A Panther Book

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THE BRITISH IN VIETNAM

Illustrated

How the twenty-five year war began

GEORGE ROSIE

The Bourbon kings were famous for 'never having learnt anything and never having forgotten anything'. Reality finally caught up with the Bourbons and they are now a matter of history. But as recently as 1945 Britain, France, and Holland were deeply and sincerely convinced that the second world war had changed nothing and that their Pacific colonial empires were still there to be reoccupied and administered as of old.

The world, and not least the people of Vietnam, is still paying the price of such staggering imbecility.

George Rosie's calm straightforward account puts one less-publicized operation of the whole incredible affair into cool perspective. The British force, mainly Indian troops, arrived in Vietnam in 1945 with two objects in view: disarm the Japanese and repatriate P.O.W.s. A clear implication of the force's orders were that it would carry on policing duties until the French colonialists were firmly in the saddle again. But in a very short time pretty well everyone in south-east Asia had got in on the act – Vichy French and Free French, the defeated Japanese, Koumintang Chinese, various Vietnamese nationalist groups, and of course Americans, who are still bogged down there a quarter of a century later. One result of that British presence in Vietnam is that Vietnam is not yet a matter of history, nor is it likely to be for many savage years to come.

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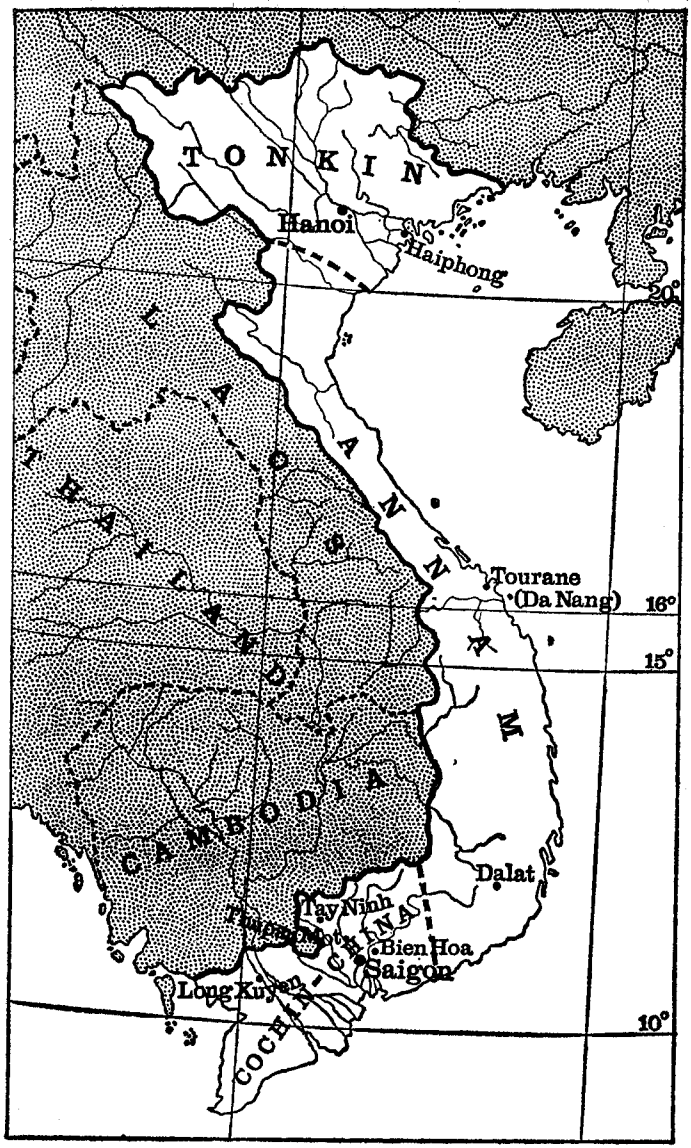
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Introduction

VIETNAM: one of the most murderous, protracted and bitterly disputed wars in modern history. And, to many people, one of the most tragically unnecessary. No issue in recent years has so agitated the conscience of the west or opened so many cracks in the western alliance. Revulsion to the war has brought hundreds of thousands of people on to the streets of cities throughout the world. In the United States itself, the war has alienated the sensitive, thoughtful part of an entire generation, toppled a president, and brought much that is best in American life into open and sometimes bloody conflict with authority. The later 1960s have been a time of escalating horror for the people of Vietnam and of tragic divisiveness for the people of America. Both nations have suffered grievous wounds which may take generations to heal. We, in Britain, have watched, both appalled and sympathetic, but consoled perhaps by the notion that this war at least was none of our business.

But we forget too easily. There was a time, at the end of the Second World War, when Britain became directly responsible for events in South Vietnam; a time when an experienced British force under a distinguished British general intervened in the affairs of the country and brought to an end the first taste of independence that the people of Vietnam had known for a hundred years. And when, in the risings which followed, Britain used her former enemy, the Japanese, to suppress the Vietnamese nationalists. We are used to the idea that wars in Vietnam have been exclusively the concern of first the French, and later the Americans. But, in late 1945, it was British bullets which were whining across the paddy-fields around Saigon, British mortars which were pounding the frail villages of

the Mekong Delta (and British soldiers who were being brutally ambushed by the forerunners of the Vietcong). The history of the British occupation of South Vietnam does not form a happy narrative. Like most post-war colonial interludes, it is a tale fraught with political complexity and intrigue, with internecine struggle, with terrorism and repressive counter-measures. It was an early example of that now familiar conflict between two irreconcilables: European Imperialism and Asian nationalism, a struggle which is still being acted out. The real villain of the piece was a failure to grasp that the colonial game was up, an illusion that the rule of the white man was still a viable proposition.

The decision to place South Vietnam (with the rest of southern French Indo-China) under the command of the British was taken at the Three-Power Conference at Potsdam on 23 July, 1945 on the recommendation of the British Chiefs of Staff. At that juncture of the war, it was generally assumed that the Japanese would have to be cleared out of Vietnam by means of a large-scale Allied invasion, a task which was to be allocated to Lord Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command. But the invasion was never planned in detail. With surprising suddenness, following the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese collapsed, and the entire role of the British with regard to Vietnam changed. Instead of facing a bitter and protracted battle with the Japanese, Mountbatten's forces were now given the job of clearing up the country after the war and of restoring affairs to peace-time conditions. In normal circumstances, not too hazardous an undertaking. But the circumstances obtaining in Vietnam in 1945 were not normal. After the collapse of the Japanese, the Vietminh, under the leadership of the late Ho Chi Minh, had taken over power in Hanoi and in Saigon, a fact which was to complicate the situation immeasurably. The British force put into Vietnam was a crack division of the renowned 14th Army: the 20th Indian Division under the

command of Major-General Douglas D. Gracey. General Gracey's written orders were to disarm, concentrate and repatriate the defeated Japanese, to release and ship home Allied P.O.W.s and internees, and, in the process, to maintain law and order. Though he was under instructions to stand well back from the politics of the country, it was generally assumed, by General Gracey as much as by anyone, that Vietnam would be restored to the French. He was never officially disabused of that notion. Therefore, while the British force was technically neutral, this prior condition implied a *de facto* support of the French cause and a consequent refusal to recognize the Vietminh government. But, by openly endorsing the French and by declining to have any dealings with the nationalists, General Gracey began a series of events which became increasingly tragic and led to a short, but very brutal, war in which the 20th Indian Division was used, and firmly used, to quash the nationalists. There is no doubt that General Gracey was acting under difficult circumstances in a very trying situation. Many things can be (and have been) cited in his defence. But, in the end, he *did* overthrow the Vietnamese government in Saigon, he *did* use his force to suppress the uprisings which followed, and he *did* restore the iniquitous French colonial system to South Vietnam. By his actions he may well have set the scene for the years of warfare and destruction which have followed.

This book is a short and in many ways limited account of the course of events in South Vietnam during the British occupation from September 1945 to March 1946. I have attempted to describe the cause and effect of events in and around Saigon during these crucial months, and in the process to explain (not justify) the actions of the British commander. I have also tried to give some idea of the difficulties under which he was operating. The book also contains an account, gleaned from the regimental and other histories, of the fighting which took place between British and Vietnamese forces in the late months of 1945.

It is quite clear that the war was no trifling affair, and that some of the operational instructions issued to the British division were implicitly ruthless. There was an alarming directness about the way in which the British troops operated, a directness which cost the lives of thousands of Vietnamese. A further element of irony was contained in the unenviable role of the Japanese, who, defeated and humiliated, were obliged to pick up their arms for their former enemy and to bear the brunt of the 'Allied' casualties.

However unknown the facts of the British régime in Vietnam are now, at the time they did not go unnoticed. British policy in Vietnam came under heavy fire at home, both in the press and in Parliament. The book also contains an explanation of the political circumstances in Vietnam which led to the Vietminh's bid for power: a brief outline of Vietnamese nationalism from its early days to the Vietminh takeover of Hanoi and Saigon in August 1945. (The assumption of power by Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues is still referred to by the people of Vietnam as 'The August Revolution'.) I have also attempted, by way of such limited information as is available, to give some idea of Churchill's manoeuvring at the war-time conferences to block President Roosevelt's ideas of post-war independence for Vietnam. Throughout the war Churchill did his best to ensure the restoration of the pre-war Imperial *status quo* in Asia. American ideas of political emancipation for former French colonies were not to his liking. He knew well that independence is a contagious force, and that if allowed in Vietnam it might well spread to Burma and to India itself. Using every weapon in his formidable armoury, Churchill worked to scupper Roosevelt's liberal policies, particularly over French Indo-China. As a result, there was no greater enemy of Vietnamese nationalism than British government policy.

This book is therefore an attempt to trace the course of British interest and involvement in the affairs of Vietnam.

There is no question in my mind that British policy, both before and during the occupation, bears some measure of responsibility for the tragic events which followed. It is a reponsibility that has never fully, or even partly, been acknowledged. But it is a complicated story, and one which raises many more questions than any book can answer until such time as the official documentation becomes available – the Cabinet papers, the Foreign Office accounts, the records of the British Commission in Saigon, the War Diaries of the units of the 20th Indian Division. We will have to wait a few years, until 1976, before we can know just how much General Gracey, for example, took upon himself and to what extent he was acting under orders from Whitehall. Only when the Cabinet Papers are released will we know whether the Attlee government knew exactly what was being done in Vietnam in their name. But until such time as professional historians can make a *complete* documentation of the events and the policies from which they stemmed, perhaps this book will serve as an outline.

Some of the terms and descriptions used in this account should also be explained. With the exception of calling the country Vietnam and the people Vietnamese, I have used the place names and appellations of the period. Since the departure of the French in 1954, many of these have been changed. Tourane, for example, is now called Da Nang, Cap St Jacques is now Ving Tau, Baria is called Xa Phuoc Le. Saigon itself has grown enormously since 1945. At that time the population of the city was around 150,000; today it is nearer two million. The war has depopulated the countryside at the expense of the city. In 1945, Cholon was virtually a separate city; now it is a suburb of Saigon, and a fairly central one at that. Previous to and during French rule, Vietnam was divided into three parts: Cochin China in the south, Tonkim in the north, with Annam in between. Hanoi was the capital of Tonkim, Hue the capital of Annam, and Saigon the capital of Cochin China.

Consequently, the people of South Vietnam are often called Cochin Chinese, or, more usually, Annamites or Annamese. It was the habit of the French to call *all* Vietnamese 'Annamites.'

The nationalist politics of the period were complicated and can bear some analysis. A wide variety of groups emerged in 1945, particularly in the South. Of these, the most powerful, the most politically sophisticated and, in many ways the most moderate were the Vietminh. Although Communist-led, the Vietminh were far from being an exclusively Communist organization. At the time it was a genuine coalition of a variety of nationalist groups from liberal Socialists to hard-line Marxists. Ho Chi Minh's often quoted dictum, 'My party is my country,' was never more true than of the Vietminh in 1945. Their exlusive aim was independence, *'doc lap'*. Internal politics were a matter to be settled afterwards. But, in addition to the Vietminh, there were a variety of other, politico-religious movements peculiar to Vietnam and extremely xenophobic in outlook. These were the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the villainous Binh Xuyen brigands, and to complicate matters further, there were such small but even more fanatical groups as the Trotskyists and the Voluntaires de la Mort. Most of these groups, particularly the Cao Dai and the Binh Xuyen, were possessed of private armies which were to give trouble to the British, then to the French, and even to the Vietnamese régimes which followed the French. It was the dictator Ngo Dinh Diem who finally suppressed the Binh Xuyen. The Cao Dai, and to a lesser extent the Hoa Hao, still exist in South Vietnam, and the Vietcong give them a wide birth. When the fighting began in September 1945, *all* these forces were thrown against the British, the Japanese and the French. To lump them together under the title of 'Vietminh' would be inaccurate as well as unjust to the Vietminh, considering in particular the excesses in which the Binh Xuyen indulged. I have therefore settled on the title 'nationalists' to describe

the Vietnamese forces who engaged in the war against the British command. It should be said, too, that although the Vietminh were the most identifiable group, and the one with whom the French dealt, they never succeeded in establishing any firm control over their allies, even when they attempted to do so.

It should also be said that this is very much a journalist's book, and makes no claim to being that of a professional historian. I have, however, done my best to sift fact from opinion, and to balance the emphasis on both. Complete 'objectivity' is usually a vain pursuit, even for the historians themselves. If, in the end, this book does seem to tend to judge the issues involved, then that is because Vietnam is hardly a subject to invite detachment, whatever the shade of political viewpoint from which an author may be writing.

But if the book does nothing more than remind a few people in Britain that we, as a nation, bear some measure of responsibility for the tragedy of Vietnam, then perhaps that will be enough.

