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Chapter 1 The French in Indochina

Vietnam! Today the name conjures images of desperate fighting, a tragic loss of American lives, and a foreign policy failure. In the early 1950's, few Americans had ever heard of that country.

Vietnam was not even a place one could find on a map. However one could find a French colony in Southeast Asia. What we now call Vietnam was once owned and run by France. From the late 1800's to 1954, Vietnam was part of a French colony called French Indochina.

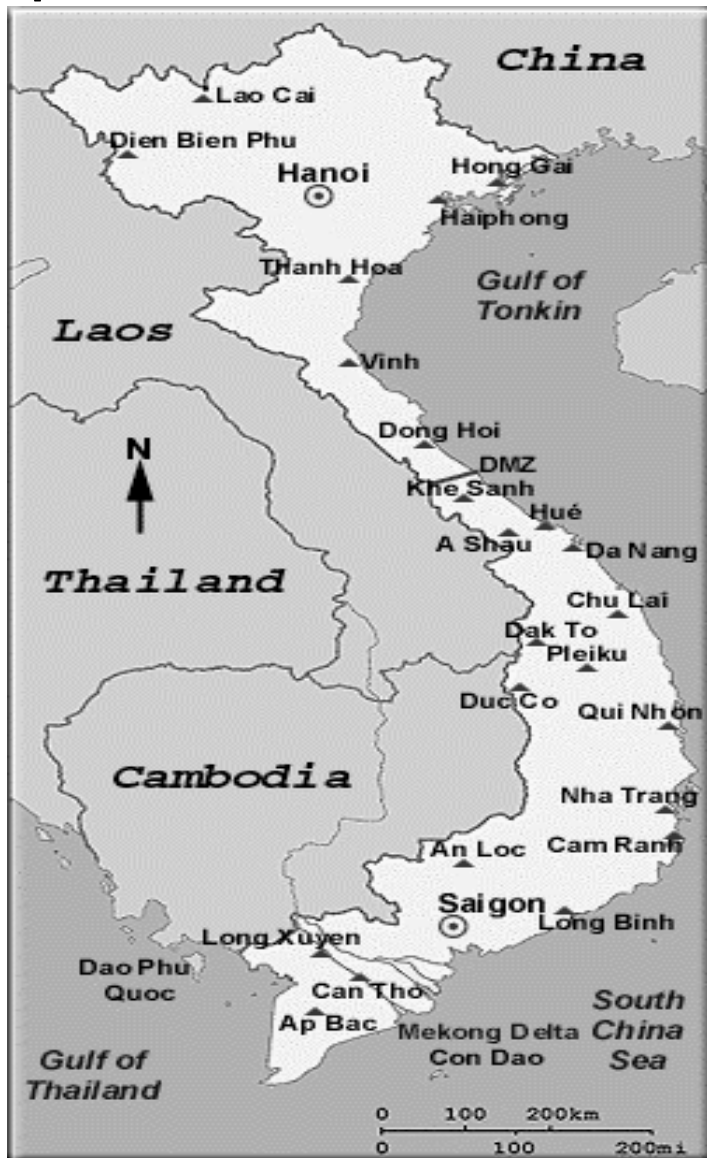
When the French first became interested in Indochina French missionaries sought to convert the Vietnamese to Catholicism, the religion of France. French merchants saw opportunities to enrich themselves by securing rice coffee, tea and rubber, and the French government also was eager to establish a strategic presence in Southeast Asia.

This chapter briefly reviews the early history of the French involvement in Vietnam, and the effects of French influence on the Vietnamese. The information in this chapter will help readers decide whether the United States should have helped France to keep its colony of French Indochina.

Life in Vietnam Before the French

Before the French came to Indochina, Vietnam, the Khmer Empire (Cambodia), and the Laotian Kingdom (Laos) were independent countries. Vietnam had been ruled by neighboring

China for hundreds of years, but after centuries of resistance the Vietnamese people overthrew their Chinese rulers and became independent. The tradition of armed struggle against foreign occupation had a long and noble history in Indochina as the French as well as the U.S. later learned to their regret.



