

5

Decolonisation in Indochina, 1945–1954

KEY CONCEPTS

Key concepts relevant to this chapter are:

- communism ► decolonisation
- democracy ► imperialism
- nationalism ► racism
- self-determination ► terrorism

KEY DATES

1850s

- ▼ France gains control of Indochina

1930

- ▼ February Ho Chi Minh establishes the ICP

1941

- ▼ Japan occupies French Indochina
- ▼ Founding of Viet Minh

1943

- ▼ Viet Minh guerrilla warfare against Japanese and French

1945

- ▼ August Viet Minh takes control of Hanoi and Saigon
- ▼ 2 September Ho Chi Minh proclaims Vietnamese independence
- ▼ October Return of the French

1946

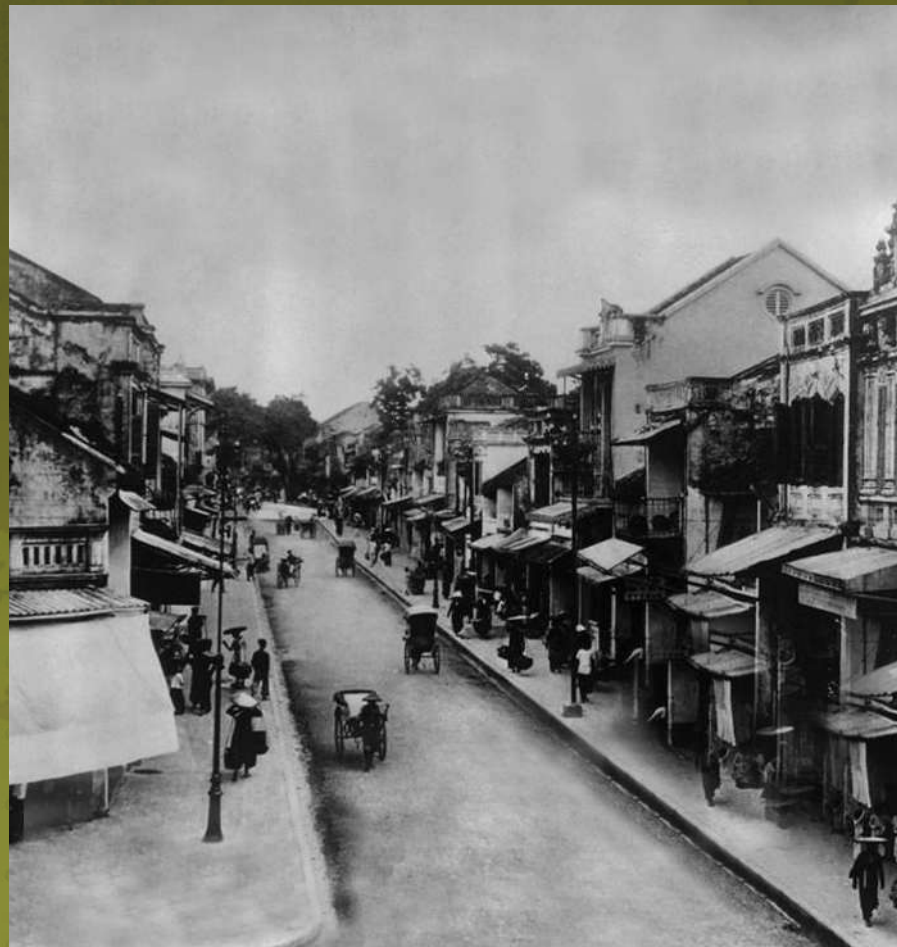
- ▼ First Indochinese War against France begins

1954

- ▼ 7 May Viet Minh defeat French at Dien Bien Phu
- ▼ July Geneva Accords on future of Indochina

The areas of focus of this case study are:

- The impact of French imperialism on Indochina
- The rise of Vietnamese nationalism and war against the French
- The growth of Vietnamese nationalism/communism
- The defeat of France



Source 5 .1

A photograph of the main street of Hanoi, Vietnam, in 1940, when Indochina was under French rule

Introduction

imperialism ▶ the practice of increasing a nation's power by taking control of other nations and their resources

colony ▶ land settled and ruled by a foreign power which exploits the colony's people and resources while maintaining a distinction between the ruling nation and the colonial people it views as inferior

At the beginning of the twentieth century most areas of the world were under the control or influence of foreign powers (see the map in source 10.10, page 188). These powers enjoyed the benefits of **imperialism** — the exploitation of a **colony** and its resources for the benefit of the power that controlled it.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many peoples fought political and military battles to gain independence from colonial rule. In Indochina, the peoples of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam fought to gain independence from French rule and establish themselves as independent nations. The road to independence was a long and hard-fought one that, in Vietnam, took thirty years.

The impact of French imperialism on Indochina

In the late nineteenth century, France was one of the world's great powers. It controlled land in Africa, South America and the three countries that made up the Indochinese Union or French Indochina — Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Control of these imperial possessions helped increase France's power, wealth and influence.



France gained control of Indochina (an area almost one and a half times the size of France itself) from the late 1850s onwards. In Vietnam, France created three administrative areas — Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. This undermined the country's sense of unity as did the French policy of giving each area a different status in relation to France:

- ▶ A French governor ruled Cochinchina as part of France and its political representatives could hold seats in the National Assembly in Paris. The Vietnamese who lived in Cochinchina could gain French citizenship.
- ▶ Those living in Annam and Tonkin could not gain French citizenship and these territories, officially under French 'protection', were not considered part of France. In theory these areas remained under the rule of local leaders; in reality, these leaders were not free to act independently of France.

In Laos and Cambodia, France exercised its control through the emperors who continued the day-to-day rule of their countries. France influenced their decision making and, either directly or indirectly, the French governor ruled all of Indochina.

