

# The Nationalist Movement in Indo-China

Vietnam gained formal independence in 1945, before India, but it took another three decades of fighting before the Republic of Vietnam was formed. This chapter on Indo-China will introduce you to one of the important states of the peninsula, namely, Vietnam. Nationalism in Indo-China developed in a colonial context. The knitting together of a modern Vietnamese nation that brought the different communities together was in part the result of colonisation but, as importantly, it was shaped by the struggle against colonial domination.

If you see the historical experience of Indo-China in relation to that of India, you will discover important differences in the way colonial empires functioned and the anti-imperial movement developed. By looking at such differences and similarities you can understand the variety of ways in which nationalism has developed and shaped the contemporary world.



*Fig. 1 – Map of Indo-China.*

# 1 Emerging from the Shadow of China

Indo-China comprises the modern countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (see Fig. 1). Its early history shows many different groups of people living in this area under the shadow of the powerful empire of China. Even when an independent country was established in what is now northern and central Vietnam, its rulers continued to maintain the Chinese system of government as well as Chinese culture.

Vietnam was also linked to what has been called the maritime silk route that brought in goods, people and ideas. Other networks of trade connected it to the hinterlands where non-Vietnamese people such as the Khmer Cambodians lived.



**Fig. 2 – The port of Faifo.**  
*This port was founded by Portuguese merchants. It was one of the ports used by European trading companies much before the nineteenth century.*

## 1.1 Colonial Domination and Resistance

The colonisation of Vietnam by the French brought the people of the country into conflict with the colonisers in all areas of life. The most visible form of French control was military and economic domination but the French also built a system that tried to reshape the culture of the Vietnamese. Nationalism in Vietnam emerged through the efforts of different sections of society to fight against the French and all they represented.



**Fig. 3 – Francis Garnier, a French officer who led an attack against the ruling Nguyen dynasty, being killed by soldiers of the court.**  
*Garnier was part of the French team that explored the Mekong river. In 1873 he was commissioned by the French to try and establish a French colony in Tonkin in the north. Garnier carried out an attack on Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin, but was killed in the fight.*

French troops landed in Vietnam in 1858 and by the mid-1880s they had established a firm grip over the northern region. After the Franco-Chinese war the French assumed control of Tonkin and Anaam and, in 1887, French Indo-China was formed. In the following decades the French sought to consolidate their position, and people in Vietnam began reflecting on the nature of the loss that Vietnam was suffering. Nationalist resistance developed out of this reflection.



**Fig. 4 – The Mekong river, engraving by the French Exploratory Force, in which Garnier participated.**  
*Exploring and mapping rivers was part of the colonial enterprise everywhere in the world. Colonisers wanted to know the route of the rivers, their origin, and the terrain they passed through. The rivers could then be properly used for trade and transport. During these explorations innumerable pictures and maps were produced.*

The famous blind poet Ngyuyen Dinh Chieu (1822-88) bemoaned what was happening to his country:

I would rather face eternal darkness  
 Than see the faces of traitors.  
 I would rather see no man  
 Than encounter one man's suffering.  
 I would rather see nothing  
 Than witness the dismembering of the country  
 in decline.

## 1.2 Why the French thought Colonies Necessary

Colonies were considered essential to supply natural resources and other essential goods. Like other Western nations, France also thought it was the mission of the 'advanced' European countries to bring the benefits of civilisation to backward peoples.

The French began by building canals and draining lands in the Mekong delta to increase cultivation. The vast system of irrigation works – canals and earthworks – built mainly with forced labour, increased rice production and allowed the export of rice to the international market. The area under rice cultivation went up from 274,000 hectares in 1873 to 1.1 million hectares in 1900 and 2.2 million in 1930. Vietnam exported two-thirds of its rice production and by 1931 had become the third largest exporter of rice in the world.

This was followed by infrastructure projects to help transport goods for trade, move military garrisons and control the entire region. Construction of a trans-Indo-China rail network that would link the northern and southern parts of Vietnam and China was begun. This final link with Yunan in China was completed by 1910. The second line was also built, linking Vietnam to Siam (as Thailand was then called), via the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

By the 1920s, to ensure higher levels of profit for their businesses, French business interests were pressurising the government in Vietnam to develop the infrastructure further.

## 1.3 Should Colonies be Developed?

Everyone agreed that colonies had to serve the interests of the mother country. But the question was – how? Some like Paul Bernard, an influential writer and policy-maker, strongly believed that the

### Activity

Imagine a conversation between a French coloniser and a Vietnamese labourer in the canal project. The Frenchman believes he is bringing civilization to backward people and the Vietnamese labourer argues against it. In pairs act out the conversation they may have had, using evidence from the text.

economy of the colonies needed to be developed. He argued that the purpose of acquiring colonies was to make profits. If the economy was developed and the standard of living of the people improved, they would buy more goods. The market would consequently expand, leading to better profits for French business.

Bernard suggested that there were several barriers to economic growth in Vietnam: high population levels, low agricultural productivity and extensive indebtedness amongst the peasants. To reduce rural poverty and increase agricultural productivity it was necessary to carry out land reforms as the Japanese had done in the 1890s. However, this could not ensure sufficient employment. As the experience of Japan showed, industrialisation would be essential to create more jobs.