London, 1970 *GEORGE ROSIE.*

Chapter One

The French Invasion to the August Revolution

THE power of the white man was first felt by the people of Vietnam in the 1840s when, after the harassment of Christians by the Emperor Thieu Tri, French warships sailed imperiously into the country's ports and demanded the release of French missionaries. Thieu Tri was unnerved, and promptly capitulated. But it was his successor, Tu Duc, who really incurred the wrath of Europe. Having decided to stamp out Christianity once and for all (that 'depraved doctrine' according to an edict of 1833), he launched a campaign of persecution against Vietnamese Christians and their white shepherds. Hundreds of French and Spanish priests were incarcerated or killed. Consequently, in 1859, a Franco-Spanish force invaded Tourane (now Da Nang) and drove south to capture Saigon. In 1862 Tu Duc formally confirmed their conquest by a treaty. The emperor's rule over the remainder of the south was put to an end shortly after, in 1867, by Admiral de la Grandière. In the north Tu Duc's authority had always been tenuous, and was badly subverted when a small French force, acting unofficially, captured Hanoi in 1873. In the years that followed the northern provinces around Hanoi lapsed into confusion and anarchy, and Tu Duc could do little to restore order. Under the vague terms of vassalage which existed then between Vietnam and China, Tu Duc appealed to the Emperor of China for assistance. And this was his undoing. Before the Chinese could act, a French naval squadron invaded Haiphong and a force of 600 men took Hanoi. On 25 August, 1883 Tu

Duc was obliged to sign away his power by recognizing the authority of France over Tonkin (the north) and Annam (the middle), having already surrendered Cochin China (the south). The French, despite nominal limitations on their power, were firmly in the saddle.

Vietnamese society, diffuse, mandarin-operated and highly traditional, took a severe cultural beating from its French overlords. The French, unlike the British, did not simply pull the levers from the top by way of a middle to lower set of strata of indigenous officials. Instead, the French system was to install their own people at the lowest levels, thus usurping the traditional power and influence of mandarins, canton chiefs and even village elders (while at the same time producing a huge drain on the colonial budget to pay for European-style salaries). The result of this policy was to dispossess and alienate the educated and vigorous Vietnamese middle class, thus laying the seeds of discontent and insurrection. Not surprisingly, the first signs of trouble came from the mandarinate, which the French had precluded from power and influence. Right up to the end of the First World War the character of Vietnamese resistance lay in the efforts of the traditional, Chinese-orientated ruling class to reassert themselves. After the war new types of agitator emerged: Communists and westernized intellectuals, many of whom had acquired their subversive ideas in France itself. They were to prove much more dangerous than the grumbling mandarins in the Imperial Court.

During the 1920s many attempts were made by Vietnamese 'moderates' to achieve some measure of reform and liberalization through the offices of the French authorities. Their efforts were fruitless. The intransigence of the French resulted in the rapid growth of various clandestine organizations, the largest of which was the Viet Nam Quoc Don Dong (VNQDD – Vietnamese Nationalist party). Based loosely on the Chinese Kuomintang, VNQDD policy was the total overthrow of French rule. After an abortive up-

rising at Yen Bay in February 1930, the VNQDD was easily suppressed and did not surface again until 1945 under the auspices of Chiang Kai-shek. The demise of the VNQDD cleared the way for the Communists. That same year, 1930, the various disorganized Communist groups were forged into the Indo-Chinese Communist party (ICP) by the Comintern's representative in South-East Asia, Nguyen Ai Quoc – later known as Ho Chi Minh. (Nguyen Ai Quoc was itself a pseudonym meaning 'Nguyen the Patriot'. He had been born Nguyen Tat Thanh in the village of Kim Lien in 1890.) Almost immediately the ICP set about organizing a series of demonstrations, strikes and uprisings, which led to nothing but brutal repression. Although the entire nationalist movement, including the ICP, was badly weakened by French police measures in the 1930s, it never completely collapsed. The tenacious organization of the Communists survived, and by the time the Second World War arrived they were the best-organized of the anti-French forces.

When metropolitan France fell to Hitler in 1940, the French Empire in the Far East was dealt a blow from which it never recovered. And another threat was looming out of the east – Japan. French Indo-China in general and Vietnam in particular were seen by the Japanese as a rich prize. Here was rubber, rice, and above all a sound strategic position from which to wage the coming war – north-west into Burma and India, south to the islands of the Pacific. Immediately the Japanese began turning the screws on the French, greatly assisted by the Thais, who began to lay claims to sizeable areas of neighbouring French Indo-China. Under pressure from two directions, and cut off from their source of power in Europe, the French were in no position to resist. On 22 September 1940, Admiral Decoux, the Vichy governor, signed an agreement in Hanoi with the Japanese General Mishihara, permitting the Japanese to station 6,000 men north of the Red River and 25,000 to the south together with useful

quantities of military aircraft. That was, of course, only the beginning. Without ever declaring war, the Japanese moved into Vietnam. Gradually the reins of power were eased out of the hands of the French.

In 1939, in Liu Chou, a remote town in southern China, an organization had been formed to crystallize the Vietnamese independence movement. Its title was the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi – the League for the Independence of Vietnam. It was called the Vietminh for short. Its effective leader was the Comintern agent who had founded the Indo-China Communist party, Ho Chi Minh. The Vietminh was, initially at least, a genuine coalition of many interests: democrats, Socialists, Communists, traditionalists, and straightforward French-haters. But, as in many wartime resistance movements in Europe, the best-disciplined and most effective faction was the Communist one. After the arrival of the Japanese, the Vietminh, particularly its Communist faction, while still regarding the French as the main enemy, was not at all persuaded by Japanese 'Asian co-prosperity' propaganda. 'Let us unite together,' Ho Chi Minh wrote in 1941. 'As one in mind and strength we shall overthrow the Japanese and the French ...'[1] Asiatic power or not, to the people of Vietnam the Japanese were only one more invader under whom they were obliged to suffer.

French resistance to the Japanese was practically non-existent, partly because they were demoralized, partly because of instructions from the Vichy government, but mainly because they were more concerned about a possible Vietnamese insurrection. Joseph Buttinger, in his book *Vietnam; A Political History*, remarks that, 'Decoux, so powerless in his dealings with the Japanese, had no trouble at all playing the strong man vis-à-vis the Vietnamese'. The few disorganized Vietnamese uprisings which did take place during the war were ruthlessly suppressed by the French. In one uprising in Cochin China, 6,000 Vietnamese were killed or wounded and thousands were imprisoned.

For most of the war the Japanese played a double game with the Vietnamese. They operated their familiar, and usually successful, policy of stirring up Asian nationalism against European rule on the one hand and then standing by and letting the French stamp down on the consequences.

In the south, Vietnamese nationalism began to take some very odd forms. There was a sudden, to the French alarming, growth of the curious religious movement called Cao Dai. Cao Dai was a mish-mash of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, western philosophy, Christianity, and sideshow spiritualism, the mix being leavened by resounding hatred for the French. Other movements ranged from the Hoa Hao, which had similar quasi-religious overtones, to the Binh Xuyen, who came nearest to being the Cosa Nostra of Vietnam. All flourished, owing largely to the active encouragement of the Japanese. Of these groups, the largest was the Cao Dai, whose priests (who were more like mediums) began to side more and more openly with the Japanese. The Vietminh were meanwhile quietly and efficiently organizing their cadres in the countryside. In 1943 they contacted the French and offered to set up a common anti-Japanese underground. Their offer was turned down, the French probably reasoning that arms and training to be used against the Japanese could be turned against themselves. The Americans, however, were not so concerned with maintaining the authority of Vichy as with defeating the Japanese. Any effective ally against Japan was of obvious value to them, and the Vietminh were seen to be such an ally.

Contact between the Vietminh and the American command in China was set up by a Canadian, Laurie Gordon, an ex-Texaco Oil man who was at the time operating an intelligence service in the north. American arms and supplies began filtering through to the Vietminh in 1944, in return for which the Vietminh provided intelligence about the Japanese and smuggled shot-down American pilots

back into China. The Americans quickly realized the usefulness of the Vietminh and the quality and quantity of aid was stepped up. In October 1944, equipped with Thomson submachine-guns, modern rifles and grenades, Ho Chi Minh felt confident enough to begin operating from Thai Nguyen, north of Hanoi. The Vietminh harassment of the Japanese remained fairly limited, but was successful in that it kept an entire division of Japanese troops occupied.

Then, in March 1945, events took a new turn. Seeing the imminent collapse of Germany, and fearing a resurgence of French power, the Japanese decided to strike against the French. On 9 March they staged a swift and efficient *putsch* in Vietnam. The French were stripped of all power and authority, turned out of administrative buildings and had their police and armed forces disarmed and gaoled, though a few French units, with Vietminh help, managed to fight their way out into China. The French did receive some assistance in the way of arms and supplies from the British, but the Americans in the China Theatre, who could have done much more, refused point-blank to come to their assistance, the French thus paying the price of their years of collaboration with and non-resistance towards the Japanese. A few small and tardy attempts were made by a number of French units to form a common resistance with the Vietminh, and at Bac Con a 'Franco-Vietnamese Resistance Committee against the Japanese Fascists' was formed. But according to the Vietminh, the French showed no real stomach for this idea.

The removal of the French strengthened the hand of the Vietminh for several reasons. The war was now going badly for the Japanese and they were heavily preoccupied. A massive repression by the Japanese of another Asiatic people would have been a dangerous precedent in the wake of the high moral tone of their previous propaganda. Since overrunning the former European empires the Japanese had laid great stress on their economic ideas for 'Asian Co-prosperity' and at the same time had done their best to

subvert the complex and long-standing myth of white superiority. More importantly, however, the Japanese police and intelligence networks were nowhere near as efficient as those of the experienced French. And the puppet officials were not immune from the virus of independence that was now abroad. As the American reporter Harold Isaacs pointed out, 'Many an Annamite patriot joined the puppet militia only to get his hands on a rifle, and then to melt away into the hinterland to join the Vietminh partisans.'[2] As Vietminh guerrilla harassment intensified, more supplies from the Americans became available, and in July 1945, American O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services) instructors were parachuted into the Vietminh H.Q. at Thai Nguyen to train Ho Chi Minh's soldiers.

As a resounding Japanese defeat became more and more of a possibility, so the Vietminh guerillas intensified their efforts – to impress the Allies as much as anything. Indeed, the Vietminh always kept a shrewd weather eye on the possible direction of post-war Allied policy. What they expected (as did the Allies) was a full-scale military invasion of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, and with that in mind the Standing Bureau of the ICP issued the following instructions in March 1945: '... guerrilla activities represent the only tactics by which our people can keep the initiative in the struggle to drive the Japanese aggressor out of the country while holding themselves in readiness to given support to the Allied forces . . .'[3] When the invasion came, the Vietminh were determined to be seen as the only effective anti-Japanese force in Indo-China – in fact, as one with the Allies. This, they reasoned, would be the final nail in the coffin of French rule.

But the invasion never took place. Instead, on 6 August, 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Two days later, Russia declared war on the Japanese, and the day after that Nagasaki met the same fate as Hiroshima. The Japanese collapsed in confusion. On 14 August Hirohito and the Japanese Cabinet accepted terms of

unconditional surrender. The Second World War was over.

On 13 August the ICP held a national congress to hammer out their post-war policy, and the congress report[4] forms an interesting document of Vietminh intentions. The official attitude towards French residents was, 'To ensure protection of their lives and property (except for pro-Japanese elements).' (Considering the extent of French collaboration with the Japanese, the rider *could* have justified a massacre of the French population.) Towards the expected Gaullist forces, the official line was, 'Pending the party instructions, we must avoid all military incidents, but where they penetrate, people and their property must be evacuated; at the same time we must lead the masses to demonstrate against all attempts by the French to re-establish their former role in Indo-China.' Towards the Allied troops (British, American and Chinese), the instructions were to 'avoid collisions and maintain good relations with them'. As to foreign policy, the ICP showed itself shrewdly well-informed:

> We must avail ourselves of the contradiction in the Allied camp concerning the Indo-China question between the British and the French on one side, and the Americans and the Chinese on the other. . . . We must win the Soviet Union and the United States over to our cause so that we can oppose French attempts to resume their former position in Indo-China. . . .'

On 13 August the Vietminh issued a (largely rhetorical) general insurrection order, and on Sunday, 19 August, Ho Chi Minh's National Liberation Committee took power in Hanoi. The next day the ineffective Emperor Bao Dai abdicated, and his proclamation of abdication, issued the following week, begged the new government 'to deal fraternally with all the parties and groups which have fought for the independence of our country, even though they have not closely followed the popular movement; to do this in order to give them the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of the country and to demonstrate that the new régime is built upon the absolute union of the entire

population'. After this plea for moderation, Bao Dai ended pathetically,

> As for us, during twenty years' reign we have known much bitterness. Henceforth we shall be happy to be a free citizen in an independent country. . . . Long live the independence of Vietnam. Long live our democratic Republic.[5]

A week later Bao Dai left Hué to become supreme counsellor to the Hanoi government as plain Mr. Vinh Thuy. On Saturday, 25 August, the Vietminh Provisional Executive Committee for South Vietnam was set up in Saigon with nine members, six of whom were Communist. The 'August Revolution', as it is still called by the Vietnamese, had been carried through. It was, according to Buttinger, 'a patriotic event whose irresistible drive stemmed from the double realization that the war had ended and that national liberation had become a possibility. . . .'[6]

The 2 September Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam[7] is an odd, slightly hysterical document which is more a catalogue of French misdeed than anything else. But it begins on an ironical note. Quoting the Declaration of American Independence of 1776, it opens with the words:

> 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.