Source 5.2

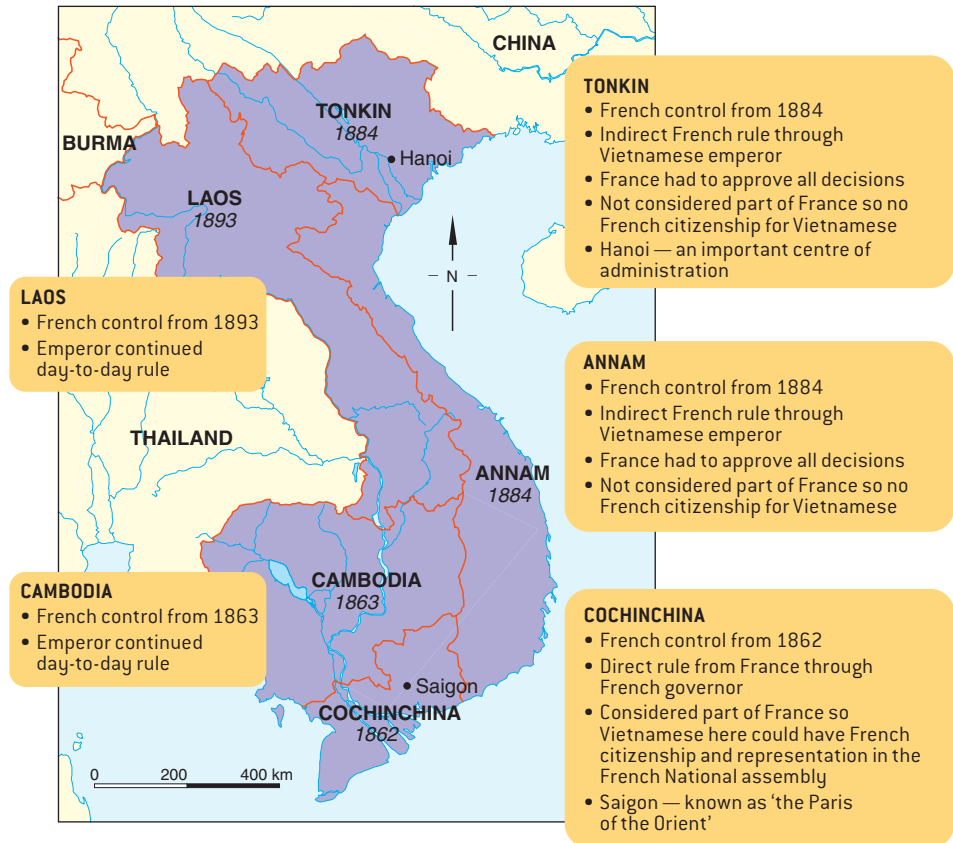
A nineteenth-century illustration depicting French forces conquering Hanoi

SOURCE QUESTION

What impression does the source 5.2 illustration give of the French troops' method of overcoming the Indochinese people of Hanoi?

Source 5.3

Map showing the stages by which France gained control of Indochina and the differing nature of control within Indochina's five main administrative areas



SOURCE QUESTIONS

Use source 5.3 to answer the following.

1. Identify the years in which France took control of the different areas of Indochina.
2. What advantages would France have gained by dividing Indochina into five areas?

racism ▶ one group's view that its race is superior to that of another group

French attitudes and influence in Indochina

France, like most empire builders, believed that the 'natives' in its colonies were inferior and in need of contact with French culture to overcome their 'backwardness'. This **racism** was a component of the spread of French *civilisation* in Indochina, France's *mission civilisatrice*, which resulted in weakening traditional Indochinese sources of authority. For example:

- ▶ French culture and European subjects were the main influences on the education system.
- ▶ France encouraged upper-class Indochinese to adopt French cultural practices, values and attitudes.
- ▶ French-educated officials took control of village communities and undermined their traditional social and economic structures.

Source 5.4

Photograph showing a peasant carrying a French official along a stream



Source 5.5

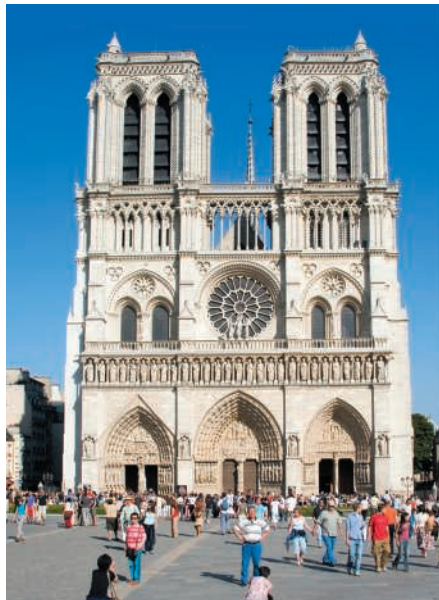
A French woman in Indochina describing a meeting with a local Annamese man

He gave his hand to my husband and then to me. It was the first time I had shaken hands with an Annamese, and a shudder went through me when I felt in my own the uncanny dry-skinned fingers with their long nails. This simple and natural action brought home to me more strongly than ever the natural antipathy that exists between white and yellow races. In theory, I do not mind shaking hands with any of the mandarins who will do me that honour, but I can never do so without this consciousness.

Extract from G. Vassal, *On and Off Duty in Annam*, Heinemann, London, 1910, p. 109.

Source 5.6

Photographs of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (left) and Hanoi Cathedral in Vietnam (right)



SOURCE QUESTION

What do sources 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 indicate about the impact of French colonisation on Vietnamese life and culture?

Indochinese colonies provided many opportunities for France to increase its wealth and prestige. Indochina produced significant quantities of coal, corn, rice, rubber, silk, tin and zinc and its location was useful for building up France's overland trade with China. France used many of Indochina's 25 million people as a cheap labour force in mines, factories and rice fields and on rubber plantations. The establishment of monopoly control of the alcohol, salt and opium trades also enhanced France's profits, with France demanding that the Montagnards (highland dwellers) achieve set production targets and that villagers in the lowlands achieve French-designated buying targets.