The colonial economy in Vietnam was, however, primarily based on rice cultivation and rubber plantations owned by the French and a small Vietnamese elite. Rail and port facilities were set up to service this sector. **Indentured** Vietnamese labour was widely used in the rubber plantations. The French, contrary to what Bernard would have liked, did little to industrialise the economy. In the rural areas landlordism spread and the standard of living declined.

### New words

Indentured labour – A form of labour widely used in the plantations from the mid-nineteenth century. Labourers worked on the basis of contracts that did not specify any rights of labourers but gave immense power to employers. Employers could bring criminal charges against labourers and punish and jail them for non-fulfilment of contracts.



**Fig. 5 – A French weapons merchant, Jean Dupuis, in Vietnam in the late nineteenth century.**  
Many like him explored the regions in the hope of making profits from trade. He was one of those who persuaded the French to try and establish a base in Vietnam.

## 2 The Dilemma of Colonial Education

French colonisation was not based only on economic exploitation. It was also driven by the idea of a ‘civilising mission’. Like the British in India, the French claimed that they were bringing modern civilisation to the Vietnamese. They took for granted that Europe had developed the most advanced civilisation. So it became the duty of the Europeans to introduce these modern ideas to the colony even if this meant destroying local cultures, religions and traditions, because these were seen as outdated and prevented modern development.

Education was seen as one way to civilise the ‘native’. But in order to educate them, the French had to resolve a dilemma. How far were the Vietnamese to be educated? The French needed an educated local labour force but they feared that education might create problems. Once educated, the Vietnamese may begin to question colonial domination. Moreover, French citizens living in Vietnam (called colons) began fearing that they might lose their jobs – as teachers, shopkeepers, policemen – to the educated Vietnamese. So they opposed policies that would give the Vietnamese full access to French education.

### 2.1 Talking Modern

The French were faced with yet another problem in the sphere of education: the elites in Vietnam were powerfully influenced by Chinese culture. To consolidate their power, the French had to counter this Chinese influence. So they systematically dismantled the traditional educational system and established French schools for the Vietnamese. But this was not easy. Chinese, the language used by the elites so far, had to be replaced. But what was to take its place? Was the language to be Vietnamese or French?

There were two broad opinions on this question. Some policy-makers emphasised the need to use the French language as the medium of instruction. By learning the language, they felt, the Vietnamese would be introduced to the culture and civilisation of France. This would help create an ‘Asiatic France solidly tied to European France’. The educated people in Vietnam would respect French sentiments and ideals, see the superiority of French culture, and work for the French. Others were opposed to French being the only medium of instruction. They suggested that Vietnamese be taught in lower classes and French in the higher classes. The few

who learnt French and acquired French culture were to be rewarded with French citizenship.

However, only the Vietnamese elite – comprising a small fraction of the population – could enroll in the schools, and only a few among those admitted ultimately passed the school-leaving examination. This was largely because of a deliberate policy of failing students, particularly in the final year, so that they could not qualify for the better-paid jobs. Usually, as many as two-thirds of the students failed. In 1925, in a population of 17 million, there were less than 400 who passed the examination.

School textbooks glorified the French and justified colonial rule. The Vietnamese were represented as primitive and backward, capable of manual labour but not of intellectual reflection; they could work in the fields but not rule themselves; they were ‘skilled copyists’ but not creative. School children were told that only French rule could ensure peace in Vietnam: ‘Since the establishment of French rule the Vietnamese peasant no longer lives in constant terror of pirates ... Calm is complete, and the peasant can work with a good heart.’

## 2.2 Looking Modern

The Tonkin Free School was started in 1907 to provide a Western-style education. This education included classes in science, hygiene and French (these classes were held in the evening and had to be paid for separately). The school’s approach to what it means to be ‘modern’ is a good example of the thinking prevalent at that time. It was not enough to learn science and Western ideas: to be modern the Vietnamese had to also look modern. The school encouraged the adoption of Western styles such as having a short haircut. For the Vietnamese this meant a major break with their own identity since they traditionally kept long hair. To underline the importance of a total change there was even a ‘haircutting chant’:

Comb in the left hand  
Scissors in the right,  
Snip, snip, clip, clip!  
Watch out, be careful,  
Drop stupid practices,  
Dump childish things  
Speak openly and frankly  
Study Western customs

## Activity

Imagine you are a student in the Tonkin Free School in 1910. How would you react to:

- what the textbooks say about the Vietnamese?
- what the school tells you about hairstyles?



**Fig. 6 – A local caricature ridiculing the Vietnamese who has been westernised. Abandoning his own culture, he has begun wearing Western clothes and playing tennis.**

## 2.3 Resistance in Schools

Teachers and students did not blindly follow the curriculum. Sometimes there was open opposition, at other times there was silent resistance. As the numbers of Vietnamese teachers increased in the lower classes, it became difficult to control what was actually taught. While teaching, Vietnamese teachers quietly modified the text and criticised what was stated.