Then, after a reference to the ideals of the French revolution of 1789, it goes on to vilify French Imperialism:

> They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice. . . . They have deprived our people of every democratic liberty. . . . They have enforced inhuman laws. . . . They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood. . . . To weaken our race they have forced us to use opium and alcohol. . . . They have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people and devastated our land. . . . they have hampered the prosperity of our national bourgeoisie; they have mercilessly exploited our workers. . . .

Finally, having denounced the Japanese and their French collaborators, the Declaration states:

> For these reasons we, members of the Provisional government representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligations that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam, and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our fatherland.
>
> The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country.
>
> We are convinced that the Allied nations, which at Teheran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam . . . 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. . . . We, members of the Provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country – and in fact is so already. . . .

But their optimism and faith in the liberality of the Allies was to prove misplaced. The immediate fate of Vietnam had already been decided – a long way away from either Saigon or Hanoi.

Chapter Two

Wartime Politics and Vietnam

VIEWED from twenty-five years on and in the light of later events it is perhaps difficult to understand just how unimportant the affairs of an obscure French colony must have seemed in 1945. Vietnam had always been peripheral to the main events of the Pacific war; in the public mind it was not associated with the movement and counter-movement of great opposing armies as were, say, Burma and the Philippines. With much of Europe in ruins, Japan only recently defeated, and the appalling implications of the atomic bomb still reverberating, the future of an eastern corner of the French Empire must have seemed small beer indeed. There were other more fundamental issues to worry about.

But despite this, Indo-China had been a subject of a considerable contention among the Allied leaders throughout the war. Time after time, in Washington, in London, at Cairo, Teheran, Yalta and finally Potsdam, the issue of French Indo-China cropped up. And whenever it did the wrangling which followed was often acrimonious. In fact, Indo-China was one of the key points at which American, British, Chinese and French foreign policies came into conflict. The war-time conferences over Indo-China throw into some relief the very different underlying prejudices of the respective Allied powers, who were all ostensibly advancing together in the common cause of 'democracy.' As usual, democracy had as many interpretations as it had protagonists; the British version in particular was to prove instrumental in the shaping of events in Vietnam.

The British Empire, like the empires of Holland and

France, had suffered a profound shock from the rapid and militarily brilliant onslaught of the Japanese. On the same night that the American battle fleet was crippled at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Malaya had been invaded by Japanese troops and Hong Kong bombed. A week later the Japanese were in Borneo. In February 1942 Singapore fell, and a few months later the British were driven out of Burma, India itself being threatened. It seemed that the British Empire in the East had gone down like a pack of cards and that the days of British influence in the Far East were finally numbered. Even the powerful American allies were being thrown back across the Pacific. The Japanese had proved once more that, given the technical means, Asiatics were a match for the Europeans who had lorded it in Asia for so long.

Within the empire the humiliation of the British had the effect of subverting the myth (since that is what it was) of British military might. British rule in Asia was largely sustained by bluff, and the Japanese had called it. Once credibility in the British as a protective force had been destroyed, the forces of nationalism, which had been developing for years, began to build up popular followings. The trend was compounded by the policy of the Japanese to encourage Asian nationalism within the context of their 'Greater Asia Co-Prosperity' scheme (an idea in itself not without merit).

While Asian nationalism had become a force to be reckoned with by the late 1930s, British policy in the Far East at the time was, understandably perhaps, preoccupied with Japan. The emergence of the Japanese as a real power was seen as a greater threat to the Imperial *status quo* than were the nationalist rumblings from within individual countries. Throughout the 1930s the British, French, Dutch and the Americans exerted an economic stranglehold on the Japanese which inhibited the success of the moderates in that country. As the Japanese grew increasingly desperate, so their policies slipped further and further towards

the right. In July 1940, eighteen months before the outbreak of the Pacific war, Matsuoka, the Japanese Foreign Minister, told Craigie, the British Ambassador, that 'Japan was determined and in fact compelled by circumstances to set up a new order in the Far East, while Great Britain was resisting these tendencies with every means at her command.... It was therefore difficult to see how a fundamental clash of interests and purpose could be avoided.'[1] Interestingly enough, in negotiations immediately prior to the war, the Japanese put forward Indo-China as a bargaining counter in an effort to remove Allied economic pressure. They offered to withdraw their troops from Indo-China 'either upon the restoration of peace with China or upon the establishment of an equitable peace in the Pacific area.'[2] This concession was not seen as meeting the Allied demands, however, and was rejected outright.

So far as the nationalist movements within the Empire went, it was not until the advent of the 1945 Labour government that British colonial policy began to assume a realistic direction. During the war it remained stubbornly conservative. But with the war with Japan going badly, Churchill's government decided to make some effort to come to terms with the aspirations of the Asian nationalists. At all costs the Indians, at least, had to be persuaded to remain in the war and on the British side. Consequently, in March 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps flew to India to try to thrash out a compromise settlement with the Indian Congress party. But Nehru and Congress were in no mood to accept vague offers of gradual independence once the war was over, and Cripps was not authorized to offer anything more. The talks broke down in April, and in the months that followed Congress grew increasingly intransigent. In August they ordered a campaign of civil disobedience. The British reaction was prompt and predictable. Congress headquarters were raided, and Nehru, Gandhi, Azad and most of the prominent Congress leaders (those 'wicked men,' according to Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for

India) were jailed. The result was widespread violence and rioting involving many deaths and countless arrests. And, of course, a further hardening in the determination of the nationalists.

Considering the heavy-handed actions of the British Raj, it seems remarkable how loyal the Indian Army remained. In Malaya, Borneo, Hong Kong and Burma the same forces were at work, but after the Japanese invasion, of course, the British were no longer on hand to repress them. With the limited intelligence at its disposal, the Colonial Office probably assumed, or simply hoped, that feeling in the colonies still favoured the British, and that the bungling and brutality of the Japanese would cancel out the effects of their anti-white propaganda. And to a remarkable extent this was what happened. The Japanese occupation of the British colonies was often heavy-handed and inept, alienating vastly more people than were ever won over. A solid continuing vein of loyalty to the British enabled the clandestine forces operating out of India to score successes out of all proportion to their numbers. Force 136, a highly organized undercover group operating in Burma, Malaya and Indo-China, co-ordinated local guerrilla groups and kept checks on Japanese troop movements, supply lines and arms dumps. When the time came to turn the Japanese out of Burma, these clandestine organizations harassed the Japanese rear, sabotaged supplies and communications and pinpointed targets for the R.A.F. It was a highly successful combination and Japanese losses were enormous. The debt that the British owed to these, largely nationalist, guerrilla groups was freely admitted by the military. But the creators of British foreign and colonial policy seemed content to ignore it at least to the extent of refusing to acknowledge any political obligation towards it. By Churchill and many of his colleagues the war in the Far East was seen as a struggle to regain the Imperial conditions which had existed before the Japanese attack. The maintenance of the Empire and the

retrieval of its lost components remained the main objective.

American policy in the Far East was less single-minded. According to one commentator, it 'steered an uneasy course between the traditional sympathy of Americans with the right of freedom for all peoples, and an informal commitment to the colonial powers to restore the *status quo* in the Pacific.'[3]

Although in many ways American 'traditional sympathy' with the 'right of freedom' was sentimentally and dimly held, it did exist. While the exigencies of war and the need for reliable allies forced the Americans to pay cognizance to the aims of the European powers, the American tradition of anti-colonialism remained stubbornly extant, much to the chagrin of Churchill, Eden and de Gaulle. President Roosevelt, more than anyone, roundly disapproved of European colonialism, and his disapproval permeated almost his entire administration. In March 1943, William Phillips, the American Ambassador in India, published a letter in the American press which was bitterly critical of the British repression of Indian nationalists. 'The British Prime Minister,' he wrote, 'has stated that the provisions of the Atlantic Charter are not applicable to India, and it is not unnatural therefore that the Indian leaders are beginning to wonder whether the charter is only for the white races. . . .'[4] (British protests at this statement brought a soothing presidential statement, but Phillips's opinions were shared by most of the Roosevelt men in the Far East.) President Roosevelt himself used stronger language, at least in private. To his son Elliot he said. 'Don't think for a moment . . . that Americans would be dying tonight if it had not been for the short-sighted greed of the French, the British and the Dutch.'[5]

The president's dislike of the European empires was deep-seated. What he wanted to see in their place was a system of international 'Trusteeships' to be operated by the United Nations. The intention would be to set up an

international board for each territory so as to prepare it for complete independence. In fact, the aims of the United Nations Trustee System were laid down in the documents of the 1945 San Francisco Conference. Article 76 of Chapter XII describes the system's aims as being 'To promote the political, economic, social and educational advancement of the inhabitants of the Trust territories, and their progressive development towards self-government or independence....'[6] Naturally this subversive American notion did not meet the approval of the British, French or Dutch. The idea was flawed in detail, and never fully worked out, but there is no reason to assume that, given a bit of goodwill, it might not have worked. Stalin rather liked the idea, and was quite keen for it to be implemented in Korea. Ironically, two of the territories for which it was most vigorously proposed, Korea and Indo-China, emerged as the major flash-points of post-war Asia.

While Roosevelt disliked European Imperialism generally, the French version of it he utterly detested. So much so that, in the opinion of the late Bernard Fall, 'his preoccupation amounted almost to a fixation'.[7] 'France has had the country – thirty million inhabitants – for nearly one hundred years,' he told Secretary of State Hull, 'and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning. ... France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China deserve something better than that.' When the State Department suggested to him that the French army would return to Indo-China in the natural course of military events, they were told that 'no French troops whatever should be used in operations in Indo-China'. Roosevelt's dislike of the French Empire never waned. Just before his death he told his Chiefs of Staff 'that he favoured anything that was against the Japanese, so long as the United States is not aligned with the French'.[8]

Not that Roosevelt's policy was entirely altruistic. Eden, for one, suspected that there were other motives in American policy than simply a desire to be on the side of

the angels. And Roosevelt himself said in a speech at Bremerton Navy Yard in August 1944, 'The destinies of the peoples of the whole Pacific will for many years be entwined with our own destiny.' But at least the president had a solid grasp of the fact that the days of the European empires were numbered, and that there was no way of stopping the wave of nationalism sweeping Asia. But after his death, in April 1945, his successor Truman shared neither his far-sightedness, nor his particular concern over Indo-China. As a result the Roosevelt men in the Far East came increasingly into conflict with the new president's cautious and rather conservative views.

The policy of de Gaulle's Free French government in Asia was hardly less reactionary than that of Pétain and Vichy, and considerably more intransigent than even British conservatives dared to put on paper. French liberalism stopped short of their Empire. The preamble of the Brazzaville Conference of January 1944, stated that, 'The aims of the work of civilization which France is accomplishing in her possessions excludes any idea of autonomy and any idea of development outside the French Empire bloc.... The attainment of "self-government" in the colonies, even in the most distant future, must be excluded. ...'[9] This, it should be remembered, was not the voice of the Vichy government, but a conference held under the auspices of the Free French government in exile. It might be argued that the very loss of metropolitan France made the determination of the French to hang on to their colonies even more resolute. But whatever their reasons, the French made it quite clear throughout the war (and afterwards) that there were to be no concessions to the colonial emancipation movement, no loosening of France's grip. This hard-line policy, which was to lead directly to the bloodbaths of Indo-China and Algeria, was firmly established during the war. The French were fortunate that their Imperial cause found a vigorous champion in Churchill. Without the active support of the British (and the death of

Roosevelt), the French would never have been able to return to the Far East as a fully blown Imperialist power.

These divisions in Allied policy over Asia emerged time and again during the war conferences. The conflict was usually between the Americans and the British, who took it upon themselves to represent French and Dutch aspirations in conjunction with their own. Fortunately for the European empires, Roosevelt and Stalin saw the main purpose of the war as the defeat first of Germany and then of Japan. The issue of colonial independence, while important to Roosevelt, was a secondary one, and the rifts it created were papered over in the interests of the war effort. Churchill's stubbornness over the question paid off, the contentious issue usually being dropped before it became too heated.

Even in the early stages of the war with Japan, the British Foreign Office was well aware of the hostility towards European colonialism existing among Americans. It was to assuage this hostility that the War Cabinet accepted, in December 1942, a draft declaration on future colonial independence. In February 1943 a draft text was sent to Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington, to obtain the comments of the State Department. In March, just before he left for Washington, Eden received a revised text from the Americans. Since the American version called for actual dates to be set, it was entirely unacceptable to the British government, and then, when Eden got to Washington, Roosevelt brought up his ideas of international trusteeship for, among other places, French Indo-China. Eden told the president that he thought it 'rather hard on the French',[10] and that the British could not accept a proposal which would reduce France to the status of a second-rate power. At the Quebec Conference in the same year, Roosevelt gave Churchill yet another draft declaration on national independence, on which Churchill made no comment. At the next conference in Moscow, the Americans again circulated the idea of international

trusteeship, and Eden refused to discuss the matter. At Teheran, in December 1943, both Stalin and Roosevelt insisted that France did not deserve to have Indo-China returned, and Churchill, perturbed, asked Halifax to get a clarification of American policy from Secretary of State Hull. Roosevelt himself saw Halifax in January 1944 and told him 'that frankly it was perfectly true that I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France . . .'.[11] In April 1944 the Foreign Office was once more asked by the State Department for a declaration of national independence.

Roosevelt continued to bring up the subject whenever the time seemed right, and Churchill always did his best to ignore it. In the opinion of Eden, 'Roosevelt's dislike of colonialism', while 'it was a principle with him, was not the less cherished for its possible advantages'.[12] At Yalta, in February 1945, the American Under-Secretary of State, Stettinius, brought up the matter of trusteeship once again, about which Eden says he was

> suspicious of possible wider applications, and had not liked the topic when Roosevelt brought it up in Washington in 1943. Churchill considered that the intention of the report might be aimed at the British Empire, and he was not the man to let this go by. He launched out eloquently in defence. . . .