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In the three centuries preceding the French arrival, the Vietnamese were ruled by a series of emperors whose nominal rule included collecting revenue. But, the taxes were modest and the emperor had relatively little real power over the Vietnamese. "The edicts of the emperor," according to an old Vietnamese saying, "stop at the edge of the village." The men who ruled the hundreds of small villages and hamlets in which the vast majority lived were chosen locally based on their education, wisdom, and family's status. The lives of the people in these villages were seldom affected by outside events. They knew little of what was happening beyond the circle of the huts in which they lived, and fields on which they tilled their crops.

Life in the villages was usually pleasant and peaceful. Much of Vietnam was well suited for growing rice, and Chinese conquerors had taught the Vietnamese people the difficult art of planting and harvesting this crop. The Vietnamese diet consisted mainly of rice and fish. A man was considered well off if he had a water buffalo to help him in his farming. Most of his clothes were home-made, and he had little need for goods made outside of his village. His religion was usually Buddhist, with its attending set of beliefs, priests, and rituals. Women exercised a surprising amount of authority, and the level of education in the villages was unusually high. On the average 4 out of 5 Vietnamese were taught to read and write in their own language using the calligraphy introduced by the Chinese.

The French Come to Indochina

France did not set out to conquer Indochina all at once. Over a period of more than 350 years the French gradually extended their control over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. As early as the 16th century European missionaries were welcomed in Indochina for their technical skills and connections to European suppliers of modern weapons and western merchandise. The French East India Company, a trade organization formed to expand trade and propagate Catholicism, gained a foothold in Indochina in 1668. Thereafter a pattern was established which continued for centuries. When French soldiers, traders, or priests were attacked and/or killed in Indochina, the French would revenge the loss of their nationals, and use the resistance to their authority as an excuse to extend their power. Vietnamese were forced to surrender control over their land and to provide the French with special privileges. The French also took part in wars between rival Vietnamese factions. As a reward from the winning faction, the French would be given control over more land and the right to sell French goods and spread the French religion. In the process, the French replaced local leaders with their nationals – by 1925, a bureaucracy of some 5,000 Frenchmen ruled over a country totaling 30,000,000. In time, France had extended its control to encompass Laos, North and South Vietnam, and Cambodia, which they called French Indochina.

The French Civilization: Religion and Culture

The French have traditionally taken great pride in what they called their '*civilization Francais.*' This included the language, religion, literature, poetry and music of France, as well as its culture, laws, form of government, educational system, and technological achievements. One of the reasons the French gave for expanding their colonial empire throughout the world was to spread this civilization to "inferior" native peoples.

For the Vietnamese, spreading French civilization meant making them into Frenchmen. The French taught the Vietnamese to speak their language. French priests converted the Vietnamese to Catholicism. French teachers educated Vietnamese in French history, literature, and law. The Vietnamese were also taught math, science, and engineering in special private schools attended by 20 percent of Vietnamese boys. This prepared the smartest young Vietnamese, if their parents could afford it, to attend the French colleges in Indochina or a university in France. In their new schools Vietnamese students took the same courses in French history and literature that were taught in France. In this way, French culture was

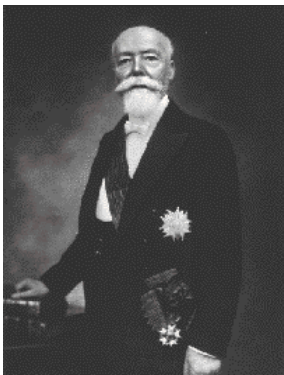
instilled in the brightest and wealthiest Vietnamese children, and young men were prepared to help the French rule their country

French Civilization in Vietnam: Modern Life

The French made many changes in Vietnam. They modernized the country by building railroads connecting the major cities. Of special pride to both the Vietnamese and the French was a railroad connecting the northern capital, Hanoi, to Saigon the largest city in South Vietnam. In addition to the railroads, the French imported trucks and cars, paved streets, and built roads and bridges.