In 1926 a major protest erupted in the Saigon Native Girls School. A Vietnamese girl sitting in one of the front seats was asked to move to the back of the class and allow a local French student to occupy the front bench. She refused. The principal, also a colon (French people in the colonies), expelled her. When angry students protested, they too were expelled, leading to a further spread of open protests. Seeing the situation getting out of control, the government forced the school to take the students back. The principal reluctantly agreed but warned the students, 'I will crush all Vietnamese under my feet. Ah! You wish my deportation. Know well that I will leave only after I am assured Vietnamese no longer inhabit Cochinchina.'

Elsewhere, students fought against the colonial government's efforts to prevent the Vietnamese from qualifying for white-collar jobs. They were inspired by patriotic feelings and the conviction that it was the duty of the educated to fight for the benefit of society. This brought them into conflict with the French as well as the traditional elite, since both saw their positions threatened. By the 1920s, students were forming various political parties, such as the Party of Young Annam, and publishing nationalist journals such as the *Annamese Student*.

Schools thus became an important place for political and cultural battles. The French sought to strengthen their rule in Vietnam through the control of education. They tried to change the values, norms and perceptions of the people, to make them believe in the superiority of French civilisation and the inferiority of the Vietnamese. Vietnamese intellectuals, on the other hand, feared that Vietnam was losing not just control over its territory but its very identity: its own culture and customs were being devalued and the people were developing a master-slave mentality. The battle against French colonial education became part of the larger battle against colonialism and for independence.

### Some important dates

1802

Nguyen Anh becomes emperor symbolising the unification of the country under the Nguyen dynasty.

1867

Cochinchina (the South) becomes a French colony.

1887

Creation of the Indo-china Union, including Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and later, Laos.

1930

Ho Chi Minh forms the Vietnamese Communist Party.

1945

Vietminh start a general popular insurrection. Bao Dai abdicates. Ho Chi Minh declares independence in Hanoi (September 23).

1954

The French army is defeated at Dien Bien Phu.

Kennedy decides to increase US military aid to South Vietnam.

1974

Paris Peace Treaty.

1975 (April 30)

NLF troops enter Saigon.

1976

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is proclaimed.



## 3 Hygiene, Disease and Everyday Resistance

Education was not the only sphere of everyday life in which such political battles against colonialism were fought. In many other institutions we can see the variety of small ways in which the colonised expressed their anger against the colonisers.

### 3.1 Plague Strikes Hanoi

Take the case of health and hygiene. When the French set about creating a modern Vietnam, they decided to rebuild Hanoi. The latest ideas about architecture and modern engineering skills were employed to build a new and ‘modern’ city. In 1903, the modern part of Hanoi was struck by bubonic plague. In many colonial countries, measures to control the spread of disease created serious social conflicts. But in Hanoi events took a peculiarly interesting turn.

The French part of Hanoi was built as a beautiful and clean city with wide avenues and a well-laid-out sewer system, while the ‘native



**Fig. 7 – Modern Hanoi.**  
*Colonial buildings like this one came up in the French part of Hanoi.*

quarter' was not provided with any modern facilities. The refuse from the old city drained straight out into the river or, during heavy rains or floods, overflowed into the streets. Thus what was installed to create a hygienic environment in the French city became the cause of the plague. The large sewers in the modern part of the city, a symbol of modernity, were an ideal and protected breeding ground for rats. The sewers also served as a great transport system, allowing the rats to move around the city without any problem. And rats began to enter the well-cared-for homes of the French through the sewage pipes. What was to be done?

### 3.2 The Rat Hunt

To stem this invasion, a rat hunt was started in 1902. The French hired Vietnamese workers and paid them for each rat they caught. Rats began to be caught in thousands: on 30 May, for instance, 20,000 were caught but still there seemed to be no end. For the Vietnamese the rat hunt seemed to provide an early lesson in the success of collective bargaining. Those who did the dirty work of entering sewers found that if they came together they could negotiate a higher bounty. They also discovered innovative ways to profit from this situation. The bounty was paid when a tail was given as proof that a rat had been killed. So the rat-catchers took to just clipping the tails and releasing the rats, so that the process could be repeated, over and over again. Some people, in fact, began raising rats to earn a bounty.

Defeated by the resistance of the weak, the French were forced to scrap the bounty programme. None of this prevented the bubonic plague, which swept through the area in 1903 and in subsequent years. In a way, the rat menace marks the limits of French power and the contradictions in their 'civilising mission'. And the actions of the rat-catchers tell us of the numerous small ways in which colonialism was fought in everyday life.

## Discuss

What does the 1903 plague and the measures to control it tell us about the French colonial attitude towards questions of health and hygiene?

## 4 Religion and Anti-colonialism

Colonial domination was exercised by control over all areas of private and public life. The French occupied Vietnam militarily but they also sought to reshape social and cultural life. While religion played an important role in strengthening colonial control, it also provided ways of resistance. Let us consider how this happened.

Vietnam's religious beliefs were a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism and local practices. Christianity, introduced by French missionaries, was intolerant of this easygoing attitude and viewed the Vietnamese tendency to revere the supernatural as something to be corrected.