About Yalta, Roosevelt said,

> . . . I suggested . . . that Indo-China be set up under a trusteeship. . . . Stalin liked the idea, China liked the idea. The British didn't like it. It might bust up their Empire, because if the Indo-Chinese were to work together and eventually get their independence the Burmese might do the same thing. . . .[13]

But the death of Roosevelt in April 1945 removed the issue from the arena, and with the advent of Truman the State Department were soon saying that there could be no trusteeship in Indo-China, 'except under the French government', and that it was Truman's purpose 'at some appropriate time' to ask France 'for some positive indication

of its intention in regard to the establishment of basic liberties and an increasing measure of self-government in Indo-China'.[14] Mountbatten is reported to have told Leclerc in October 1945 that, but for the death of Roosevelt, France would not be going back to Indo-China.[15] Roosevelt's ideas on U.N. trusteeship may have been vague, but they were enlightened for the time. Post-war events have confirmed that his policies were infinitely more far-sighted than those of British or French statesmen.

At the last war-time conference at Potsdam, in July 1945, the British finally got their way over the future of the Far East. All the former French and Dutch possessions passed under British control, a decision which must have delighted Churchill and Eden (but which cost more than a few British lives). For the first time in their colonial history, the British were to be responsible for the turbulent French colony of Indo-China. How it came about is barely described by British sources. The official British protocol of the Potsdam Conference does not even mention the decision regarding Indo-China. The American 'Diplomatic Papers' do, however, and at some length and in some detail. It is from this source that most of the following information is taken.

The decision to place the southern half of Indo-China under Lord Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command instead of under the American South China Command was made on the recommendation of the British Chiefs of Staff, ostensibly for military reasons. To be fair, there were good military reasons for this, but there were equally good reasons for Indo-China remaining part of U.S. General Wedemeyer's China Theatre. How far British political motives influenced the military recommendations is not clear, but in the light of the British government's known anxiety for Indo-China to be returned to the French they can hardly be ruled out. It can at least be said that the transfer of Indo-China must have pleased the British government very well, and the American 'Diplomatic

Papers'[16] contain one rather remarkable document which is worth quoting at some length as it gives a very vivid picture of the suspicion with which the American commanders viewed British intentions. It also contains a fairly clear picture of Roosevelt's policy with regard to Indo-China and how it was being implemented by his local commanders, together with a remarkably shrewd piece of American prophecy. This document is paper No. 603, an undated memorandum by the President's Naval Aide, G. M. Elsey.

Indo-China first became a subject of presidential messages in November 1944. General Wedemeyer, Commanding General of United States Forces in China, on 15 November reported that British, French and Dutch interests were making an intensive effort to ensure recovery of their prewar political and economic positions in the Far East. One example of this effort is the establishment of a French military mission in India which was preparing to infiltrate Indo-China. For his guidance, Wedemeyer asked for United States policy regarding Indo-China which, by decision of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, is in the Chinese theatre.

President Roosevelt instructed Ambassador Hurley the next day to inform Wedemeyer that 'United States policy with regard to French Indo-China cannot be formulated until after consultation with the Allies at a forthcoming Combined Staff conference'. The president also asked Hurley to keep him posted on British, French and Dutch activities in Southeastern Asia. . . .

This is what Hurley did.

On 26 November [1944] he sent a short diatribe against the policies of our three Allies which, he said, were directed to the 'repossession of their colonial empires, and the re-establishment therein of imperial governments'.

The memorandum goes on to discuss the Yalta Conference:

On 8 February, while explaining his views on trusteeship, President Roosevelt told Stalin he had in mind a trusteeship for Indo-China. He said the British did not approve, and wanted to give it back to the French because they feared the implications of a trusteeship might affect Burma. He added that the French had done nothing to improve the natives since obtaining the colony. When President Roosevelt said that de Gaulle had asked for

ships to transport French forces to Indo-China, Stalin asked where de Gaulle would get the troops. The president replied that de Gaulle had said he would find the troops when the president found the ships; so far there were no ships.

Wedemeyer and Hurley continued to press their point.

In March Wedemeyer and Hurley were both in Washington. President Roosevelt told Wedemeyer that he must watch carefully to prevent British and French political activities in the area, and that he should give only such support to the British and French as would be required in direct operations against the Japanese.

On 24 March Roosevelt and Hurley had a long discussion over Indo-China, which Hurley later reported to Truman on 28 May.

. . . I told him [Truman] that the French, British and Dutch were co-operating to prevent the establishment of a United Nations Trusteeship for Indo-China. The Imperialist leaders believe that such a trusteeship would be a bad precedent for the other imperialistic areas in South-East Asia. I told the president also that the British would attempt, with the use of our Lend-Lease supplies and if possible our manpower, to occupy Indo-China, and re-establish their former Imperial control. . . .

The 'political activities' referred to by Wedemeyer and Hurley were the actions of British and French clandestine forces who had been operating in Indo-China throughout 1945. Also, the R.A.F. had been flying sorties over the area, which, as a part of China Command, was strictly Wedemeyer's territory. To this intrusion into his command Wedemeyer took exception.

The memorandum also records an attempt by Churchill to involve the French in the future of Indo-China. Churchill wired Roosevelt on 11 April saying:

Now that the Japanese have taken over Indo-China and that substantial resistance is being offered by French patriots, it is essential not only that we should support the French by all the means in our power, but also that we should associate them with our operations in the country.

In May, Mountbatten informed Wedemeyer that he intended to fly twenty-six sorties over Indo-China in support of the French, in response to which Wedemeyer asked, 'What arrangements have been made to ensure that the equipment furnished to guerrilla units is employed against the Japanese?'

The implication of the question was that the arms could be used by the French against the Vietnamese. Obviously Mountbatten had no way of knowing, so he did not reply. Instead, he went ahead with his missions. Wedemeyer was irate. On 25 May he protested to Mountbatten:

It had never occurred to me that you would presume that you have authority to operate in an area contiguous to your own without cognizance and full authority of the Commander of that area. . . .

Hurley meanwhile was striving to get a reaffirmation of Roosevelt's policy out of Truman. On 28 May he wrote:

I had been definitely directed verbally by President Roosevelt in regard to his policy in Indo-China. . . . Lord Louis [Mountbatten] is using American Lend-Lease supplies and our American resources to invade Indo-China to defeat what we believe to be the American policy and to re-establish French Imperialism. . . . The move of the Imperialistic powers to use American resources to enable them to move with force into Indo-China is not for the main purpose of participating in the war against Japan. . . . If you, sir, are opposed to Lord Louis' political objectives in Indo-China, I suggest that our government stop giving him Lend-Lease supplies and deny him the use of American Air Forces and other American resources. . . .

Truman's reply of 4 June (quoted in conference document 149) simply states, 'Many of the questions presented in your communications . . . may be discussed in a forthcoming tripartite conference.'

Elsey's memorandum goes on to note that Wedemeyer, in a cable to General Marshall, endorsed Hurley's interpretation of British motives in the Far East and that:

He reported that his information pointed to an increase of British political and economic operations in Indo-China for the

purpose of reviving British pre-war prestige and economic preferment. . . .

And he also noted that:

. . . It was probable the British would propose, at the next Big Three meeting, extending the boundaries of Mountbatten's command to include all former British, French and Dutch colonial possession. . . .

That is exactly what happened.

In a memorandum received in Washington on 9 July, the British Chiefs of Staff asked that the boundaries of the South-East Asia Command be extended to include Indo-China and all the Dutch possessions in the Pacific.

The main difference [the memorandum said] is the inclusion of Indo-China as well as Siam in South-East Asia Command. This we consider important so that there may be unity of control of the major operations in this area when they develop and of previous subversive and paramilitary operations.[17]

At Potsdam the Combined Chiefs got down to talking it over. The Americans had worked out a compromise whereby Indo-China would be split at the 16th parallel, the north to be under Wedemeyer, the south to be under Mountbatten. On 18 July General Marshall asked the British Chiefs of Staff 'if they would express their reaction to dividing Indo-China into two parts. . . .'[18] The British Chiefs of Staff replied that they would like to think it over. Five days later, on 23 July, the decision was approved. The day before, Churchill had once again refused to discuss any ideas concerning a trusteeship for Indo-China.

By that time Mountbatten was in Berlin, and the next day, 24 July, he was with the Combined Chiefs. At a meeting held in the late afternoon of 24 July he was informed of the decision about Indo-China. According to the conference documents,

General Marshall asked what Admiral Mountbatten thought of the idea of splitting Indo-China into two. . . . Admiral Mountbatten said that he had just heard of the proposition and that his first reactions were favourable. He would have liked some latitude

on the actual northern limit of the area in case his operations were to develop either to the north or to the south of the degree of latitude suggested, but did not feel very strongly on the point. He thought the French might find the proposition a little less agreeable.[19]

When asked what he thought of the French offer of two divisions for the war in the Far East, Mountbatten said that he would welcome them so long as they were properly equipped and supported. Marshall explained, however, that he could not expect to receive them until the late spring of 1946.

So, with Mountbatten's approval, the decision went forward in the final report to the president and the prime minister.

We are agreed [the Combined Chiefs wrote] that the best arrangement would be to include that portion of Indo-China lying south of 16 degrees north in South-East Asia Command. This arrangement would continue General Wedemeyer's control of that part of Indo-China which covers the flank of his projected operations in China, and would enable Admiral Mountbatten to prepare the ground in the southern half of Indo-China where any initial operations by him would develop. . . . We recommend that the President and the Prime Minister approach the Generalissimo [Chiang Kai-shek] to secure his agreement to this arrangement.[20]

And, as final rider, it was noted that, 'At a later date it may prove to be desirable to place all or part of the remainder of Indo-China within the sphere of operations of South-East Asia Command.' Accordingly Hurley was instructed, on 1 August, to pass the decision along to the Generalissimo for his approval. The Generalissimo agreed. Mountbatten was now responsible for events in the southern half of Indo-China.

Whether such a decision would have been made if Roosevelt had lived long enough to get to Potsdam seems unlikely. It is doubtful whether the military arguments would have been strong enough to persuade him to second Indo-China to a British command. The pro-colonial campaign that the British had been waging on behalf of the

French would probably have ruled out any such move. But in the event the decision was made, for better or worse. Ironically perhaps, the military credibility of the decision was never put to the test, since the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki shortly lead to Japan's capitulation. Thus the British involvement in Indo-China became not the large-scale invasion followed by a protracted battle against the Japanese that was anticipated, but a confused and politically loaded confrontation with the forces of Vietnamese nationalism. It was not Field-Marshal Terauchi's Japanese Army of the South that the British were to destroy, but Ho Chi Minh's August Revolution.

The Arrival of the British

DURING the spring and summer of 1945 Mountbatten and his staff laid elaborate plans to invade Japanese-held territory in South-East Asia, with an emphasis on the invasion of Malaya and Singapore. These schemes were never put into practical effect. At the beginning of August Japanese resistance was destroyed by three devastating blows: the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Russian declaration of war two days later, and the second atomic raid on Nagasaki. Immediately the Japanese began to sue for peace. The war was over.

Among the first of his post-war orders, Mountbatten received an instruction concerning Indo-China. On 13 August he was informed by the British Chiefs of Staff that his duties there were to secure the Japanese Headquarters, round up and disarm the Japanese prior to their repatriation, and release and transport home Allied P.O.W.s and internees. He was to occupy no more of the country than was necessary for the pursuance of his orders, and was to withdraw his forces as soon as possible. The administration of civil affairs was to be the responsibility of the French. Two days later, on 15 August, southern Indo-China was officially included in his command. Mountbatten now became responsible for events in that turbulent French colony.

Specific instructions notwithstanding, Mountbatten must have realized the political implications of his task in South Vietnam. If his mandate in the country was to be successful, he would have to walk a tightrope between loyalty to the French as an ally and equal loyalty to the liberal

intentions of the Atlantic Charter and the policies of the new Labour government. The situation certainly called for all the tact and political skill that he could muster. But events were already moving quickly – probably too quickly for comfort. There was no time for thrashing out an adequate policy with Whitehall and ensuring that its intricacies were understood by his representatives in South Vietnam. Mountbatten knew, however, that a Civil Affairs agreement between France and Britain over Indo-China was nearing completion (it had been proposed to the War Office on 8 August), so, pending details, he decided to set severe limitations on the British forces designated to enter the country.

In late August the British military organization which was to represent Mountbatten in South Vietnam was formed in Rangoon: its title, SACSEA Control Commission No. 1, under the command of Major-General Douglas D. Gracey. From the outset it was made clear to General Gracey that the British were 'birds of passage' in South Vietnam, that his authority there was strictly limited and temporary. His tasks were to secure the key area of Saigon, including Field-Marshal Count Terauchi's Headquarters, to disarm and concentrate the Japanese forces in the country, to rescue and repatriate Allied P.O.W.s and civilian internees and to maintain order. As Mountbatten's agent he was not to assume 'any measure of administrative authority outside key areas, nor was it made his responsibility to re-establish French sovereignty or to maintain order generally in southern Indo-China'.[1] The British Supreme Commander in South-East Asia was anxious – in fact determined – that his force in Vietnam should be as neutral as the situation allowed, pending the arrival of adequate French forces or contrary instructions from the Foreign Ministry. Mountbatten wanted as little as possible to do with the internal politics of the country.

