over a number of years. The French conquest began in the South, in Cochinchina, in the 1860s. Throughout the next 30 years, France pushed steadily North, gaining territories in Annam and Tonkin, and also Cambodia and Laos. These territories were formally brought together under the name *Indochine française* in 1885.

This desire to establish a French empire in South-East Asia was partly driven by imperial rivalry with Great Britain. French Indochina was intended to rival British India: the French created their '*Perle de l'Extrême-Orient*' in response to the 'Jewel in the Crown' that India represented for Britain.

Many historians argue, however, that the 'conquest' of Indochina was as a result of '*la force des choses*' rather than the result of any concerted plan on France's behalf. What is meant here is that a number of merchants and explorers had been acting autonomously in the region in their own interests, without any specific directives from Paris. During the 1870s and 1880s, many in France were vehemently against French action in Indochina, believing it to be wasteful of '*l'or et le sang français*' at a time when France should be concentrating on domestic matters. Jules Ferry, nicknamed 'Le Tonkinois' because of his interest in Indochina, fell from power due to his pursuit of further expansion. Once back in power, he sought to justify colonial conquest in terms of regaining French prestige and 'grandeur'.

**Q. Once French power was established, how did the colonial authorities rule? What policies did they adopt towards the native populations?**

A. Colonialism is predicated upon a hierarchical relationship: *dominé/dominateur; inférieur/supérieur*. Like all colonial systems, that in French Indochina relied upon the unequal sharing of power and privilege.

In creating a system of colonial government in Indochina, France welded together the old with the new. The system was a hotch-potch of traditional Vietnamese institutions, on which were superimposed modern French ones. Nor were the different areas of Indochina governed in the same way. In Cochinchina, which was the only full colony, a Governor General ruled from Saigon, and French law was applicable. Annam and Tonkin, however, and later Cambodia and Laos, each had the status of a protectorate. Annam and Tonkin were governed by the Hanoi Governor General, and by two *résidents supérieurs*, one in Hanoi and one in Hué. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese monarchy in Hué and the pre-colonial bureaucracy were allowed to remain and each province in Annam and Tonkin had two parallel administrations: one led by a French chief, and the other led by a Vietnamese chief. There was little difference between the two systems. Appointed by the Minister for Colonies, the Governor General of Indochina could suspend all local councils if he deemed it necessary. In almost all areas of colonial life he ruled by personal decree, with the approval of Paris. The Governor General had power over the entire political federation known as *l'Union indochinoise*.

France attempted to develop Indochina (*mise en valeur*), and to bring it into the 'modern' era by developing its transport networks, industry, hospitals, and schools. In many ways, France's colonial project overseas was the same irrespective of the territories in question: to recreate a replica of France. This was done in the spirit of universalism, enshrined in the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*. Those very same rights, however, were severely curtailed when it came to the status of the indigenous Indochinese: few benefited from education, few enjoyed the wealth of the colony, and very few rose to positions of relative power within the colonial government. Besides which, the indigenous Indochinese were deprived of the fundamental right to rule themselves.

**Q. When and how was French rule challenged?**

A. There had been resistance to the imposition of French colonial rule from the very start. Rebellion in Indochina was traditionally nurtured by the intellectual class: the Mandarin leaders, who were able to disseminate anti-French sentiment effectively through the education system.

It is ironic that France often cultivated the very leaders who later were to head nationalist movements in Indochina. An intellectual bourgeois elite emerged in the 1920s who had profited from a French university education, and who returned to Indochina thoroughly imbued with notions of *Liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*.

The Yen Bay uprising was probably the most serious of the rebellions in Indochina, and took place on 9–10 February 1930. The Vietnamese nationalist movement (VNQDD – Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, created in 1927) attacked the French garrison post at Yen Bay. Joined by a significant number of indigenous troops stationed there, they seized the arms depot and killed a number of French officers. Although the uprising was part of a series of rebellions, demonstrations, attacks and protests, the fact that French officers had been killed called for a show of strength on the part of the colonial authorities. Eighty-three indigenous ‘rebels’ were sentenced to death, 13 of whom were guillotined in June 1930 after a distinctly undemocratic trial. The French airforce pursued sympathizers into the surrounding country, indiscriminately bombing assembled crowds and ‘suspect’ villages.

Marxist thought had also become more widespread among the indigenous populations of Indochina. Nurtured both by Moscow and the French Communist Party (PCF), Nguyen Ai Quoc, alias Ho Chi Minh (pictured below), established the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930.



Before the Second World War, however, nationalist thought in Indochina remained the preserve of the Indochinese intellectuals and the class of bourgeoisie who had been prevented from scaling the social ladder by colonial rule. The peasant majority in Indochina were little motivated by such concerns. France felt it had little to fear from these largely peaceful and ‘docile’ populations.