From the eighteenth century, many religious movements were hostile to the Western presence. An early movement against French control and the spread of Christianity was the Scholars Revolt in 1868. This revolt was led by officials at the imperial court angered by the spread of Catholicism and French power. They led a general uprising in

### Box 1

Confucius (551-479 BCE), a Chinese thinker, developed a philosophical system based on good conduct, practical wisdom and proper social relationships. People were taught to respect their parents and submit to elders. They were told that the relationship between the ruler and the people was the same as that between children and parents.



**Fig. 8 – The execution of Father Borie, a Catholic missionary.**  
Images like this by French artists were publicised in France to stir up religious fury.

Ngu An and Ha Tien provinces where over a thousand Catholics were killed. Catholic missionaries had been active in winning converts since the early seventeenth century, and by the middle of the eighteenth century had converted some 300,000. The French crushed the movement but this uprising served to inspire other patriots to rise up against them.

The elites in Vietnam were educated in Chinese and Confucianism. But religious beliefs among the peasantry were shaped by a variety of **syncretic** traditions that combined Buddhism and local beliefs. There were many popular religions in Vietnam that were spread by people who claimed to have seen a vision of God. Some of these religious movements supported the French, but others inspired movements against colonial rule.

One such movement was the Hoa Hao. It began in 1939 and gained great popularity in the fertile Mekong delta area. It drew on religious ideas popular in anti-French uprisings of the nineteenth century.

The founder of Hoa Hao was a man called Huynh Phu So. He performed miracles and helped the poor. His criticism against useless expenditure had a wide appeal. He also opposed the sale of child brides, gambling and the use of alcohol and opium.

The French tried to suppress the movement inspired by Huynh Phu So. They declared him mad, called him the Mad Bonze, and put him in a mental asylum. Interestingly, the doctor who had to prove him insane became his follower, and finally in 1941, even the French doctors declared that he was sane. The French authorities exiled him to Laos and sent many of his followers to **concentration camps**.

Movements like this always had a contradictory relationship with mainstream nationalism. Political parties often drew upon their support, but were uneasy about their activities. They could neither control or discipline these groups, nor support their rituals and practices.

Yet the significance of these movements in arousing anti-imperialist sentiments should not be underestimated.

### New words

**Syncretic** – Characterised by syncretism; aims to bring together different beliefs and practices, seeing their essential unity rather than their difference

**Concentration camp** – A prison where people are detained without due process of law. The word evokes an image of a place of torture and brutal treatment

## 5 The Vision of Modernisation

French colonialism was resisted at many levels and in various forms. But all nationalists had to grapple with one set of questions: What was it to be Modern? What was it to be Nationalist? In order to be modern, was it necessary to regard tradition as backward and reject all earlier ideas and social practices? Was it necessary to consider the ‘West’ as the symbol of development and civilisation, and try and copy the West?

Different answers were offered to such questions. Some intellectuals felt that Vietnamese traditions had to be strengthened to resist the domination of the West, while others felt that Vietnam had to learn from the West even while opposing foreign domination. These differing visions led to complex debates, which could not be easily resolved.

In the late nineteenth century, resistance to French domination was very often led by Confucian scholar-activists, who saw their world crumbling. Educated in the Confucian tradition, Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) was one such nationalist. He became a major figure in the anti-colonial resistance from the time he formed the Revolutionary Society (Duy Tan Hoi) in 1903, with Prince Cuong De as the head.

Phan Boi Chau met the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) in Yokohama in 1905. Phan’s most influential book, *The History of the Loss of Vietnam* was written under the strong influence and advice of Qichao. It became a widely read bestseller in Vietnam and China and was even made into a play. The book focuses on two connected themes: the loss of sovereignty and the severing of ties with China – ties that bound the elites of the two countries within a shared culture. It is this double loss that Phan laments, a lament that was typical of reformers from within the traditional elite.

Other nationalists strongly differed with Phan Boi Chau. One such was Phan Chu Trinh (1871-1926). He was intensely hostile to the monarchy and opposed to the idea of resisting the French with the help of the court. His desire was to establish a democratic **republic**. Profoundly influenced by the democratic ideals of the West, he did not want a wholesale rejection of Western civilisation. He accepted the French revolutionary ideal of liberty but charged the French for not abiding by the ideal. He demanded that the French set up legal and educational institutions, and develop agriculture and industries.

### Source A

In Japan, Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh spent time together, discussing their visions of Vietnamese independence, and debating their differences. This is what Phan Boi Chau later wrote about their discussions:

‘Thereafter over more than ten days, he and I debated time and again, and our opinions were diametrically opposed. That is to say, he wished to overthrow the monarchy in order to create a basis for the promotion of popular rights; I, on the contrary, maintained that first the foreign enemy should be driven out, and after our nation’s independence was restored we could talk about other things. My plan was to make use of the monarchy, which he opposed absolutely. His plan was to raise up the people to abolish the monarchy, with which I absolutely disagreed. In other words, he and I were pursuing one and the same goal, but our means were considerably different.’

### Source

### Discuss

What ideas did Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh share in common? What did they differ on?

### New words

Republic – A form of government based on popular consent and popular representation. It is based on the power of the people as opposed to monarchy

## 5.1 Other Ways of Becoming Modern: Japan and China

Early Vietnamese nationalists had a close relationship with Japan and China. They provided models for those looking to change, a refuge for those who were escaping French police, and a location where a wider Asian network of revolutionaries could be established.