The nucleus of the British force appointed to carry out

the Control Commission's tasks was General Gracey's own 20th Indian Division, which consisted of:

ARTILLERY
(Commander Brigadier J. A. C. Hirst)
114th Field Regiment Royal Artillery
2nd Indian Field Regiment (replaced by the 9th Field Regiment Royal Artillery)
23rd Indian Mountain Regiment

DIVISIONAL INFANTRY
9th Jat Machine-Gun Battalion
2/8 Punjab Regiment (reconnaisance battalion)
9/12 Frontier Force Regiment (H.Q. battalion)

32ND INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
(Commander Brigadier E. C. J. Woodford)
9/14 Punjab Regiment
4/2 Gurkha Rifles
3/8 Gurkha Rifles

80TH INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
(Commander Brigadier D. E. Taunton)
4/17 Dogra Regiment
1/19 Hyderabad Regiment
3/1 Gurkha Rifles

100TH INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE
(Commander Brigadier C. H. B. Rodham)
14/13 Frontier Force Rifles
1/1 Gurkha Rifles
4/10 Gurkha Rifles

The division had been raised by Gracey in Bangalore in 1942 and trained in Ceylon, and it was one of the first in the British Army to be trained exclusively for the jungle warfare conditions of Burma. Originally the division had

included three British battalions, the 1/1 Northamptons, the 1st Devons and the 2nd Border Regiment, but these had been replaced later in the war by three battalions of Gurkhas. (The classic composition of an Indian infantry brigade was one British, one Indian and one Gurkha battalion.) Throughout the war in Burma the 20th Indian Division had been at the very heart of the fighting. It had been in the arduous defence of the Imphal Plain where the Japanese drive into India was stopped. In that bitter campaign the division had borne the brunt of much of the fighting. After a rest period in 1944, it was back in action covering the right flank of the 14th Army in the drive for Mandalay. Early in 1945 the division crossed the Irrawaddy River, established a beachhead, and held off ferocious Japanese counter-attacks (winning its second V.C. of the war). After the fighting on the Irrawaddy was over the division had killed 2,000 Japanese and captured fifty guns and sixteen tanks. Throughout 1945 General Gracey and his division had pushed further and further south, harrying the Japanese and inflicting terrible casualties. Finally, in May, they occupied Prome. By the end of the war there was no more skilful, experienced and battle-hardened division in Burma. The 20th Indian Division was probably the best division in one of the best armies in Asia, the British 14th Army. Together with its attached units it mustered over 22,000 men and 2,000 vehicles.

Then, backing General Gracey's warriors in Vietnam, were the armoured cars of the 16th (Indian) Light Cavalry, fourteen Spitfires of 273 Squadron R.A.F., and thirty-four Mosquito fighter-bombers of 684 Squadron R.A.F. (2,250 air force personnel in all). There was also a Royal Naval port party of 140 men, the 260 officers of the Control Commission itself (plus ten public relations officers), and 800 French troops of the 5th R.I.C. The total British force which entered South Vietnam in September and October, 1945, thus numbered nearly 26,000 men with almost 2,500 vehicles.

Gracey himself was a formidable soldier. His military career had been long and brilliant, marked by a succession of decorations. Educated at Sandhurst, he had served in France in 1915 with the Royal Munster Fusiliers and later with the 1/1 Gurkhas in the Middle East. Twice wounded, he was decorated M.C. and bar. In the 1920's he was a staff instructor at Sandhurst, and later a student at Quetta Staff College in India. During the 1930s he became a staff officer, and later commandant of the 2/3 Gurkhas, with whom he served on the North-West Frontier. At the beginning of the Second World War he was back at Quetta Staff College, this time as assistant commandant. In 1941 he was promoted to brigadier and was sent with his brigade, the 17th Indian Infantry Brigade, to deal with Rashid Ali's anti-British *coup* in Iraq. Later he served against the Vichy French in Syria, and took part in the pre-emptive invasion of Persia. For his services in the Middle East he was twice mentioned in dispatches and awarded the O.B.E. In 1942 he was promoted again and given the job of raising and training the 20th Indian Division, a task he performed superbly. For his campaigns in Burma he added the C.B. and C.B.E. to his list of decorations.

A short, powerfully built man, Gracey was a tough, hard-headed Indian Army officer, but no dyed-in-the-wool blimp. He was intelligent and resourceful, and a sharp critic of the military establishment. Possessed of an uproarious sense of humour, he won the deep affection and loyalty of his officers, both British and Indian. Although he could be a fierce disciplinarian, his Indian troops, and particularly his Gurkhas, adored him. To them he was known as 'Cha Cha', 'uncle'. He returned their affection, and guarded their lives and welfare zealously. During the long campaigns in Burma there was never any squandering of the lives of sepoys and Gurkhas of the 20th Indian Division.

And, interestingly, Gracey was far from opposed to Asian nationalism as such. After the war he became

Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army and in 1948, together with his opposite number in the Indian Army, stopped what could have turned into a full-scale war between India and Pakistan. But whether this admittedly able soldier was the man for the job in South Vietnam in 1945 is a matter for some doubt. For one thing, he was irrevocably associated with the Indian Army, which, to most Asian nationalists, was a key instrument and symbol of European repression. For another, his job in Saigon was politically sensitive and complicated by the fact that he was operating in a double role, as Commander-in-Chief of Allied Land Forces French Indo-China (ALFFIC) and as head of SACSEA Control Commission No. 1. This would have been a tricky operation at the best of times, which was hardly the case in late 1945 in South Vietnam.

The political conditions immediately prior to the arrival of the British had been highly unsettled and, to even the most experienced of observers, highly confusing. Within the power vacuum caused by the sudden collapse of the Japanese, almost all the various nationalist groups in Saigon began to jockey for position, usually under the cover of the United National Front (UNF). This organization had been set up by the Japanese, but heavily penetrated by the Vietminh. The Vietminh were well aware that the Allies would look on it with extreme disfavour. They asserted that unless the UNF was clearly seen to be led by the Vietminh (who had fought the Japanese), then there was a serious risk that the Allies would dismiss the entire nationalist movement out of hand as a creature of Japanese intrigue. They therefore demanded that they should lead the organization. On 22 August the UNF agreed (temporarily) to the Vietminh proposals, and next day the People's Committee for the South was established in Saigon Town Hall. Under the chairmanship of Tran Van Giau, the Cochin China Communist leader, it consisted of nine members, six of whom were Communists. Immediately the committee began to pursue a moderate line. Like

their counterparts in Hanoi, the committee members were determined to present a respectable front to the Allies. Every act of provocation against the French, no matter how small, was roundly condemned. Plea after plea went out to the people of Saigon to maintain law and order, to keep the city running smoothly. Tran Van Giau had no intention of giving the British a pretext for usurping the nationalists' new-found power.

On 27 August Tran Van Giau and the committee held a meeting with Cédille, the commissioner-designate for Cochin China (who had been dropped into the country by the R.A.F. on 22 August). The meeting achieved nothing except arousing the antagonism of the hard-line nationalist groups. The Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao and the Trotskyists all became wary of the moderation being exercised by the Vietminh, fearing a sellout to the French. But the Vietminh persisted. While others were trying to wreak official revenge on the French *colons*, the Vietminh managed to contain them and to keep the situation under control. Throughout August Saigon remained relatively quiet.

Then, on 2 September, the day of the Declaration of Independence, the committee organized a mass demonstration in Saigon. It was a mistake. Although the Vietminh had toured the streets calling for order, towards the end of the day there was a bad riot in the Rue Catinat. Outside the cathedral some shooting started, and five Europeans, including the pro-Vietminh priest Father Tricoire, were killed. How the shooting began is still unknown, but there is some evidence that it may have been the work of French *agents provocateurs*. Certainly the Vietminh had nothing to gain by it. But after the shooting the nervous crowd ran amok, a number of French houses were looted and many French arrested and locked up.

Next day the Vietminh newspaper deplored the excesses and the head of the Vietminh police, Duong Bach Mai, released all the French prisoners. But the French were by now in a state of acute nervousness and in terror for their

lives. Still determined to present a responsible image to the Allies, Tran Van Giau appealed to the population of Saigon in pamphlets saying, 'In the interests of our country we call on everyone to have confidence in us and not let themselves be led astray by people who betray our country.'[2] But soon after the Trotskyists issued a manifesto denouncing the committee as pawns of the Imperialists and traitors to the August Revolution. The committee retaliated swiftly. In two days Duon Bach Mai arrested all the leaders of the Trotskyists and then struck against the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. Quickly, in another move to assuage the fears of the British, Tran Van Giau reshuffled the committee, increasing the membership to thirteen, only four of whom were Communists. He himself stepped down as leader and his place was taken by Pham Van Bach, not officially a Communist, but certainly a Communist sympathizer. Having done their best to keep the city operating and pursued their moderate aims 'with a singlemindedness of which in this century only the Communists seem capable,'[3] the committee awaited the arrival of the British.

While Pham Van Bach was waiting for General Gracey's advance British units were already in the country. Until the RAPWI (Repatriation of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) teams arrived, the job of contacting and looking after the 5,000 P.O.W.s around Saigon was assigned to various allied clandestine units who had been operating in the country: British units such as Force 136, E Group, and the American O.S.S. (a few of whom had remained in the south). At the end of August, 'Operation Mastiff' was mounted by the R.A.F. and 'Liberator' transports from Bengal began flying in and out of Saigon. Between 30 August and 11 September twenty-four R.A.F. sorties had been carried out. Then, on 8 September, the first of the RAPWI teams landed and included engineering and medical reconnaissance units. (One of the tasks of the medical staff was to examine Field-Marshal Terauchi, who had recently suffered a stroke and was claiming to be unable

to attend the surrender ceremonies in Singapore.) The RAPWI parties were met at the airport by the Vietminh, who offered them every facility, and the mission reported back to Gracey that their reception had been friendly, that everything was quiet in Saigon, that the airport was in good condition, and that there were standings for up to seventy Dakotas. Three days later, on 11 September, the first troops of the 20th Indian Division began arriving, consisting of men of the 1/1 Gurkhas, part of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade. They, too, were welcomed by the Vietminh, but this time the British officers exercised their authority. They demanded lists of all armed Vietnamese, ordered that all Vietnamese forces, including the police, should remain where they were, and immediately began taking over vital installations such as the airfield, the power station, the banks and some of the police stations. Japanese who had been on guard were quickly replaced by Gurkhas. The committee were concerned at this quick British move, but remained determined to co-operate with the British forces, though the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao refused point-blank to give up their arms. Militarily the occupation of these vital installations made sound sense, and was in fact routine. But politically it had the effect of disquieting the Vietnamese.

Two days later, on 13 September, Gracey, together with Brigadier Maunsell, his Chief of Staff, flew into Saigon. When they deplaned at Tan Son Nhut in the late afternoon, they found the airfield ringed with Japanese troops and Field-Marshal Terauchi's generals waiting to pay their respects to the victors. In Terauchi's own car, which had been laid on by the advance units, Gracey and Maunsell, with Gurkhas and Japanese riding shotgun, made the trip into Saigon. The route from the airport into the city had been bedecked by the Vietminh with British, American and Vietminh flags and a variety of pro-allied slogans, (one of which read 'Welcome to the Allies, to the British and the Americans, but we have no room for the French').

The route was also lined with apparently friendly Vietnamese civilians, who were being controlled by Japanese soldiers.

For the first day or two of Gracey's régime, Saigon was quiet enough, at least on the surface. Most essential services were operating – the water, the telephones, the trams, even the rubbish collection. One exception was the electricity supply, which tended to be erratic (there was a shortage of fuel at this point, and for some time the Royal Engineers had to burn rice to keep the generators turning). The food supply generally was adequate, and distribution through the shops and the markets (both French and Vietnamese) was unimpaired. There was a shortage of certain commodities, such as baby foods, sugar and medical supplies, but the British command had those flown into the country. The administration of Saigon by the Vietminh may not have been perfect, but neither was it a disaster. Considering the confusion and political unrest which prevailed, the committee was not doing a bad job.

Of more concern to Gracey was the 'law and order' situation. Ever since the riots of 2 September the Vietnamese population had been restive and the French highly nervous. The extremists among the nationalists had succeeded, to the dismay of the Vietminh, in stirring up some feeling against the British by spreading a rumour that Gracey had come simply to reinstall the French. The Japanese were maintaining a kind of rough and sporadic law and order at least during the day. Disrupters of the peace met swift justice from Japanese patrols, usually in the form of a rifle butt. During the day the streets were busy enough, and the French walked around in complete safety, in the main thoroughfares anyway. The French civilian clubs were thriving, the tennis courts busy, the swimming pools usually crowded, and the bars packed. But after dark the French kept well off the streets. In Saigon and Cholon even the main boulevards were deserted at night. Almost the only signs of life were from the crowds of Japanese

troops, who were still going down to the dives in Cholon to get drunk (one of the first moves the British made was to put Cholon out of bounds to Japanese troops). More seriously, there was occasional sporadic shooting during the night, and quantities of arms were being smuggled out of police stations. Reports of a clandestine war between the Vietminh and the other nationalists began to worry the British command, though Brigadier Taunton of 80 Brigade has no personal recollection of any disturbances at this time.

What mainly concerned the British commission was the fact that no legal writ was in force. No magistrates or criminal courts were operating, the Vietnamese police were helpless, and the Japanese were opting out of the situation. Although nothing much was actually happening, a serious situation remained a real possibility. The Vietminh, no doubt doing their best, were proving inadequate in this area, and the Japanese were unwilling to take a hand. Gracey decided to act quickly to restore his grip on the city. At the first plenary session of the commission on 15 September, attended by the Japanese command, Gracey gave Terauchi a tongue whipping. He reminded Terauchi that the preservation of the peace was his responsibility under the terms of General Order No. 1 and under instructions from Mountbatten. The Japanese were ordered to ensure that peace prevailed in Saigon. Terauchi admitted his responsibility, and said he would do his best. Gracey had no option at this stage but to lean heavily on Japanese assistance. The fly-in of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade was a slow business (they were not up to strength until 26 September), and the remainder of the British force was coming by sea and not expected until the beginning of October. But the dressing-down Terauchi received was effective. In Saigon at least, the Japanese established a firm grip, and there were no serious disorders during the week following Gracey's arrival.