The needs of the French colonists took priority over the development of Indochina for the benefit of its own people, who therefore could not exercise **self-determination**. The people who grew the rice had little access to it as a food source. The work of the peasants financed the building of canals, roads, railway lines and port facilities to service French trading opportunities and the cost of the French administration of Indochina. The peasants remained poor under the burden of high taxes, high rents and debts to moneylenders.

self-determination ▶ a people's right to exercise independent control of its own destiny

Indochinese labourers bore the cost of the Michelin tyre company's reliance on Indochinese rubber supplies. In the period 1917–44, nearly 30 per cent of the workers on one rubber plantation died from diseases caused by malnutrition. In Vietnam, the French gave land grants to French settlers and also sold large areas of land to wealthy Vietnamese. By the late 1930s, these landlords controlled 45 per cent of the rice-growing areas in Cochinchina while 60 per cent of the peasantry had no land at all.

The French Security Service protected French political and economic interests. Frenchmen held most of the key government and public service positions; the Indochinese who did achieve significant positions received a fraction of the wages paid to their French counterparts.

🌀 The rise of Vietnamese nationalism and 'war' against the French

guerrillas ▶ locals who fight the enemy by engaging in surprise attacks on enemy facilities, troops and supply routes

nationalism ▶ sense of a national identity developed from belonging to a group sharing common cultural, linguistic and historical ties, and the desire to work with others to achieve common goals related to these, at times regardless of how this might affect other countries

In all countries of Indochina, the native population had fought from the very beginning against French rule of its territory. In Vietnam, **guerrillas** fought to prevent both the forceful takeover of their land and the loss of their heritage. Vietnamese peasants protested against changed patterns of work and land ownership. Some upper-class Vietnamese joined and provided leadership for armed peasant revolts and scholar patriots provided ongoing encouragement of a concept of Vietnamese national identity. The French responded with violence and attempts to suppress radical thought. This further encouraged the growth of **nationalism** and resistance to French rule. The French also responded by providing privileges to upper-class Vietnamese in order to win their loyalty and increase the gap between them and those of lower classes.

Source 5.7

Photograph of a group of Vietnamese guerrillas in the late nineteenth century



Early twentieth century nationalism

Many educated Vietnamese refused to cooperate with the French. Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chu Trinh were two of the most prominent activists of this anti-French group.

In the early twentieth century, Phan Boi Chau tried to gain support for a rebellion against the French and create the basis of a leadership group to replace them. In the period 1904–12, he helped create three different nationalist and pro-independence organisations: the *Duy Tan Hoi* (Reformation Society) in 1904; the *Viet Nam Cong Hien Hoi* (Vietnam Public Offering Society) in 1907; and the *Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi* (Vietnam Restoration Society) in 1912.

Phan Boi Chau encouraged his followers to think of themselves as Vietnamese and forget the divisive French terms (Annamese, Cochinchinese and Tonkinese) for people from the different areas of the country. He aimed to gain Vietnamese independence from French rule and establish a democratic republic. Phan Boi Chau believed that the French had to be forced out of Vietnam. His use of **terrorism** gained him a four-year prison term in 1914. He lived in exile in China for the next eight years and then under house arrest back in Vietnam (after the French kidnapped him to force his return) until his death in 1940.

Phan Chu Trinh was another important pro-independence leader. He supported some of the ideas of the eighteenth-century French philosophers, Montesquieu and Rousseau, and believed that French colonial government could evolve peacefully towards **democracy**. He was one of many educated Vietnamese whom the French imprisoned at Poulo Condore, an island which the French used for political prisoners.

The use of **quoc ngu** (the national script) in literature, journals and pamphlets helped towards the creation of a national rather than a regional identity within Vietnam. The printing business established by Nguyen Van Vinh (1882–1936) in Hanoi in 1907 facilitated the acceptance of this national language which, in 1918, officially replaced the Chinese script. The use of *quoc ngu* became the main means of spreading views critical of France's influence in Vietnam and making them accessible to educated Vietnamese. It also promoted a national identity through promotion of a Vietnamese literary culture.

Nationalism between the wars

Resistance grew stronger during and after World War I. This was due to the influence of nationalism that arose from French demands on Vietnam during the war. France took 50 000 soldiers and 50 000 workers to serve in Europe and significantly increased local taxes to help subsidise the French war effort. In the Thai Nguyen province of north Vietnam, Vietnamese soldiers armed prisoners and locals in an uprising against French authority. As with many other revolts at that time, the French regained control and either killed or imprisoned those who had fought against them.

The education that many wealthy Vietnamese experienced in France itself also encouraged a greater understanding of and commitment to nationalist ideas and the ideals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, which had inspired the French people's own struggles against oppression and injustice (see page 2).

terrorism ▶ the use of violence to gain political change

democracy ▶ government by elected representatives of the people

quoc ngu ▶ the romanised script, used for the Vietnamese language. It replaced the Chinese script.

communism ▶ a political ideology and economic system, developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), in which people share equally the ownership of their society’s resources, contribute to its work according to their abilities, and are provided for according to their needs. Its main ideas include the abolition of private ownership of property; government control of the nation’s resources; and the elimination of classes.

By 1930, two radical revolutionary groups had emerged to challenge French authority:

- ▶ the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD), which never recovered from the failure of its 1930 attempt to take power
- ▶ the more successful Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded by Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) in 1930.

Ho Chi Minh’s goal of independence from French rule reflected both a strong communist and a nationalist outlook as was evident in his speech announcing the formation of the ICP in 1930 (see source 5.8). This speech reflected his commitment to **communism** as the framework for the achievement of nationalist goals.

Source 5.8

Extract from Ho Chi Minh’s speech in February 1930 announcing the formation of the ICP

Workers, peasants, soldiers, youth, pupils!

Oppressed and exploited compatriots!