In the first decade of the twentieth century a 'go east movement' became popular. In 1907-08 some 300 Vietnamese students went to Japan to acquire modern education. For many of them the primary objective was to drive out the French from Vietnam, overthrow the puppet emperor and re-establish the Nguyen dynasty that had been deposed by the French. These nationalists looked for foreign arms and help. They appealed to the Japanese as fellow Asians. Japan had modernised itself and had resisted colonisation by the West. Besides, its victory over Russia in 1907 proved its military capabilities. Vietnamese students established a branch of the Restoration Society in Tokyo but after 1908, the Japanese Ministry of Interior clamped down on them. Many, including Phan Boi Chau, were deported and forced to seek exile in China and Thailand.

Developments in China also inspired Vietnamese nationalists. In 1911, the long established monarchy in China was overthrown by a popular movement under Sun Yat-sen, and a Republic was set up. Inspired by these developments, Vietnamese students organised the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam (Viet-Nam Quan Phuc Hoi). Now the nature of the anti-French independence movement changed. The objective was no longer to set up a constitutional monarchy but a democratic republic.

Soon, however, the anti-imperialist movement in Vietnam came under a new type of leadership.



**Fig. 9 – Cartoon of Vietnamese nationalists chasing away imperialists.**  
In all such nationalist representations of struggle the nationalists appear heroic, marching ahead, while the imperial forces flee.

## 6 The Communist Movement and Vietnamese Nationalism

The Great Depression of the 1930s had a profound impact on Vietnam. The prices of rubber and rice fell, leading to rising rural debts, unemployment and rural uprisings, such as in the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. These provinces were among the poorest, had an old radical tradition, and have been called the ‘electrical fuses’ of Vietnam – when the system was under pressure they were the first to blow. The French put these uprisings down with great severity, even using planes to bomb demonstrators.

In February 1930, Ho Chi Minh brought together competing nationalist groups to establish the Vietnamese Communist (Vietnam Cong San Dang) Party, later renamed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. He was inspired by the militant demonstrations of the European communist parties.

In 1940 Japan occupied Vietnam, as part of its imperial drive to control Southeast Asia. So nationalists now had to fight against the Japanese as well as the French. The League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh), which came to be known as the Vietminh, fought the Japanese occupation and recaptured Hanoi in September 1945. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was formed and Ho Chi Minh became Chairman.

### 6.1 The New Republic of Vietnam

The new republic faced a number of challenges. The French tried to regain control by using the emperor, Bao Dai, as their puppet. Faced with the French offensive, the Vietminh were forced to retreat to the hills. After eight years of fighting, the French were defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

The Supreme French Commander of the French armies, General Henry Navarre had declared confidently in 1953 that they would soon be victorious. But on 7 May 1954, the Vietminh annihilated and captured more than 16,000 soldiers of the French Expeditionary Corps. The entire commanding staff, including a general, 16 colonels and 1,749 officers, were taken prisoner.

In the peace negotiations in Geneva that followed the French defeat, the Vietnamese were persuaded to accept the division of the country. North and south were split: Ho Chi Minh and the communists took

### Source B

#### Declaration of independence

The declaration of the new republic began by reaffirming the principles of the declaration of independence of the United States in 1771 and of the French Revolution in 1791 but added that the French imperialists do not follow these principles for they

‘have violated our fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

‘In the field of politics, they have deprived us of all liberties. They have imposed upon us inhuman laws ... They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood.

‘They have fettered public opinion; they have practiced **obscurantism** against our people ...

‘For these reasons, we members of the Provisional Government, representing the entire population of Vietnam, declare that we shall henceforth have no connection with imperialist France; that we abolish all the privileges which the French have arrogated to themselves on our territory ...

‘We solemnly proclaim to the entire world: Vietnam has the right to be free and independent, and in fact has become free and independent.’

Source

#### New words

Obscurantist – Person or ideas that mislead

power in the north while Bao Dai's regime was put in power in the south.

This division set in motion a series of events that turned Vietnam into a battlefield bringing death and destruction to its people as well as the environment. The Bao Dai regime was soon overthrown by a coup led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem built a repressive and authoritarian government. Anyone who opposed him was called a communist and was jailed and killed. Diem retained Ordinance 10, a French law that permitted Christianity but outlawed Buddhism. His dictatorial rule came to be opposed by a broad opposition united under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NLF).

With the help of the Ho Chi Minh government in the north, the NLF fought for the unification of the country. The US