### **Q. What impact did the Second World War have upon French Indochina?**

A. The military defeat of France left Indochina without support and open to Japanese aggression. Indochina had only a small colonial army and limited supplies. The Governor General in power in Indochina at the fall of France was Catroux. He initially declared himself in favour of de Gaulle and Free France but was put under immense pressure from both the Japanese and the Pétain government. The Japanese government sought assurance that there would be no transport of arms or supplies to China through Indochina. Catroux sought the support of other Generals throughout the empire, hoping for reinforcements and munitions to enable him to resist the Japanese but these were not forthcoming. In June 1940, Catroux was forced to cede to Japanese demands and closed railway lines which were being used to transport arms to the Chinese front. The Japanese pushed for further concessions, demanding the right to send out control missions to check that Indochina’s frontiers had been closed.

Catroux was then replaced by Decoux, a Vichyite. The Japanese continued to pressurize the new Governor General, who yielded to their demands to the right to occupy airfields and to travel freely throughout Indochina. The Japanese recognized French sovereignty in Indochina and the territorial integrity of the area. In return, however, France recognized the Japanese interest in the area, agreed to discuss economic sanctions, and to grant military facilities in Indochina to Japan.

The Japanese seemed content to leave the framework of French control in place in Indochina, but at a price. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese infiltrated Hanoi and took up key positions throughout the city. The Mikado issued an ultimatum to the French, demanding assurances that Indochina would do nothing to hinder the activities of the Japanese forces. If Decoux supplied these assurances, his government would be left intact. If he refused, Japan threatened to take over Indochina. An agreement was reached on 9 December 1940. French sovereignty was confirmed. The French still controlled their own army, and the administration of Indochina. Japanese forces were free to fight the war against the Allies from Indochinese soil.

Governor General Decoux modelled his government in Indochina on Pétain's Vichy regime. He ruthlessly applied the laws of Vichy against Gaullists, liberals, freemasons and Jews. However, as war in the Pacific was drawing to a close, the Japanese moved suddenly to disarm the French and seize sovereignty of Indochina on 9 March 1945. On 11 March they set in place a puppet regime under the Emperor Bao Dai, who declared Vietnam independent of France. The French response was to reassert their authority immediately. On 24 March 1945, de Gaulle announced the creation of the *Fédération indochinoise*, which was to have a new status within the recently conceived *Union française*. Before the French could act, however, an indigenous group led by Ho Chi Minh came to power in Tonkin. On 2 September 1945, Ho and his guerrillas proclaimed the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Bao Dai renounced his imperial title, and became part of Ho Chi Minh's new government.

### **Q. What were the causes of the Indochina War, 1945–54?**

A. France had no intention of giving up its empire after the Second World War, and was determined to reassert its colonial authority over Indochina. France was afraid that both the Chinese and Russians would try to influence the course of events in Indochina in the post-war period. They also feared that the British, whose army were overseeing the capitulation of Japanese troops, would try to seize Indochina for themselves. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh had taken advantage of France's weakened position to claim power. In response to this rather confused state of affairs, France attempted what was essentially a war of reconquest in Indochina.

### **Q. Why did the French lose?**

A. The French lost because they underestimated their enemy. Initially, they underestimated the extent of nationalist sentiment among the Indochinese. France had not believed that Ho Chi Minh would be able to rally the majority of Indochinese to his cause. Second, they underestimated the military capability of the Indochinese: the French army was used to waging conventional wars, and the Indochinese surprised them with their unconventional methods, their tenacity and their courage.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, which effectively marked the end of the French war in Indochina, was a terrible and humiliating defeat for the French Army. It had believed that this 'fortress' in the hills on the border of Laos and Tonkin (see below), with its 10,000 French troops, was impregnable; yet General Giap's forces waged a relentless and implacable guerrilla campaign against the French forces for 55 violent and bloody days.



The defeat at Dien Bien Phu led France to sign the Geneva Accords (21 July 1954) which ended the French presence in Indochina.

### **Q. What impact did the Indochinese War have upon the Fourth Republic?**

A. It was in Indochina that the Fourth Republic experienced, and lost, its first colonial war. Seemingly, however, it did not learn the lessons from this first defeat and went on to wage a bitter and bloody war in Algeria, hot on the heels of the Indochinese War. The French Army was in disarray after the Indochinese experience, and the seeds of discontent and disaffection which were sown during that conflict came to bear fruit, in a dramatic and threatening way, during the Algerian War.

### **Key publication by Nikki Cooper**

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### **Further reading**

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French Indochina comprised the colony of Cochinchina and the protectorates of Annam, Cambodia and Tonkin, and the mixed region of Laos. After the fall of France in June 1940 the French Indochinese government had remained loyal to the Vichy regime. The following month governor Admiral Jean Decoux signed an agreement under which Japanese forces were permitted to occupy bases across Indochina. Indochina, also called (until 1950) French Indochina, French Indochine Française, the three states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia formerly associated with France, first within its empire and later within the French Union. The conflict known as the First Indochina War soon erupted, and, during a lull in the fighting in 1949–50, the French, in an attempt to retain their holdings in the area, ratified separate treaties that recognized Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as independent, self-governing states within the French Union.