The Communist Party of Indochina is founded. It is the party of the working class. It will help the proletarian class lead the revolution in order to struggle for all the oppressed and exploited people. From now on we must join the Party, help it and follow it in order to implement the following slogans:

1. To overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class.
2. To make Indochina completely independent.
3. To establish a worker–peasant and soldier government.
4. To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker–peasant and soldier government.
5. To confiscate all of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class and distribute them to poor peasants.
6. To implement the eight hour working day.
7. To abolish public loans and poll tax. To waive unjust taxes hitting the poor people.
8. To bring back all freedom to the masses.
9. To carry out universal education.
10. To implement equality between man and woman.

Ho Chi Minh, quoted in I. Sutherland, *Conflict in Indo China*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne, 1990, p. 18.

SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. Who is the audience for the speech in source 5.8?
2. Which of Ho Chi Minh’s slogans are linked to:
 - (a) the nationalist goal of independence
 - (b) the communist goal of improving the lives of working-class people?
3. What do your answers to these questions indicate about which ideology — communism or nationalism — played the more significant role in the ICP at this time?

The ICP began to build support for its goal of independence and, at the same time, provide the framework for an alternative to French rule. When the Great Depression of the 1930s led to the collapse of world markets for rubber and rice, this resulted in famine inside Vietnam. The economic hardships of the Depression provided additional reasons for the peasantry to support the ICP against the French. During the 1930s, the ICP led demonstrations against low pay, high salt prices and other aspects of French exploitation of the Vietnamese people. The French imprisoned a number of the party's leaders and the party itself continued its efforts in less obvious ways.

Over the next decade, the ICP policy for Vietnam developed into one placing a stronger influence on nationalism and independence and linked to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of organisation. Ho Chi Minh argued that these goals could best be achieved through establishing broadly based national opposition to the French and the use of communist political ideology.

Ho Chi Minh's ideas differed from those of mainstream Russian communists in two ways:

1. He placed his main emphasis on the achievement of national independence, rather than on gaining equality for all people within Vietnam.
2. He believed that peasants rather than urban workers would be the main force for change.

The impact of World War II

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 provided a real opportunity to end French control of Indochina. From early 1940 onwards, Nazi German forces controlled northern France and influenced the nominally neutral **Vichy government** that ruled southern France. The Vichy government lacked the strength to retain control of all of France's overseas colonies.

Japanese forces invaded French Indochina to gain access to its raw materials. Japan particularly wanted to prevent Vietnam from supplying Japan's enemy — China — with essential materials. In September 1941, the Vichy government agreed to allow an occupying force of 35 000 Japanese soldiers into Indochina. The French remained the official rulers of Indochina by allowing the Japanese to take whatever of its resources they wanted for their war effort. These events increased Indochina's hostility to both France and Japan and gave further encouragement to Vietnamese nationalism. They encouraged support for a resistance movement known as the **Viet Minh** (Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam), which Ho Chi Minh founded in 1941. Opposition to French rule became more organised.

Strategies of the Viet Minh

The Viet Minh was a coalition of nationalist groups largely influenced by its ICP leadership. Its goal was Vietnamese independence from foreign rule, or **decolonisation**, and its membership included both nationalists and communists. Many observers viewed Ho Chi Minh primarily as a nationalist fighting for Vietnamese liberation rather than as a communist. His closest colleagues were Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap.

Vichy government ▶ French government headed by Marshall Pétain that cooperated with the Nazi government controlling the northern part of France

Viet Minh ▶ a group incorporating Vietnamese nationalists who fought to gain independence from foreign control of Vietnam

decolonisation ▶ the freeing of a colony from imperial rule and granting of self-government; in this context, the removal of French imperialist control over Indochina

Source 5.9

Extract from a letter written in June 1941 by Ho Chi Minh at the time of the founding of the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh)

Elders! Prominent personalities! Intellectuals, peasants, workers, traders, and soldiers! Dear compatriots!

Since the French were defeated by the Germans, their forces have been completely disintegrated. However, with regard to our people, they continue to plunder us pitilessly, suck all our blood, and carry out a barbarous policy of all-out terrorism and massacre. Concerning their foreign policy . . . they heartlessly offer our interests to Japan. As a result, our people suffer under a double yoke: they serve not only as buffaloes and horses to the French invaders but also as slaves to the Japanese plunderers . . .

Rich people, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, and women who warmly love your country! At the present time national liberation is the most important problem. Let us unite together! As one in mind and strength we shall overthrow the Japanese and French and their jackals in order to save people from the situation between boiling water and burning heat.

Dear compatriots!

National salvation is the common cause to the whole of our people. Every Vietnamese must take part in it. He who has money will contribute his money, he who has strength will contribute his strength, he who has talent will contribute his talent. I pledge to use all my modest abilities to follow you, and am ready for the last sacrifice.

Revolutionary fighters!

. . . Unite with each other, unify your action to overthrow the Japanese and the French. Victory to Vietnam's revolution!

Victory to the World's Revolution!

Published in Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, Hanoi, 1960–62, pp. 151–4, quoted in I. Sutherland, *Conflict in Indo China*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 20–21.

☞ SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. To whom is the letter in source 5.9 addressed? What does this indicate about the types of people whose support the Viet Minh is seeking?
2. Which aspects of the letter reflect the communist goal of 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'?
3. What does Ho Chi Minh say to gain support for the cause of independence?

The Viet Minh succeeded in coordinating support for two key nationalist goals:

- ▶ overthrowing Japanese control of Vietnam during World War II
- ▶ preventing the return of the French.

Giap, the military strategist, organised the Viet Minh into an army of 10000 guerrilla fighters. They mounted an effective **guerrilla warfare** campaign against both the French and the Japanese in the period from 1943 to 1945. The Viet Minh fought in the jungles and operated in small groups, attacking enemy resources. The French responded with the arrest and killing of Viet Minh troops and the bombing of known Viet Minh areas. US military intelligence personnel assisted the Viet Minh and sympathised with their hostility to the harshness of French colonial rule.

guerrilla warfare ▶ method of warfare in which small groups engage in surprise attacks on enemy facilities, troops and supply routes

🌀 The growth of Vietnamese nationalism/communism

The Japanese were determined to maintain their use of Indochina's resources. From March 1945, the Japanese began to disarm, imprison and kill French troops and officials and to intern all other French citizens. They tried to gain support from the Vietnamese people by offering to create a nominally independent Vietnam under the leadership of its Emperor, Bao Dai. However, World War II ended with the defeat of Japan in August 1945. This left two contenders for power inside Vietnam — the much weakened French and the Vietnamese.