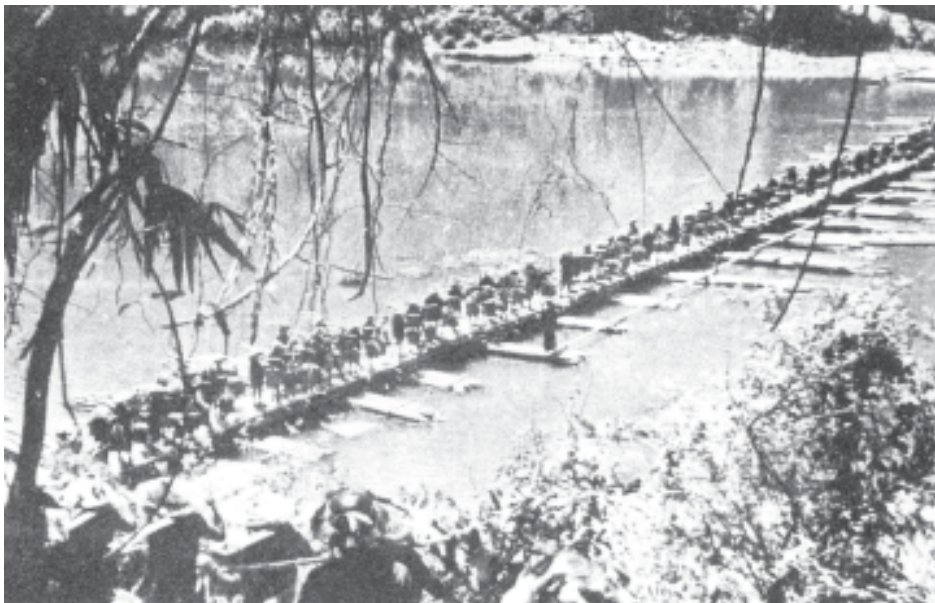
**Fig. 10 – The French Commander in Indo-China, General Henri Navarre (right).** Navarre wanted to attack the Vietminh even in their remote bases. As a consequence the French opened many fronts of attack and scattered their forces. Navarre's plans backfired in the North Eastern Valley of Dien Bien Phu.

## Box 2

At Dien Bien Phu the French were outwitted by the Vietminh forces led by General Vo Nguyen Giap. The French Commander, Navarre, had not thought of all the problems he would face in the battle. The valley where French garrisons were located was flooded in the monsoon and the area was covered with bushes, making it difficult to move troops and tanks, or trace the Vietminh anti-aircraft guns hidden in the jungle.

From their base in the hills, the Vietminh surrounded the French garrisons in the valley below, digging trenches and tunnels to move without being detected. Supplies and reinforcements could not reach the besieged French garrison, the wounded French soldiers could not be moved, and the French airstrip became unusable because of continuous artillery fire.

Dien Bien Phu became a very important symbol of struggle. It strengthened Vietminh conviction in their capacity to fight powerful imperial forces through determination and proper strategy. Stories of the battle were retold in villages and cities to inspire people.



**Fig. 11 – Supplies being taken to Dien Bien Phu.** Vietminh forces used bicycles and porters to transport supplies. They went through jungles and hidden tracks to escape enemy attacks.



### Box 3

#### Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969)

Little is known about his early life mostly because Minh chose to downplay his personal background and identify himself with the cause of Vietnam. Probably born as Nguyen Van Thanh in Central Vietnam, he studied at French schools that produced leaders such as Ngo Dinh Diem, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong. He briefly taught in 1910, and in 1911, learnt baking and took a job on a French liner on the Saigon-Marseilles run. Minh became an active member of the Comintern, meeting Lenin and other leaders. In May 1941, after 30 years abroad in Europe, Thailand and China, Minh finally returned to Vietnam. In 1943 he took the name Ho Chi Minh (He Who Enlightens). He became president of the Vietnam Democratic Republic. Ho Chi Minh died on 3 September 1969. He led the party successfully for over 40 years, struggling to preserve Vietnamese autonomy.

watched this alliance with fear. Worried about communists gaining power, it decided to intervene decisively, sending in troops and arms.

## 6.2 The Entry of the US into the War

US entry into the war marked a new phase that proved costly to the Vietnamese as well as to the Americans. From 1965 to 1972, over 3,403,100 US services personnel served in Vietnam (7,484 were women). Even though the US had advanced technology and good



*Fig. 12 – American soldiers searching rice fields for Vietcongs.*

medical supplies, casualties were high. About 47,244 died in battle and 303,704 were wounded. (Of those wounded, 23,014 were listed by the Veterans Administration to be 100 per cent disabled.)

This phase of struggle with the US was brutal. Thousands of US troops arrived equipped with heavy weapons and tanks and backed by the most powerful bombers of the time – B52s. The wide spread attacks and use of chemical weapons – **Napalm**, Agent Orange, and phosphorous bombs – destroyed many villages and decimated jungles. Civilians died in large numbers.

The effect of the war was felt within the US as well. Many were critical of the government for getting involved in a war that they saw as indefensible. When the youth were drafted for the war, the anger spread. Compulsory service in the armed forces, however, could be waived for university graduates. This meant that many of those sent to fight did not belong to the privileged elite but were minorities and children of working-class families.

The US media and films played a major role in both supporting as well as criticising the war. Hollywood made films in support of the war, such as John Wayne's *Green Berets* (1968). This has been cited by many as an example of an unthinking propaganda film that was responsible for motivating many young men to die in the war. Other films were more critical as they tried to understand the reasons for this war. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) reflected the moral confusion that the war had caused in the US.

The war grew out of a fear among US policy-planners that the victory of the Ho Chi Minh government would start a domino effect – communist governments would be established in other countries in the area. They underestimated the power of nationalism to move people to action, inspire them to sacrifice their home and family, live under horrific conditions, and fight for independence. They underestimated the power of a small country to fight the most technologically advanced country in the world.