Cédille, the French commissioner-designate for Cochin

China, kept in constant touch with the British commander. At that stage Cédille was an anxious man. He was concerned about the safety of the French community, worried about the existence of the *de facto* Vietminh government, and worried about British neutrality. He knew that the French on their own did not have the power to remove the Vietminh from the city administration, and was anxious to squeeze every drop of assistance from the British that he could. Cédille tried to impress upon Gracey just how anxious and fearful the French were, how helpless they would be in an emergency, and pleaded for arms and equipment for them to defend themselves in the event of insurrection. He also tried to convince the British general that the French had the support of a large part of the Vietnamese population. Certainly the prosperous Vietnamese middle class reasoned that they would receive a better deal from the French than they would from the Vietminh, and were pressing for a return of the old régime. The powerful Chinese merchants of Cholon were also firmly on the side of the French, though they hedged their bets by paying lip-service to the Vietnamese nationalists. Apart from this there was a strong residual feeling of guilt among many of the French. More than a few of them had enjoyed a very comfortable war under the Japanese and Vichy, and sought to assuage their guilt by becoming excessively pro-Allied. Many of the fiercest anti-Gaullists were at pains to point out how the Vietnamese had collaborated with the Japanese and how the nationalist movement was nothing but the product of Japanese trouble-making.

The constant French pressure put Gracey in an unenviable position. Officially his instructions were to remain politically neutral, but France was the acknowledged sovereign power in the country, a fact which biased the British authorities in the direction of a *de facto* support of French aspirations. While Gracey was under no orders to restore the French to power, he was obliged to maintain law and

order in Saigon. Since the Manual of Military Law prescribes that the occupying commander must observe as far as possible the laws of the country, Gracey was obliged to support French law and French order. It is quite clear that he never regarded the Vietminh committee as constituting the legal government of the country. Indeed, under the terms of his mandate he could hardly do so. Recognition of the committee would have been a political action he was not entitled to make. Consequently he made no effort to come to terms with, or even seriously to consult, the leaders of the Vietminh. There was never any doubt in his mind that rule of the country belonged to the French. To recognize the Vietminh would have been a waste of time and would have encouraged them unnecessarily while causing gratuituous anxiety to the French. Any dispute between the Vietminh and the French was none of his business. But, of course, by supporting the pre-war *status quo* Gracey was implicitly taking the French side. Not unnaturally the Vietminh took exception. They protested, with some justice, that the Vietminh had actively opposed the Japanese while the French had collaborated openly throughout the war. They insisted that it was grievously unjust of the British to support the French against a genuine ally. Did the articles of the Atlantic Charter not apply to the people of South Vietnam? Was this the justice the people of Asia could expect from the western democracies? Daily the foreign affairs secretary of the committee wrote to the British mission begging for direct negotiations with the British commander and offering their assistance in disarming the Japanese. Their pleas were to no avail. Gracey steadfastly refused to have any dealings with the Vietminh.

The British commander was acting correctly by the book. But here was a situation which called for tact and real political imagination. Gracey may genuinely have been persuaded by the French that the Vietminh were simply a trouble-making minority. He certainly seems to have

underestimated the bitterness of anti-French feeling in the country and the determination of the nationalists to win their Independence. Gracey's refusal to deal with the Vietminh was a bad political misjudgement which was to have serious consequences, anatagonizing all the nationalist groups and forcing the Vietminh to abandon their moderate position. As resentment towards the British grew, the situation in Saigon began to deteriorate. Sporadic shooting and the looting of French property increased, and the French grew steadily more frightened. And, by the logic of the situation, as disorder increased, so Gracey was forced to take sharper measures.

As a protest against what appeared to be British connivance with the French, on 17 September the Vietminh closed down the Saigon market, staged a series of strikes, and enforced a boycott of all French traders. It was a serious move which threatened the food supply of the city and gave the racketeers of the Binh Xuyen the chance to indulge in some heavy looting at French expense. Gracey was now thoroughly disturbed by the course events had taken, and more determined than ever to maintain law and order in the city. On 19 September he closed down the Vietnamese press, on the grounds that it was stirring up trouble against the authorities, and demanded the immediate disarming of all Vietnamese carrying arms. The Vietminh were outraged, particularly at the suppression of their newspapers. They protested furiously to the British that this was a gross interference with their political liberties and aspirations, and that the press should be returned to them, if only so that they could explain the policies of the British. They even offered to operate it under British censorship. But Gracey was adamant. The press remained muted. Events were clearly building to a crisis.

Martial Law and Coup d'État

ON Friday, 21 September, Gracey made his most serious move to date. On that day throughout Saigon and Cholon he posted Proclamation No. 1, which was to all intents and purposes a declaration of martial law. Up till then he had been operating, if not liberally, at least by the book. With Proclamation No. 1, however, Gracey stepped across the boundary. Printed in English, French and Vietnamese, the proclamation was an important document in the course of events, and is worth quoting from at length.

Paragraph 1 was simply a reminder to the Vietnamese that Gracey had command of 'all British, French and Japanese forces, and of all police forces and other armed bodies in French Indo-China south of 16 latitude, with orders to ensure law and order in this area.' And Paragraph 2 continued:

> Let it be known to all that it is my firm intention to ensure with strict impartiality that this period of transition from war to peace conditions is carried out peaceably with the minimum dislocation to all public utility services, legitimate businesses and trade, and with the least interference with the normal peaceful activities and avocations of the people.

But Paragraph 3 contained a note of dire warning:

> I call on all citizens in the name of the Supreme Allied Commander to co-operate to the fullest extent to achieve the above object, and hereby warn all wrongdoers, especially looters and saboteurs of public and private property, and those also carrying out similar criminal activities, that they will be summarily shot.

Paragraph 4 made clear the general's determination to maintain the peace, the following orders coming into immediate effect:

(a) No demonstrations or processions will be permitted.
(b) No public meetings will take place.
(c) No arms of any description including sticks, staves, bamboo spears, etc., will be carried except by British and Allied troops, and such other forces and police which have been specially authorized by me.
(d) The curfew already imposed on my orders by the Japanese authorities between 21.30 and 05.30 in Saigon and Cholon will be continued and strictly enforced.

The proclamation was a stiff measure, designed to clamp down particularly on the sporadic looting and minor skirmishing which had been taking place in Saigon and Cholon. It reminded the nationalists as well as the criminal gangs that the British had officially at their disposal all the fire power in the country, and that they would not hesitate to use it in the pursuit of law and order. Though all wrongdoers, particularly looters and saboteurs, were promised summary execution, in fact none were executed, at least not by process of law. But the clamp-down on demonstrations, processions and street meetings represented the final suspension of nationalist politics. With their newspapers already suppressed, with Saigon Radio in British hands, the nationalists now had no means for pleading their case or articulating their ambitions. The Vietminh were incensed. The British seemed to be stripping them of every right. Even the most primitive of weapons was proscribed, and they could no longer go on to the streets at night. The committee were informed of the new measures officially when one of Gracey's staff went over to the Town Hall and read it to them aloud in French. (He found them sitting on the floor eating a meal with their families.) Proclamation No. 1 was a severe and highly contentious move which drove the Vietminh even further into a corner.

It is usually argued that the proclamation was a reaction to the wave of strikes and boycotts instigated by the Vietminh on 17 September. But there is some evidence to suggest that Gracey had decided on the move quite early on. For example, though the official date given for the

posting of the proclamation is 21 September, the War Diary of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade states that it was posted on 19 September. Certainly that is the date printed on the poster. If so, then the document must have been printed on that day, or the day before, and was probably drafted round about 16 September. Which implies that it may well have been under consideration on the 15th, the day of the first plenary session, two days after Gracey's arrival. Which further suggests that Gracey had intended all along to take steps against the Vietminh.

When Mountbatten was informed of Gracey's action he was thoroughly alarmed. In his eyes the general had clearly exceeded his orders. As he has said,

> I felt that the proclamation – addressed as it was to the whole of southern French Indo-China – and not merely to the key points – was contrary to the policy of His Majesty's Government; and since proclamations of this nature may well appear to be initiated by government policy, I warned Major-General Gracey that he should take care to confine operations of British/Indian troops to those limited tasks which had been set.[1]

Still anxious in case Gracey's proclamation might be construed as British government policy, Mountbatten sought the advice of Generals Slim and Leclerc, both of whom were at his H.Q. in Kandy. They reached the conclusion that Gracey had acted wisely. Accordingly Mountbatten telegraphed the British Chiefs of Staff on 24 September, backing Gracey by saying that he considered that Major-General Gracey, in issuing his proclamation, has acted with courage and determination in an extremely difficult situation; with as yet inadequate forces ...' He also took it on himself to explain Gracey's motives:

> In my opinion if the riots he feared had developed, the safety of the small British/Indian force and of the French population might have been compromised, since the river and port were not yet open.

The trouble was that Gracey's proclamation, having been addressed to the entire country south of 16 degrees of

latitude, implicitly extended the tasks of the British occupation forces. Mountbatten was now faced with either having to back Gracey completely, or of stepping back and confining the British command to its original instructions – two alternative courses which he has described as being 'to implement the proclamation and retain responsibility for civil and military administration throughout south French Indo-China', or 'to limit my responsibility solely to the control of the Japanese Supreme Headquarters'. Mountbatten pointed out to his Chiefs of Staff that the first course would involve him in controlling all French civil affairs and mean the deployment of British troops throughout the interior of the country so as 'to maintain order in support of the French'. This, Mountbatten reminded them, was not in accordance with his original instructions, and in any case would require the services of a full British division. The second course of action, to confine his responsibility solely to the Japanese H.Q., required a strong French presence, and most importantly, 'the reaffirmation of the proclamation by General Leclerc in the name of the French Republic'. Mountbatten argued that it would be dangerous to revoke the proclamation now that it had been posted. Therefore the French government were required to underwrite it and bear responsibility for the consequences. But this Leclerc refused to do, saying that, 'while welcoming and supporting Major-General Gracey's proclamation', he 'was not prepared to reaffirm the proclamation in the name of the French Republic until the 9th D.I.C. had arrived and he had ample forces at his disposal'. So with the French refusing to back Gracey officially, and with less than one British brigade in the country to implement the proclamation, Mountbatten was in a quandary. Anxiously he sought a policy ruling from the British Chiefs of Staff, recommending for his part that the second course of action was the one to adopt.

Then, while Mountbatten and Leclerc were mulling over the validity and implications of Gracey's proclamation,

events in Saigon took a new and decisive turn. Without reference to Mountbatten (or to anyone else in authority), Gracey gave in to French demands for weapons and began rearming many of the Saigon *colons* with .303 rifles. On Saturday, 22 September, the day after the official posting of the proclamation, the British took over Saigon Jail, disarmed the Vietnamese staff, and rearmed the P.O.W.s of the 11th R.I.C. who had been languishing there since the Japanese *putsch*. Quietly Cédille assembled a small armed force consisting of Gaullist troops, ex-P.O.W.s and armed civilians. And then, with Gracey's permission, in the early hours of Sunday, 23 September, the French struck against the Vietminh Committee. In a fast and brutal *coup d'état* they stormed the Vietminh H.Q. in Saigon Townhall, arrested all the members of the committee they could find, and ran up the Tricolour. The operation was carried out with what one British eyewitness described as, 'maximum ineptitude and considerable cruelty'.[2] An American reporter wrote later:

> . . . sentries were shot down. Occupants of the building were either killed or taken prisoner. Records were seized and scattered. Scores of Annamites were trussed up and marched off. Foreign eye-witnesses that morning saw blood flow, saw bound men beaten. They saw French colonial culture being restored to Saigon.[3]

The French made a mess of the operation in more ways than one. Most committee members had got wind of the coming *coup* and had made off into the countryside. While some were arrested, most of the influential nationalists escaped to carry on the struggle.