Between mid and late 1944, over two million peasants died of starvation in the Quang Tri province of northern Vietnam. By late 1945, between 15 and 20 per cent of the Vietnamese population had starved to death as a result of Japan's plunder of the country's resources. The threat of famine unified Vietnam in support of Viet Minh forces. People rallied in excitement and anticipation behind the slogan 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese'.

The Viet Minh took control of Hanoi on 17 August 1945, and Saigon and Cochinchina on 25 August 1945. Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnamese independence before a huge crowd in Hanoi on 2 September 1945. His declaration of independence came at the end of a war which the Allies had fought in the name of democracy and self-determination.

Source 5.10

Photograph showing Ho Chi Minh declaring Vietnamese independence on 2 September 1945



🌀 SOURCE QUESTION

In what ways does this photo in source 5.10 express Vietnamese nationalism and self-determination?

Source 5.11

Extracts from Ho Chi Minh's
Declaration of Independence on
2 September 1945

☞ SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. Which two famous documents are referred to in this source? Why did Ho Chi Minh refer to them? Visit the website for this book and click on the 'Declarations' weblinks for this chapter (see 'Weblinks', page viii) for additional information on each of the famous documents.
2. What reasons does Ho Chi Minh put forward in source 5.11 to gain the support of other nations for the cause of Vietnamese independence?
3. Visit the website for this book and click on the 'Vietnamese independence' weblink for this chapter to find the full text of the Declaration. Identify additional reasons put forward in favour of Vietnamese independence.

'All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness'.

This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.

The Declaration of the French Revolution ... on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: 'All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.' Those are undeniable truths.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity ... have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice ...

They have ... wreck[ed] our national unity ...

They have built more prisons than schools ... they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood ... To weaken our race they have forced us to use opium and alcohol ...

They have robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our raw materials ...

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty ...

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese Fascists violated Indochina's territory to establish new bases in their fight against the Allies, the French imperialists went down on their bended knees and handed over our country to them.

Thus, from that date, our people were subjected to the double yoke of the French and the Japanese. Their sufferings and miseries increased ... On March 9 [1945], the French troops were disarmed by the Japanese. The French colonialists either fled or surrendered ...

From the autumn of 1940, our country had in fact ceased to be a French colony and had become a Japanese possession.

After the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies, our whole people rose to regain our national sovereignty and to found the Democratic Republic of Vietnam ...

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 them and have won independence for the Fatherland ...

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

A people who have courageously opposed French domination for more than eighty years, a people who have fought side by side with the Allies against the Fascists during these last years, such a people must be free and independent ...

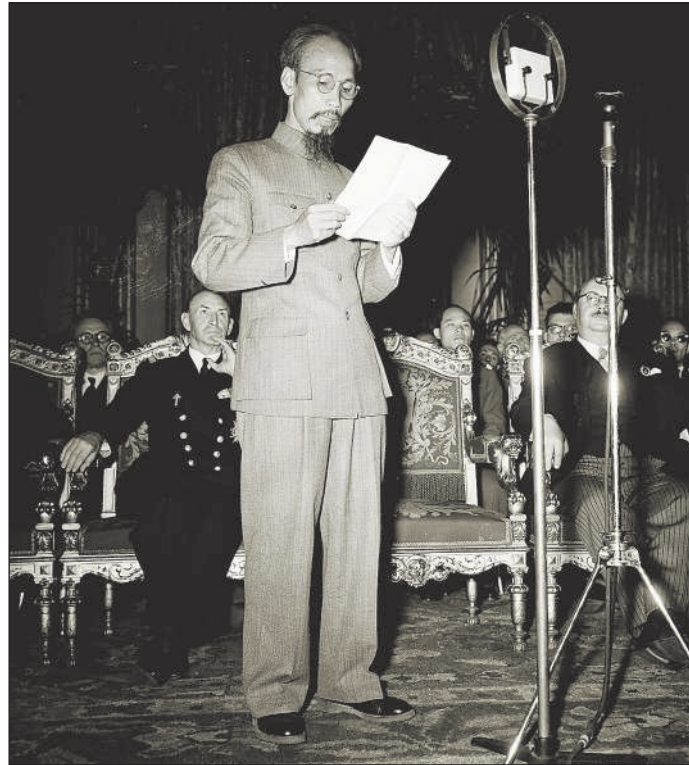
Published in Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Hanoi, 1960–62, pp. 17–21.

The French refused to accept this Declaration of Independence and, in October 1945, they returned to re-establish their control of Indochina. Ho Chi Minh travelled to France to try to negotiate a compromise and French and Viet Minh representatives met throughout 1946 in an attempt to prevent the outbreak of war. By December 1946, it was obvious that there would be no compromise.

The Viet Minh engaged in terrorist attacks against French military installations and, in November 1946, the French shelled the port of Haiphong, killing 6000 Vietnamese in the process. This began the First Indochinese War.