### New words

**Napalm** – An organic compound used to thicken gasoline for firebombs. The mixture burns slowly and when it comes in contact with surfaces like the human body, it sticks and continues to burn. Developed in the US, it was used in the Second World War. Despite an international outcry, it was used in Vietnam.

### Box 4

#### Agent Orange: The Deadly Poison

Agent Orange is a defoliant, a plant killer, so called because it was stored in drums marked with an orange band. Between 1961 and 1971, some 11 million gallons of this chemical was sprayed from cargo planes by US forces. Their plan was to destroy forests and fields, so that it would be easier to kill if there was no jungle cover for people to hide in. Over 14 per cent of the country's farmland was affected by this poison. Its effect has been staggering, continuing to affect people till today. Dioxin, an element of Agent Orange, is known to cause cancer and brain damage in children, and, according to a study, is also the cause of the high incidence of deformities found in the sprayed areas.

The tonnage of bombs, including chemical arms, used during the US intervention (mostly against civilian targets) in Vietnam exceeds that used throughout the Second World War.



**Fig. 13 – In December 1972 Hanoi was bombed.**

### 6.3 The Ho Chi Minh Trail

The story of the Ho Chi Minh trail is one way of understanding the nature of the war that the Vietnamese fought against the US. It symbolises how the Vietnamese used their limited resources to great advantage. The trail, an immense network of footpaths and roads, was used to transport men and materials from the north to the south. The trail was improved from the late 1950s, and from 1967 about 20,000 North Vietnamese troops came south each month on this trail.

The trail had support bases and hospitals along the way. In some parts supplies were transported in trucks, but mostly they were carried by porters, who were mainly women. These porters carried about 25 kilos on their backs, or about 70 kilos on their bicycles.

Most of the trail was outside Vietnam in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia with branch lines extending into South Vietnam. The US regularly bombed this trail trying to disrupt supplies, but efforts to destroy this important supply line by intensive bombing failed because they were rebuilt very quickly.



**Fig. 14 – The Ho Chi Minh trail.**  
Notice how the trail moved through Laos and Cambodia.



**Fig. 15 – Rebuilding damaged roads.**  
Roads damaged by bombs were quickly rebuilt.



**Fig.16 – On the Ho Chi Minh trail.**

### Source C

#### Letters of Mr Do Sam

Do Sam was a colonel in the North Vietnamese artillery regiment. He was part of the Tet Offensive started in 1968, to unify North and South Vietnam and win the battle against US. These are extracts from his letters written to his wife from the scene of battle. They show how, in the nationalist imagination, personal love mingles with love for the country and the desire for freedom. Sacrifice appears necessary for happiness.

Letter dated 6/1968

'You ask me what "you miss most when you think of me?" I miss the environment of our wedding ... I miss the small cozy room with lots of memories. I miss ...

'Right after our wedding I had to again leave to fight in order to protect the coastal areas of our country. What a short time we had before I had to station permanently in the South. The more I think, the more I feel for you; therefore I would have to be more determined to protect the country in order to bring happiness for millions of couples like us ...

'Last night the car kept heading south. This morning I am writing to you sitting on a stone, surrounded by the sound of streams and the rustle of trees, as if they were celebrating our happiness. Looking forward to the day when we can return victoriously. Then we could live in greater happiness, couldn't we? Wish you good health and miss me always ...'

Letter dated 6/1968

'Though you are always in my mind I have to focus on my work to contribute to the victory of the ongoing struggle of our nation ...

'I have promised myself that only when the South is liberated and peace and happiness return to the people, only then could I be free to focus on building our own happiness, only then I could be satisfied with our family life ...'

- Hung, Dang Vuong, *'Những lá thư thời chiến Việt Nam* (Letters Written during the War in Vietnam), publication of Hoi nha van (Writers' Association), 2005. Translation by Nguen Quoc Anh.

Source

## 7 The Nation and Its Heroes

Another way of looking at social movements is to see how they affect different groups in society. Let us see how the roles of women were specified in the anti-imperialist movement in Vietnam, and what that tells us about nationalist ideology.

### 7.1 Women as Rebels

Women in Vietnam traditionally enjoyed greater equality than in China, particularly among the lower classes, but they had only limited freedom to determine their future and played no role in public life.

As the nationalist movement grew, the status of women came to be questioned and a new image of womanhood emerged. Writers and political thinkers began idealising women who rebelled against social norms. In the 1930s, a famous novel by Nhat Linh caused a scandal because it showed a woman leaving a forced marriage and marrying someone of her choice, someone who was involved in nationalist politics. This rebellion against social conventions marked the arrival of the new woman in Vietnamese society.

### 7.2 Heroes of Past Times

Rebel women of the past were similarly celebrated. In 1913, the nationalist Phan Boi Chau wrote a play based on the lives of the Trung sisters who had fought against Chinese domination in 39-43 CE. In this play he depicted these sisters as patriots fighting to save the Vietnamese nation from the Chinese. The actual reasons for the revolt are a matter of debate among scholars, but after Phan's play the Trung sisters came to be idealised and glorified. They were depicted in paintings, plays and novels as representing the indomitable will and the intense patriotism of the Vietnamese. We are told that they gathered a force of over 30,000, resisted the Chinese for two years, and when ultimately defeated, they committed suicide, instead of surrendering to the enemy.