Up until that point, despite press closures and martial law, there had been a chance of a peaceful settlement, of a negotiated French re-entry. But after the *coup d'état* of 23 September there was none. By allowing the *coup* Gracey had effectively thrown away any possibility of peace. Even had the French turned out the Vietminh with smiles and garlands, they could hardly have failed to antagonize the

Vietnamese nationalists. But the brutal way in which the *coup* was executed, together with the events in its aftermath, drove the Vietnamese into extremes of anger. When the *colons* of Saigon woke on Sunday morning and saw the Tricolour flying over the city, French sentries standing where there had previously been Vietnamese, it seemed that French rule had been restored once and for all; their reaction was to run wild. In a fever of revenge the *colons*, together with the bitter ex-P.O.W.s of the 11th R.I.C., stormed through the streets of Saigon beating and arresting any Vietnamese they came across. Captain R. D. Williams, the 20th Indian Division's ammunition officer, who was stationed in the Rue Catinat, was besieged by demands for rifles from the French, who insisted that the British assist them in the fight against '*Les Jaunes*'. But then the streets of Saigon became hazardous for everyone since the French ('Trigger-happy', according to Brigadier Taunton of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade) began shooting indiscriminately, and buildings in the Rue Catinat, including the British billets, were sprayed with automatic fire, British officers having hurriedly to change their lodgings to avoid being shot up. One appalled British reporter described 'disgraceful scenes of vengeance against helpless Annamites' which 'continued all Sunday'[4], and even the British Commission stated,

> . . . the behaviour of the French citizens during the morning of Sunday, 23 September, absolutely ensured that counter-measures would be taken by the Annamites. The more emotional of the French citizens . . . unfortunately took this opportunity of taking what reprisals they could. Annamites were arrested for no other reason than that they were Annamites. . . .[5]

All day Sunday, and into Monday, the French continued to take their revenge for the humiliations they had suffered over the past months. The shootings, beatings and arrests which occurred in the wake of Cédille's *coup* alienated even the most moderate of the Vietnamese. Annamites who had previously been quite prepared to come to terms with the French, after being gun-whipped and thrown into jail

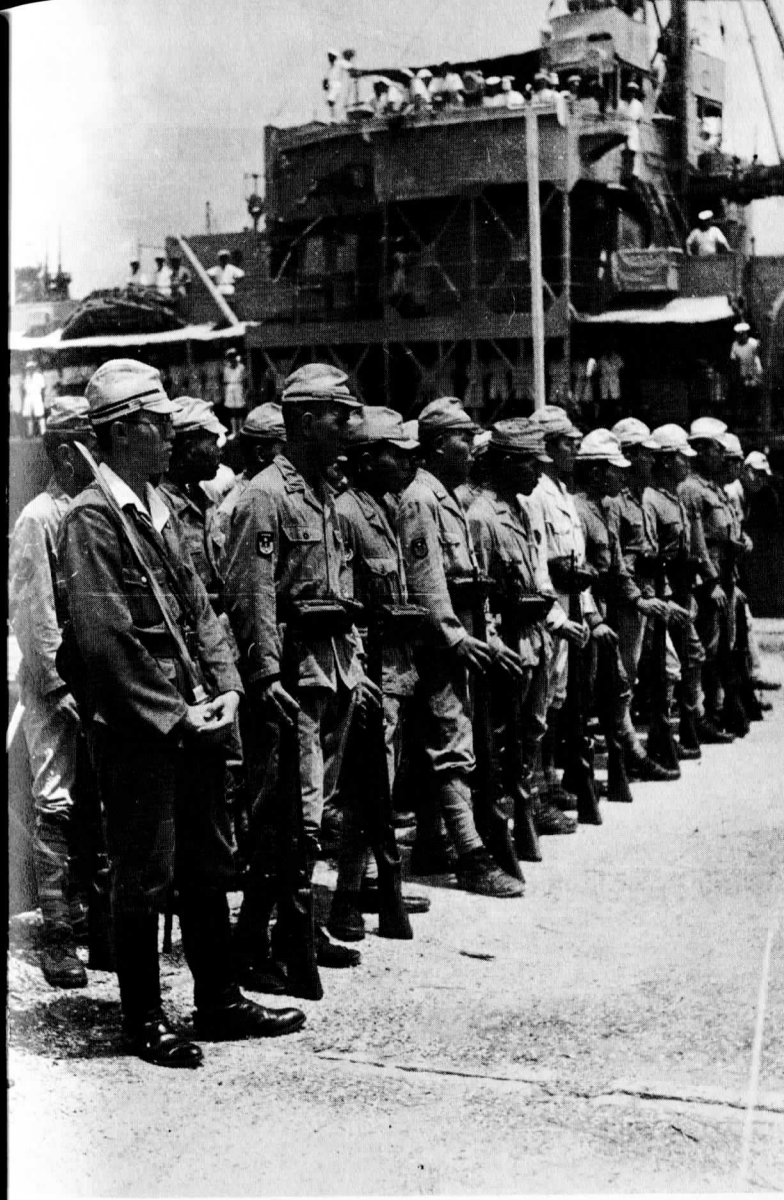
emerged as bitter opponents of French rule. The Vietminh committee, who had patiently been trying to negotiate with the British command for weeks, now turned as irate as the Cao Dai or the Hoa Hao, and the Binh Xuyen, the underworld faction, were to extract their vengeance on the French two days later in an obscene and revolting massacre of French and Eurasian civilians at the Cité Herodia, one of Saigon's suburbs.

Having unleashed the French, Gracey became appalled at the consequences and immediately took steps to prevent further excesses. Most of the *colons* were disarmed, and the men of the 11th R.I.C. were either confined to barracks or promptly locked up once more in Saigon Jail. Some of the Japanese units who had been disarmed were rearmed quickly and sent out to defend Saigon against the enraged Vietnamese, while Gracey ordered Cédille to carry out an immediate inquiry into the worst of the French excesses. But by then the damage was done. The brutal behaviour of the French during and after the *coup* had pushed the nationalists too far. They were now determined to regain by violence the independence they had lost by violence.

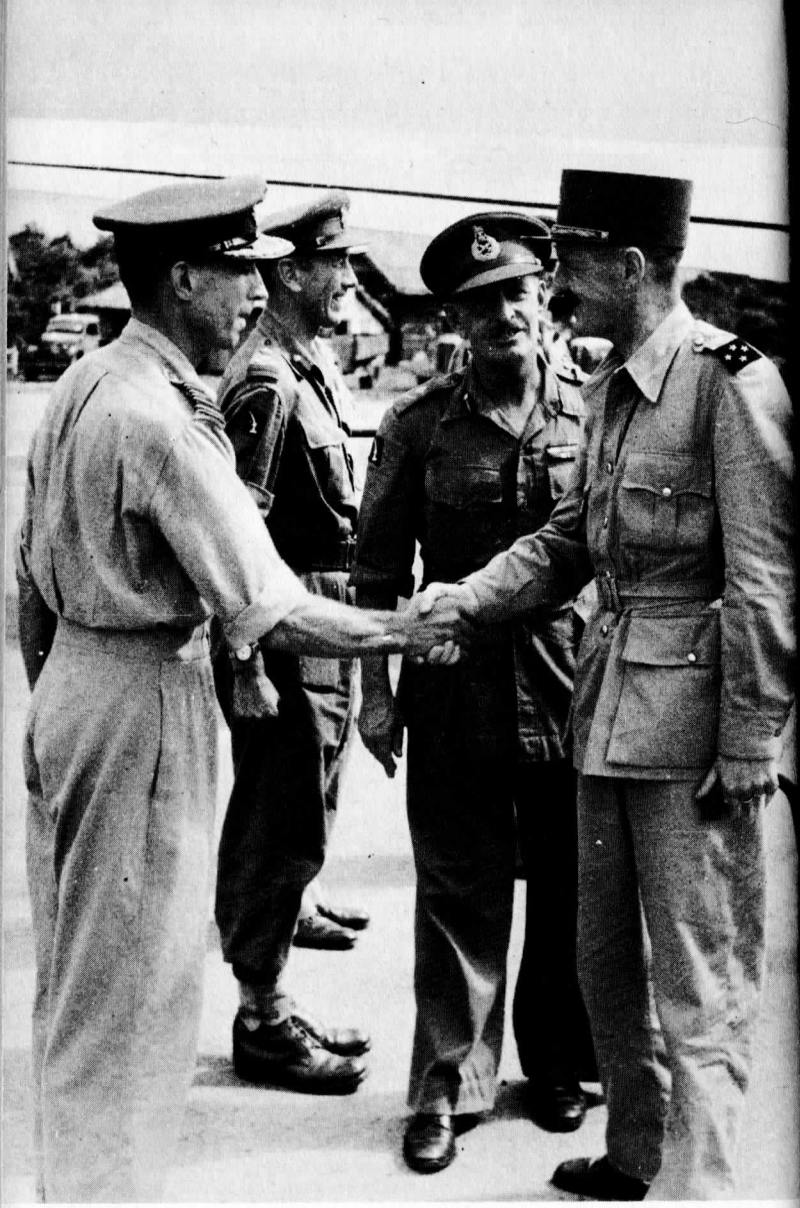
On 26 September the British prime minister received an irate telegram from Ho Chi Minh's foreign minister which contained the following protest:

> The release of French prisoners of war with arms and ammunition leading to the French attack on Saigon and the arrests of members of the People's Committee constitutes a great violation of our national rights . . . a non-fulfilment of the mission placed on the commander British forces in South Indo-China by the United Nations . . . and non-observation of neutrality by the British disarmament forces. We therefore lodge a most emphatic protest against such smoke-screening of French aggression. . . .[6]

But by the time the Hanoi government had made their protest known, Saigon was a city at war. '. . . War correspondents had the experience of once more hearing the crackle of machine-guns,' wrote Tom Driberg in *Reynold's News*, 'and the boom of mortars and seeing dead horses and overturned jeeps by the roadside.'[7]

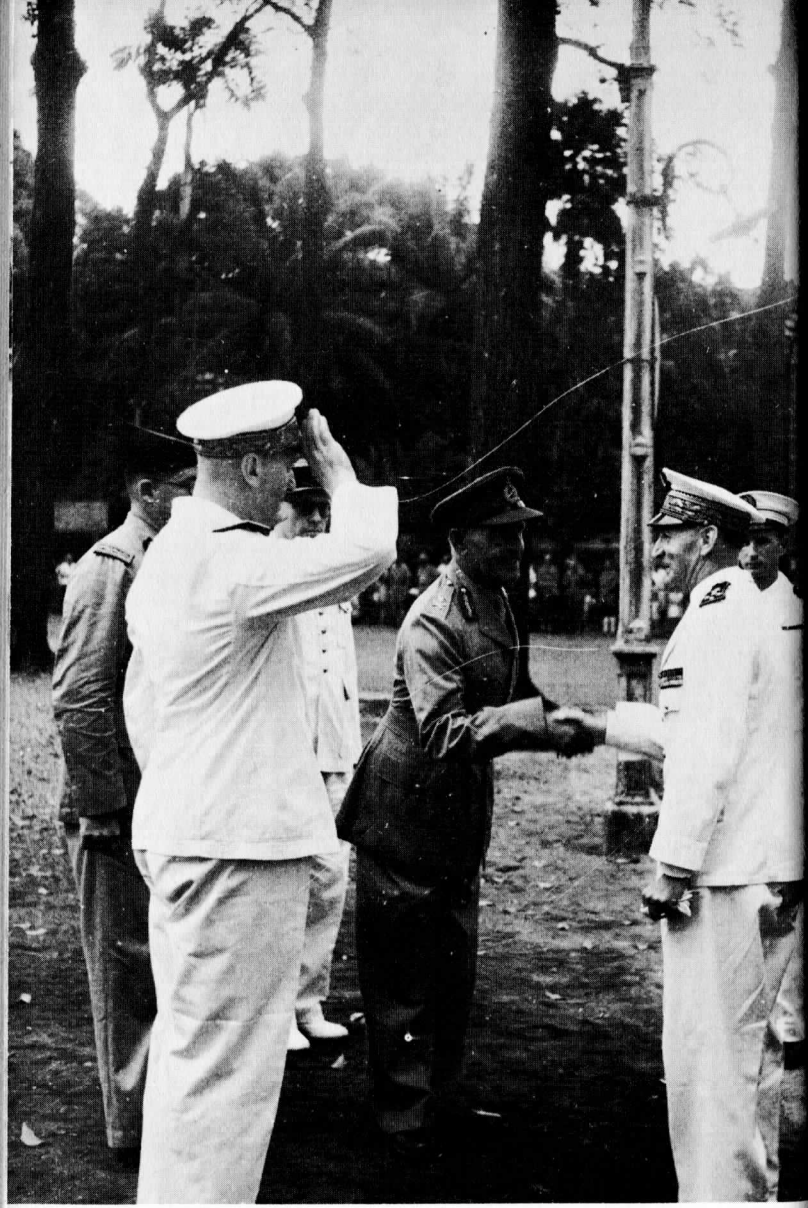


Our fully armed Japanese guards for the arrival of HMS Waveney. Saigon October 4th 1945.



General Gracey welcomes General Leclerc. Saigon Airport October 5th 1945.

Armed and fully equipped Japanese Soldier at liberty in Saigon market.

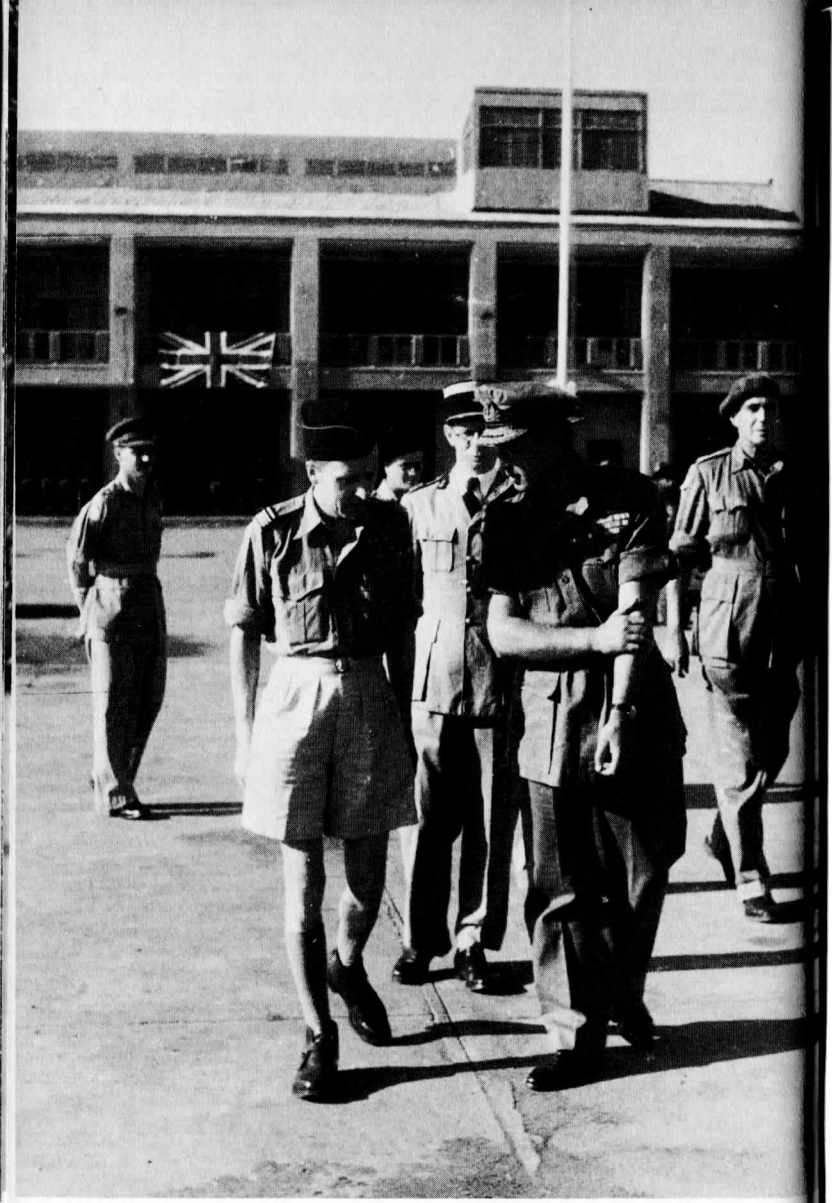


General Gracey with Vice Admiral D'Argenlieu, French High Commissioner. Rememberance Day November 11th 1945.