Though it was confined primarily to larger cities and towns, the French brought electricity to Vietnam. They made sections of Saigon and Hanoi into beautiful, modern cities with fine public parks, and wide streets. They built hotels that are still in use. The outdoor restaurants, modern buildings, and broad boulevards in Saigon resembled Paris. The French even started a law and medical school as well as an excellent college, and they introduced the practice of modern medicine.

The French installed their own legal system in Vietnam which was based on the famous Napoleonic Codes. Their system replaced the one used by the Vietnamese for hundreds of years. Before French intervention, for example, women accused of adultery were trampled to death by elephants and people found guilty of robbery were often beheaded. The French reduced penalties in those cases. They thought their system of justice was far more humane than the one practiced in Vietnam. Since this system was French, the French ran it. Vietnamese would be brought to trial in French courts, represented by French lawyers before French judges.



Paul Doumer

The French also changed the schools of Vietnam. They replaced the hard to learn Chinese characters with a far easier Roman alphabet used in Western Europe. They educated about 20% of Vietnamese males – usually the sons of the well to do. Trained to pass the exams for French Universities, many Vietnamese were able to complete their schooling in the land of their colonial rulers.

French Civilization in Vietnam - Economics

Until the late 1890's the French spent far more money expanding and governing their Indochinese Empire than they collected in revenues. In 1897, France sent a prominent politician, Paul Doumer, to govern Indochina. Doumer was determined to put Indochina on a paying basis. He wanted the Vietnamese to bear the administrative costs of running Indochina, and he wanted Indochina to provide a market for French products and be a source of profitable investment

by French businessmen.

To raise money, Doumer encouraged the use of opium, which had hitherto been confined to a small part of the Chinese population. Once more Vietnamese were addicted, Doumer leveled a tax on opium which eventually raised 1/3rd of the revenue needed to govern Indochina. Heavy taxes were also placed on the wine and salt trade. The Vietnamese who could or would not pay their taxes, lost their houses and land, and often became day laborers.

Before the arrival of the French, the emperors did not allow rice to be sold outside the country. The French, however, believed they could enrich themselves by exporting rice. They encouraged expanded production of rice on lands that had been confiscated for non-payment of taxes. The French took over the land of these unfortunate farmers and then hired them to plant and harvest the rice. As a result of these practices Vietnam became the third largest rice exporting country in the world, only lagging behind

Burma and Thailand. Despite the increase in production, many Vietnamese were not paid enough to buy food for themselves and their families.

Vietnam also became well known for its rubber plantations. The famous Michelin tire company, for example, bought up thousands of acres of land in Vietnam. Many of the Vietnamese who had lost their land for failing to pay taxes were hired to work on these plantations. These poor peasants were forced to work for the French and often suffered from malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition. From the French perspective, these landless workers were fortunate to find employment.

The French also opened coal mines in Vietnam, and used unemployed and landless peasants to work in them. As on the rice fields and the rubber plantations, the miners were barely paid a living wage.

The French Civilization in Vietnam – Government

In Vietnam's cities, the French took all of the high government positions. In the countryside, Vietnamese loyal to France played a more important role. Following orders from French government officials they ran the smaller towns and villages, collecting taxes, supervising road construction and repair, and enforcing French laws. But the highest paid among these Vietnamese officials made less money than the lowest paid Frenchman.

The French were proud of the way they spread their civilization to Vietnam. They were equally proud of the many Vietnamese who had become Catholics, spoke fluent French, and were educated in French history and literature. But not all Vietnamese appreciated France's contributions to their country. There were many who would have been happy to rid their country of its French civilization and the Frenchmen who forced it on the people of Vietnam. Armed resistance to French rule continued during the entire colonial period.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Summarize the early history of Vietnamese people up to their domination by the French.
2. What changes did the French make in Indochina?
3. From the perspective of a landless peasant, a French official, or an objective observer, explain whether and why you think that French rule was good for the Vietnamese.