Source 5.12

Photograph showing Ho Chi Minh putting forward his case for Vietnamese independence in 1946



SOURCE QUESTION

What impression does the photograph in source 5.12 create of the differences between the world of Ho Chi Minh and that of his French opponents?

capitalism ▶ an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and pursuit of business opportunities for the owner's individual profits

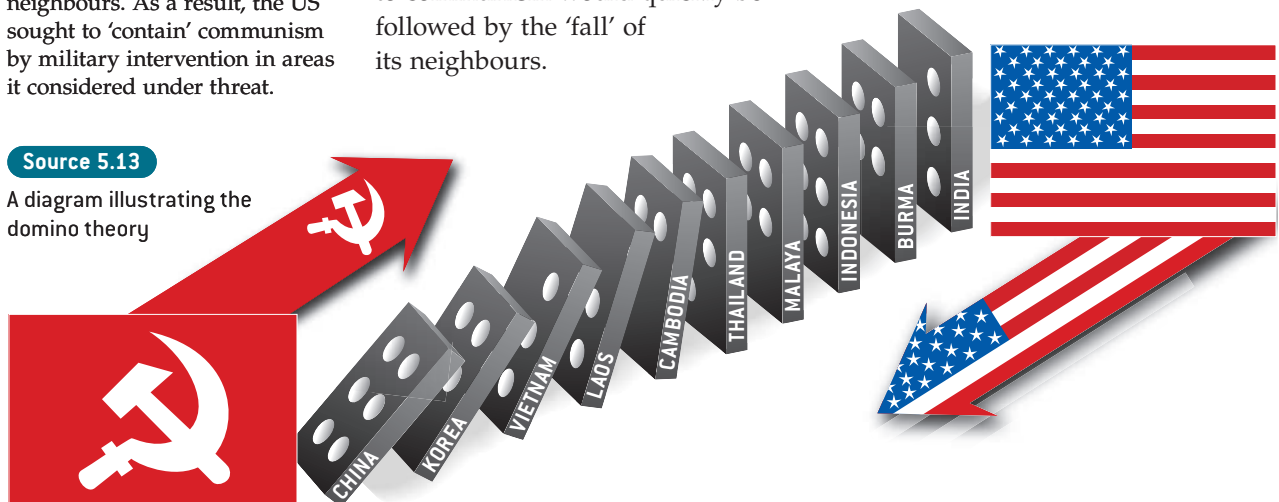
domino effect ▶ the view, put forward by the US during the Cold War, that the 'fall' of one country to communism would be followed by the 'fall' of its neighbours. As a result, the US sought to 'contain' communism by military intervention in areas it considered under threat.

The war against the French

The French government sought and eventually gained the support of the United States, which preferred French rule of Indochina to the extension of communist influence there. The United States feared the spread of communism, which it saw as a threat to democracy and to **capitalism**. The US was particularly concerned when communists gained control of China's government in 1949. By the mid 1950s, the US government spoke of its concern for a **domino effect** (see source 5.13) whereby the 'fall' of one country to communism would quickly be followed by the 'fall' of its neighbours.

Source 5.13

A diagram illustrating the domino theory



SOURCE QUESTION

Explain the message illustrated by the diagram in source 5.13.

Cold War ▶ the period of political, economic and ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, from around 1945 to 1991. While the two nations did not engage in direct military conflict, they did supply troops, weaponry and finances to one another's enemies.

The United States gave its support to France with the hope that France would grant more freedom to other Vietnamese political groups. The Viet Minh received support from the communist governments of China and the Soviet Union. Vietnam's fight for independence became part of the conflict known as the **Cold War**.

War continued for over seven more years. During this time, the French re-established their control of the major cities and coastal areas of Vietnam. Viet Minh guerrillas established their influence in the north, the Red River Delta and the countryside generally.

Source 5.14

Extract from a 1946 interview with Ho Chi Minh in which he expressed his view of 'the elephant and the tiger'

I said to him, 'President Ho, how can you possibly make war against the French army?' He replied: 'Mr Schoenbrun, we have a secret weapon . . . Don't smile when I tell you this. Our secret weapon is nationalism. To have nationhood, which is a sign of maturity, is greater than any weapons in the world.' He said it would be a war between an elephant and a tiger. 'If the tiger ever stands still, or is trapped out into the open, the mighty elephant of France will crush him. However, the tiger of Indo-China is going to hide in the jungle by day. He will steal out at night and he will leap upon the back of the elephant and tear great chunks out of the elephant's hide — and slowly the elephant will bleed to death. It may take three years, it may take five, it may take ten, but that will be the war in Indo-China.'

Quote from David Schoenbrun's interview with Ho Chi Minh in Paris, 1946.

☞ SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. Who are the 'elephant' and 'tiger' that Ho Chi Minh refers to in source 5.14?
2. What does source 5.14 indicate about the advantages the Viet Minh had over its opponents?

Source 5.15

A photograph of the Viet Minh General Vo Nguyen Giap (in the white suit) in 1952 inspecting troops of the People's Army



☞ SOURCE QUESTION

What might have been the photographer's intention in taking the photograph in source 5.15?

Change and continuity over time

P2.1

3. Make a time chart of forces and events between 1945 and 1954 that helped to end French control of Vietnam. Rank these in order of importance. Are there any that you would consider essential? Provide details to support the main points in your answer. (P2.1)
4. Discussion issue: Explain why Vietnam was able to achieve independence from France in 1954 when it had not been able to do so in 1945. (P2.1)

The process of historical inquiry

P3.1– P3.5

5. View the documentary 'The Battle for Dien Bien Phu' and use it as a historical source to answer the following questions.
 - (a) Identify and record 3–5 questions that you think are important for understanding the reasons for the defeat of France in Vietnam. Use these to guide your viewing of the documentary. (P3.1)
 - (b) Write each of your questions at the top of a separate A4 page and make relevant notes under each question as you view the documentary. Your notes should identify the main point being made and the evidence provided to support it. Use a separate page to record any additional notes you think are helpful. (P3.2)
 - (c) Identify and discuss in small groups or as a class:
 - ▶ the information the documentary provides (such as its nature, focus, emphasis, omissions) (P3.4)
 - ▶ the perspective and interpretation of the documentary maker (sympathetic? critical? biased? limited? narrow? comprehensive? ...) (P3.4)
 - ▶ the usefulness and reliability of the documentary for a historian studying the reasons for the defeat of France in Vietnam. (P3.3)
 - (d) Write two A4 pages in response to the following: Analyse the usefulness and reliability of the documentary 'The Battle for Dien Bien Phu' for a historian studying the reasons for the defeat of France in Vietnam. (P3.2, P3.3, P3.4 and P3.5)

Communicating an understanding of history

P4.1 and P4.2

6. It is late 1954. You are a reporter writing a three-page report, in preparation for a radio program, on the origins, actions and outcomes of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Your report should be appropriate for broadcast to an audience of Viet Minh sympathisers. It should identify the goals of the participants and their tactics. In commenting on the outcome of the battle, your report should consider both its immediate and its likely long-term significance for the participants and other interested groups. Your report should incorporate appropriate use of relevant historical terms and concepts. (P4.1 and P4.2)

Source 5.16

A photograph taken in December 1953 showing the capture of a Viet Minh soldier as he emerges from an underground hideout



SOURCE QUESTION

From the photograph in source 5.16, identify the methods of warfare used by the Viet Minh against the French.