Other women rebels of the past were part of the popular nationalist lore. One of the most venerated was Trieu Au who lived in the third century CE. Orphaned in childhood, she lived with her brother. On growing up she left home, went into the jungles, organised a large army and resisted Chinese rule. Finally, when her army was



**Fig. 17 – Image of Trieu Au worshipped as a sacred figure.**  
*Rebels who resisted Chinese rule continue to be celebrated.*

crushed, she drowned herself. She became a sacred figure, not just a martyr who fought for the honour of the country. Nationalists popularised her image to inspire people to action.

### 7.3 Women as Warriors

In the 1960s, photographs in magazines and journals showed women as brave fighters. There were pictures of women militia shooting down planes. They were portrayed as young, brave and dedicated. Stories were written to show how happy they felt when they joined the army and could carry a rifle. Some stories spoke of their incredible bravery in single-handedly killing the enemy – Nguyen Thi Xuan, for instance, was reputed to have shot down a jet with just twenty bullets.

Women were represented not only as warriors but also as workers: they were shown with a rifle in one hand and a hammer in the other. Whether young or old, women began to be depicted as selflessly working and fighting to save the country. As casualties in the war increased in the 1960s, women were urged to join the struggle in larger numbers.

Many women responded and joined the resistance movement. They helped in nursing the wounded, constructing underground rooms and tunnels and fighting the enemy. Along the Ho Chi Minh trail young volunteers kept open 2,195 km of strategic roads and guarded 2,500 key points. They built six airstrips, neutralised tens of thousands of bombs, transported tens of thousands of kilograms of cargo, weapons and food and shot down fifteen planes. Between 1965 and 1975, of the 17,000 youth who worked on the trail, 70 to 80 per cent were women. One military historian argues that there were 1.5 million women in the regular army, the militia, the local forces and professional teams.

### 7.4 Women in Times of Peace

By the 1970s, as peace talks began to get under way and the end of the war seemed near, women were no longer represented as warriors. Now the image of women as workers begins to predominate. They are shown working in agricultural cooperatives, factories and production units, rather than as fighters.



**Fig. 18 – With a gun in one hand.**

*Stories about women showed them eager to join the army. A common description was: 'A rosy-cheeked woman, here I am fighting side by side with you men. The prison is my school, the sword is my child, the gun is my husband.'*



**Fig. 19 – Vietnamese women doctors nursing the wounded.**

## 8 The End of the War

The prolongation of the war created strong reactions even within the US. It was clear that the US had failed to achieve its objectives: the Vietnamese resistance had not been crushed; the support of the Vietnamese people for US action had not been won. In the meantime, thousands of young US soldiers had lost their lives, and countless Vietnamese civilians had been killed. This was a war that has been called the first television war. Battle scenes were shown on the daily news programmes. Many became disillusioned with what the US was doing and writers such as Mary McCarthy, and actors like Jane Fonda even visited North Vietnam and praised their heroic defence of the country. The scholar Noam Chomsky called the war ‘the greatest threat to peace, to national self-determination, and to international cooperation’.

The widespread questioning of government policy strengthened moves to negotiate an end to the war. A peace settlement was signed in Paris in January 1974. This ended conflict with the US but fighting between the Saigon regime and the NLF continued. The NLF occupied the presidential palace in Saigon on 30 April 1975 and unified Vietnam.



**Fig. 20 – North Vietnamese prisoners in South Vietnam being released after the accord .**



**Fig. 21 – Vietcong soldiers pose triumphantly atop a tank after Saigon is liberated. What does this image tell us about the nature of Vietnamese nationalism?**

## Write in brief

1. Write a note on:
  - a) What was meant by the 'civilising mission' of the colonisers
  - b) Huynh Phu So
2. Explain the following:
  - a) Only one-third of the students in Vietnam would pass the school-leaving examinations.
  - b) The French began building canals and draining lands in the Mekong delta.
  - c) The government made the Saigon Native Girls School take back the students it had expelled.
  - d) Rats were most common in the modern, newly built areas of Hanoi.
3. Describe the ideas behind the Tonkin Free School. To what extent was it a typical example of colonial ideas in Vietnam?
4. What was Phan Chu Trinh's objective for Vietnam? How were his ideas different from those of Phan Boi Chau?

Write in brief

## Discuss

1. With reference to what you have read in this chapter, discuss the influence of China on Vietnam's culture and life.
2. What was the role of religious groups in the development of anti-colonial feeling in Vietnam?
3. Explain the causes of the US involvement in the war in Vietnam. What effect did this involvement have on life within the US itself?
4. Write an evaluation of the Vietnamese war against the US from the point of
  - a) a porter on the Ho Chi Minh trail.
  - b) a woman soldier.
5. What was the role of women in the anti-imperial struggle in Vietnam? Compare this with the role of women in the nationalist struggle in India.

Discuss

## Project

Find out about the anti-imperialist movement in any one country in South America. Imagine that a freedom fighter from this country meets a Vietminh soldier; they become friends and talk about their experiences of the freedom struggles in their countries. Write about the conversation they might have.

Project