The defeat of France

General Navarre was the French military leader in Vietnam. General Vo Nguyen Giap was the Viet Minh's military leader. Navarre aimed to encourage Giap to come into open battle against the French. To achieve this, Navarre strengthened the French army base at Dien Bien Phu, a town located on the main supply route between Vietnam and Laos. He believed that Giap would be forced to attack Dien Bien Phu to protect Viet Minh access to food supplies in this area. Navarre believed his troops would be able to successfully defend their base and seriously weaken the Viet Minh. Giap believed an attack on Dien Bien Phu could result in a major defeat for the French in Indochina.

The elephant and the tiger: 55 days at Dien Bien Phu

Navarre did not take into account the Viet Minh's determination and resourcefulness. General Giap organised as many as 20 000 peasants to move on foot, by bicycle or with carts transporting supplies through the jungle from the Viet Minh base 120 kilometres away. By January 1954, about 40 000 Viet Minh troops and 200 heavy artillery guns were positioned in the mountains that encircled the valley of Dien Bien Phu and the 15 000 French troops stationed there.

Source 5.17

A member of the Viet Minh describing the efforts taken to prepare for battle

We had to cross mountains and jungles, marching at night and sleeping by day to avoid enemy bombing. We sometimes slept in foxholes, or just by the trail. We each carried a rifle, ammunition, and hand grenades, and our packs contained a blanket, a mosquito net, and a change of clothes. We each had a week's supply of rice, which we refilled at depots along the way. We ate greens and bamboo shoots that we picked in the jungle, and occasionally villagers would give us a bit of meat. I'd been in the Vietminh for nine years by then, and I was accustomed to it.

Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 191.

SOURCE QUESTION

What does source 5.17 indicate about the attitudes and experiences of the Viet Minh forces before Dien Bien Phu?

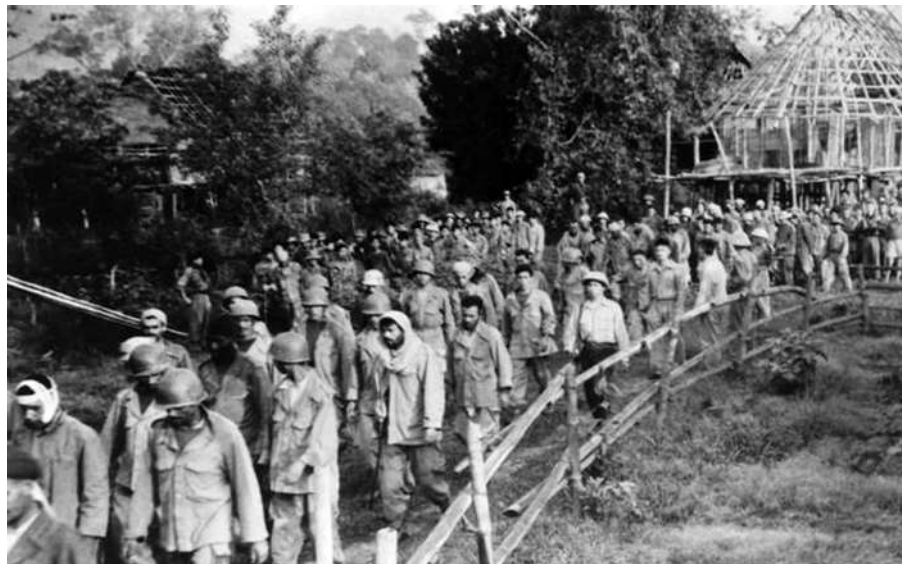
In mid March 1954, the Viet Minh began their artillery fire on the French below, inflicting serious damage to the airstrip that provided the only link with the French supply base at Hanoi. Additional troops began digging tunnels to bring them closer to the French fortifications. Continued artillery bombardment over the next few weeks reduced the area under French control. Fog and the muddied ground made it increasingly difficult for the French to either drop fresh supplies into the area or transport the wounded out.

On 1 May 1954, the Viet Minh launched a massive assault on all areas still under French control. By 7 May, the Viet Minh had gained control of Dien Bien Phu and the French surrendered.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was the culmination of the nine-year war between France and Vietnam that came to be known as the 'First Indochinese War'. The battle cost France over 7000 in casualties and 11000 taken prisoner and it signified France's failure to re-establish either political or military control over Indochina. The Viet Minh had suffered 8000 dead and 12000 wounded. They had gained significant bargaining power at the Geneva Conference, which was due to address the issue of the future of Indochina.

Source 5.18

Photograph from July 1954 showing French and Vietnamese prisoners after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, being led from the area under the guard of communist Viet Minh troops



SOURCE QUESTION

Describe what is happening in source 5.18 and the significance of this for the conflict in Indochina.

USSR ▶ the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union

1954 — The Geneva Conference

From 26 April 1954, representatives of France, the **USSR** and the United States met in Geneva, Switzerland. Their first priority was to solve the problems that had arisen from the war between North and South Korea (1950–53). On 8 May, they began discussions on the future of Indochina that concluded with a document known as the Geneva Accords.

The following were the most significant aspects of the Geneva Accords:

- ▶ France must grant complete independence to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.
- ▶ There would be a temporary division of Vietnam into two sectors along the 17th parallel of latitude.
- ▶ A demilitarised zone would separate North and South Vietnam and no foreign bases were allowed within any area of Indochina.
- ▶ Residents of Vietnam had 300 days to decide whether they wished to stay in either the North or South or move to the other sector.
- ▶ Free democratic elections for a government for a united Vietnam were scheduled for July 1956. An International Control Commission would supervise the elections.

Source 5.19

Extract from the Geneva Conference declaration on Indochina, July 1954

The conference expresses satisfaction at the ending of hostilities in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam: the Conference expresses its conviction that the execution of the provisions set out in the present Declaration and in the Agreements on the cessation of hostilities will permit Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam henceforth to play their part in full independence and sovereignty, in the peaceful community of nations.

The Conference takes note of the clauses in the Agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam prohibiting the introduction into Vietnam of foreign troops and military personnel as well as all kinds of arms and munitions . . .

. . . No military base under the control of a foreign State may be established in the regrouping zones of the two parties, the latter having the obligation to see that the zones allotted to them shall not constitute part of any military alliance and shall not be utilised for the resumption of hostilities or in the service of an aggressive policy.

The Conference recognizes that the essential purpose of the Agreement relating to Vietnam is to settle military questions with a view to ending hostilities and that the military demarcation line is provisional and should not, in any way, be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.

The Conference declares that, so far as Vietnam is concerned, the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, shall permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot. In order to ensure that sufficient progress in the restoration of peace has been made and that all the necessary conditions obtain for free expression of the national will, general elections shall be held in July, 1956 under the supervision of an international commission.

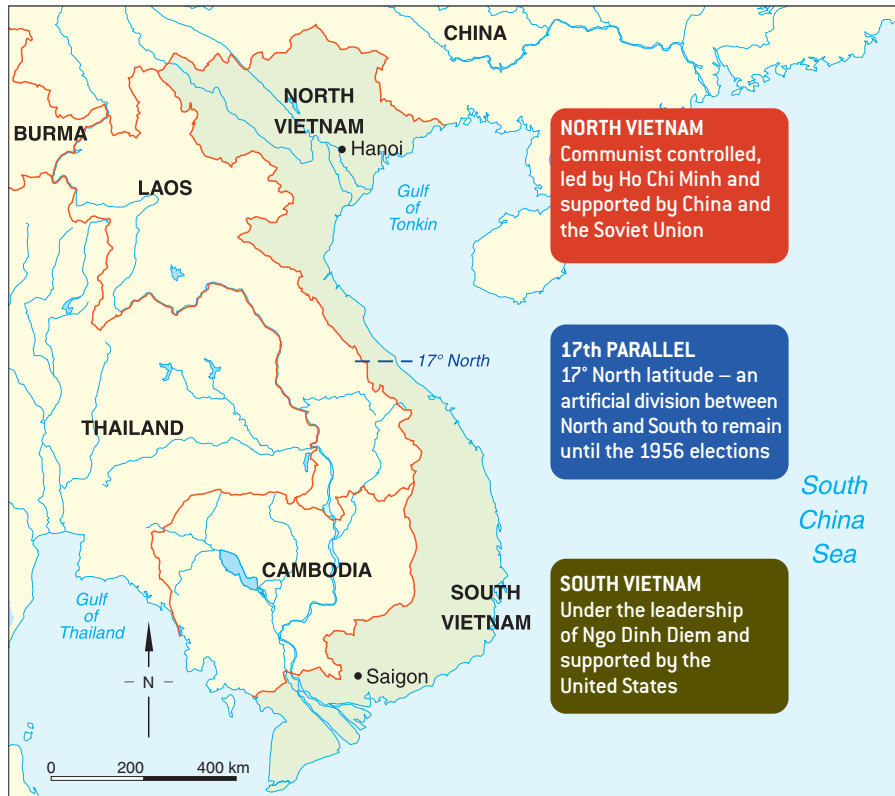
From Documents Related to the Implementation of the Geneva Agreement Concerning Viet-Nam, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hanoi, 1956, pp. 181–183, quoted in J. Harpur, *World Without End*, 2nd ed., Longman, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 42–43.

SOURCE QUESTIONS

1. What military provisions are outlined in source 5.19? What do you think was their purpose?
2. What was the demarcation line and why was it 'provisional'?
3. What principles were supposed to underpin 'the settlement of [Vietnam's] political problems'?
4. What were the plans for elections in Vietnam?

Source 5.20

Map showing the division of Vietnam following the 1954 Geneva Conference and the allegiances of each of its governments



The North was to be known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and led by Ho Chi Minh. In the south, the government of the Republic of Vietnam continued to be led by French-appointed Emperor Bao Dai.

In 1955, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem took over the presidency. Diem was an ardent nationalist supported by the United States government.

The Geneva Accords officially recognised the defeat of France in Indochina. In Vietnam, neither side was satisfied with the result. The Viet Minh had been denied the unified Vietnam for which it had been fighting. The United States and the US-backed government of South Vietnam refused to sign the Accords. They were unwilling to allow an election that might result in a communist-led Vietnam. In this sense, the Geneva Accords created a temporary lull in what was ultimately to be a long-term struggle for the control of Vietnam.

In 1954, the countries of Indochina gained independence from France. In the decades that followed, they faced a new battle as the

superpowers the term used in the second half of the twentieth century to describe the political and military power of nations like the United States and the Soviet Union.

world's **superpowers** played out the Cold War on their lands and among their peoples. This battle came to be known as the Vietnam War or, more accurately, the Second Indochina War. This war, in which the United States fought to prevent the spread of communism, produced huge death and casualty rates, brutal atrocities, widespread destruction of property and contamination of farming land and thousands of refugees.

Meeting objectives and outcomes

Key features, issues, individuals and events

P1.1 and P1.2

1. Complete the following table by identifying one individual, one group and one event that influenced the nature of French–Indochinese relations in the period 1945–54. (P1.1)

Key features	Name/Date(s)	Nature/Action	Influence	Significance
Individual				
Group				
Event				

2. Essay topic: Explain the key features of French imperialism in Indochina and its impact on the growth of nationalism. (P1.2)