Formal Japanese surrender. Mountbatten accepts Field Marshall Terauchi's sword. Saigon November 30th 1945.

Armistice Day Parade. Armoured cars of the 16th (Indian) Light Cavalry on the Rue Catinat, Saigon.

British declaration of Martial Law being posted by Japanese trooper. Saigon September 19th 1945.



Union Jack over Saigon airport as Mountbatten arrives to take formal Japanese surrender.

The Battle for the South: 23 September–Mid-October 1945

In the opinion of the American historian and expert on Vietnam, Professor Joseph Buttinger, 'There had never been a moment in the entire history of French Indo-China when the need for restraint and constructive political ideas was as great as in August and September, 1945.'[1] It is difficult to imagine anything further either from 'restraint' or 'constructive political ideas' than Gracey's decision to allow, and to back, the French *coup d'état* in Saigon. It was a tragic blunder, grievously compounded by the brutal and hysterical behaviour of the French. The population of Saigon and the south were now thoroughly antagonized, and the forebodings and warnings of the more extreme nationalists seemed to have been justified. As a consequence, the moderately inclined Vietminh were pushed into the same camp as such hard-liners as the Trotskyists, who were all for driving the British into the sea. Even had the purpose of the *coup* been to establish 'law and order', it could only be seen as a miserable failure. The disturbances which followed the *coup* were infinitely more serious than any which had preceded it.

For example, on 25 September, two days after the French takeover, the suburb of Saigon called Cité Herodia was the scene of the appalling massacre of European and Eurasian civilians mentioned briefly in Chapter Four in which it is variously estimated that 150 to 300 people died. At the time the Vietminh were blamed, but it now seems clear that the Herodia massacre was the work of the Binh Xuyen bandits, that powerful and well-armed mob of racketeers and gangsters – 'hooligans from the riverside

swamps led by an unregenerate gangster Le Van Vien', according to one British commentator.[2] The slaughter at Herodia was one of the opening shots of the short but brutal war which now confronted the British.

The Vietnamese forces ranged against the experienced British troops were ill-disciplined, untrained and scarcely armed. Much of their equipment had been acquired one way or another from the demoralized Japanese, and a lot of it was in the hands of erratic Cao Dai and Hoa Hao groups. The well-drilled American-supplied Vietminh partisans who had fought the Japanese were almost all in the north and had no counterpart in the south. The British command estimated that it was facing '5,200 moderately well-armed regulars, and 12,000 guerrillas', though how a distinction was made between 'regulars' and 'guerrillas' is not stated. The state of the Vietnamese ordinance was estimated at 'one rifle to two men and a fair proportion of automatics' (regulars), 'and one rifle to five, grenades and bows and arrows' (guerrillas).[3] In short, the Vietnamese were hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered by the British and their allies. Then, as still today, the nationalists were forced to make the most of the guerrilla tactics of shock and surprise, and to rely on the support of the population. And while they did manage to score a few small successes, and certainly secured the support of the people, the nationalist troops were to pay dearly for their military shortcomings. In the end, fanaticism and conviction were not enough.

Technically the British force was severely limited by orders. Under the terms of his mandate, Gracey's only reasons for deploying his military were in the pursuance of his appointed tasks and in the maintenance of 'law and order'. The politics of the situation were supposed to be none of his business. But having chosen to interpret law and order as the reinstatement of the French (itself a political choice), the general was now forced to use his troops in support of that kind of law and that species of order.

Which meant, of course, that the British force was being used to suppress the Vietnamese uprising. And as the War Diaries and the operational instructions of the Indian Infantry Brigades make clear, the British troops pulled few punches in their actions against the Vietnamese. Militarily Gracey had made the mistake of precipitating the *coup* before he had the forces to handle the consequences. His own division was not even up to strength, and the French had already proved themselves unreliable. When it became quite clear the Vietnamese were going to fight, Gracey had no choice but to make extensive use of the Japanese army. This he did, not only in support and auxiliary roles, but as active combat units, often, though not always, under the command of British officers. After some initial reluctance, the Japanese performed with considerable skill and efficiency for their new masters. While this piece of military *real politik* certainly saved many British and Indian casualties, to the Vietnamese nationalists it was one further proof of the duplicity and ruthlessness of the British.

According to their instructions, the British forces were not to occupy more of the country than was necessary. As Field-Marshal Terauchi's headquarters were in Saigon, the 20th Indian Division was concentrated in and around the city, with one brigade to the north, another to the south, and a third in Saigon itself, with the divisional infantry and artillery being shuttled back and forward between them as the need arose. Operating in the north was Brigadier C. G. B. Rodham's 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, comprising the 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles, the 1/1 Gurkhas, and the 4/10 Gurkhas. In Saigon itself was Brigadier E. C. J. Woodford's 32 Indian Infantry Brigade, the 9/14 Punjab Regiment, the 4/2 Gurkhas and the 3/8 Gurkhas. The force in Cholon and to the south of the city was Brigadier Douglas Taunton's 80 Indian Infantry Brigade, consisting of 4/17 Dogra Regiment, the 1/19 Hyderabad Regiment and the 3/1 Gurkhas. The divisional infantry consisted of 9th Jat Machine-Gun Battalion, 2/8 Punjab Regiment

(reconnaissance battalion) and the 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment (H.Q. battalion). Divisional artillery (mostly 25-pounder batteries) was made up of the 114th Field Regiment Royal Artillery, the 2nd Indian Field Regiment (later replaced by 9th Field Regiment Royal Artillery) and the 23rd Indian Mountain Regiment. In all these units formed one of the most experienced and battle-hardened forces to be found anywhere in Asia, and it was one which had more than its share of formidable Gurkhas. In addition, there were the armoured cars of the 16th Light Cavalry, plus one squadron of Spitfires and one of Mosquitoes.

Backing up the British division were the French colonial infantry in the south, a largely demoralized force, but stiffened by 1,000 or so of de Gaulle's warriors of the 5th Colonial Regiment who had arrived with the British. And, of course, remaining at the disposal of the general were the 40,000 men of Field-Marshal Terauchi's Japanese Expeditionary Forces of the Southern Regions.

The combined British, French and Japanese forces numbered just under 70,000 men. By present-day counter-insurgency standards not an overwhelming number, and certainly not a coherent and well-organized command. But despite that, and despite the fact that it would be more than a month before the Allies were completely up to strength, their numbers and their equipment proved more than adequate to defeat the badly led, ill-equipped and confused Vietnamese.

Clashes between the British authorities and the Vietnamese began immediately after the *coup d'état*. Mountbatten records that 'on the 24th the Annamites staged a determined assault on the power station while unsuccessful attempts were made to sabotage the radio and the water supply'.[4] The attack on the power station was, in fact, the first of many engagements between the nationalists and the 1/1 Gurkhas. During the course of it two Vietnamese were killed, while the Gurkhas suffered no casualties. Much heavier casualties were inflicted that same day by

British forces on a sweep through the north of the city. In that operation, twenty-eight Vietnamese were killed and twenty-four arrested. Next day, Tuesday, 25 September, the fighting intensified. Vietnamese raiding parties were reported to be infiltrating towards the centre of the city near the British and French H.Q. Truckloads of fully armed Japanese troops were seen driving through the city to fronts just outside Saigon. A communiqué issued by South-East Asia Command stated that, 'On 25 September a clash with armed Annamites occurred in which four Indian soldiers were wounded.'[5] But despite the initial confusion caused by the largely unexpected Vietnamese onslaught on Saigon, the attack was ill-executed and, in the end, abortive. After sustaining a number of casualties, the Vietnamese were driven back from all their objectives, thwarted but far from defeated.

On Wednesday, 26 September, Saigon again came under attack. This time the markets were set alight. Thousands of French civilians fled for safety to the heavily guarded Continental Hotel. The 3/1 Gurkhas, fighting their way along the main Boulevard de Gallieni, found the thoroughfare heavily roadblocked and themselves involved in a 'tedious' street fighting engagement. During this battle they were impressed by the speed and efficiency with which the Vietnamese Red Cross teams removed their wounded. (They were also profoundly grateful for the miserable marksmanship of the nationalists.) The 422 Field Company of the Indian Engineers, who were trying to keep the power station operating, found that as the troubles increased the Vietnamese staff kept disappearing. But the Japanese sappers and officers working with them 'worked very well'.

On Thursday, 27 September, the 3/1 Gurkhas, still trying to keep open the Boulevard de Gallieni and the streets leading to the Arroyo Chinois, carried out a sweep along the banks of this canal. In the course of this action "B" Company crossed into Kanh Hoi island, occupied the

abattoir, and killed ten Vietnamese in the process. That night the Vietnamese staged more unsuccessful attacks on the British forces. And, according to South-East Asia Command, on the following night 'about 2,000 armed Annamites, some of whom opened fire with light machine-guns, attacked one of our patrols wounding three of our other ranks . . .'.[6] At the same time a convoy of thirteen British vehicles was ambushed and one Gurkha killed.

The days immediately after the *coup* saw much sporadic fighting in which the British/Indian troops fought off desperate nationalist attacks, all over the city. In the early stages the Vietnamese casualties were fairly heavy. In one clash with 80 Indian Infantry Brigade on 26 September in the south of the city, sixty Vietnamese were killed. Mortars, 25-pounders and heavy machine-guns were freely used by the British in the street fighting, and non-combatant Vietnamese civilians must certainly have suffered in the process. But four days after the fighting started, and after scores of Vietnamese had been killed, Attlee's war minister, the Rt. Hon. J. J. Lawson, stated on a visit to Singapore that 'Britain's obligations to her allies will not involve fighting for the French against the people of Indo-China. . .'.[7]

But to Mountbatten, with whom final responsibility lay, 'the situation in Saigon appeared very serious'. Thoroughly alarmed by deepening British involvement in a war of colonial repression, he called Gracey and Cédille to Singapore on Friday, the 28th. In the presence of Lawson, he told them that they had better start negotiations with the Vietnamese before the British forces became bogged down in a quagmire which was none of their business. Also at this meeting, Lawson confirmed that 'it was the policy of His Majesty's government not to interfere in the internal affairs of French Indo China'.[8] Gracey and Cédille tried to reassure the Supreme Commander by telling him that they had in fact been trying to get the nationalists to the conference table for three days. Then they returned to

Saigon to fix a meeting with the Vietminh, which they managed to do on 1 October. On that same day, however, Mountbatten received instructions from the Chiefs of Staff informing him that he was to 'use British/Indian troops to give assistance to the French throughout the interior'.[9] Mountbatten, probably with reluctance, passed the message on to Gracey, but added that British forces were not to be used in any offensive role.

In their talks with the Vietminh, Gracey and Cédille arranged for a cease-fire to begin on 3 October, with discussions between the French and the Vietminh to commence after the fighting had stopped. The Vietminh, with a certain amount of rash optimism, promised to ensure that the nationalists would observe the truce, and Gracey undertook to see that the French would do the same. But the peace talks, which were held on 3 and 6 October, were a failure from the outset. The French were prepared to concede almost nothing, while the Vietminh demanded a full range of concessions. The week and a half of fighting had embittered both sides, and the French, knowing that reinforcements were on the way, felt themselves to be dealing from a position of strength. Meanwhile the Vietminh were being forced to adopt a militant posture by pressure from the extremist groups. There was no real ground left for compromise.

Although the fighting had died down during the truce period, it never stopped completely. The nationalists were naturally nervous at the sight of French reinforcements arriving in Saigon on 4 and 5 October, and probably reasoned that the truce was a fake, calculated to gain time. Throughout the city and the surrounding countryside the peace was uneasy and marred by incident after incident. According to the 3/1 Gurkhas, for example, 'Every day up to 12 October there were incidents of one sort or another and it became a daily routine task to clear road blocks from the main streets . . .'.[10] The Gurkhas had firm instructions not to provoke trouble, so the nationalists took

the opportunity of staging large demonstrations. 'On one occasion,' the Gurkhas' chronicler wrote, '1,000 of them (nationalists) marched past and gave a ceremonial "eyes right" to "D" Company's quarter guard . . .'.[11] Other incidents were rather more serious. On 4 and 5 October grenades were thrown at sappers guarding installations, large crowds demonstrated in the main thoroughfares, and 'subversive' literature was freely distributed. Intelligence reports stated that large groups of armed nationalists were concentrating at Gia Dinh and to the south of Kanh Hoi. As the truce wore on, the peace became steadily more fragile, and on 6 October Gracey warned the nationalists that 'maximum force would be used in the event of further disturbances'. The arrival of Leclerc, the crack French general, in Saigon on 5 October did nothing to assuage the nervousness felt by the Vietnamese.

As it became obvious that the talks were getting nowhere very quickly, Mountbatten summoned Gracey, Cédille and Leclerc to meet him in Rangoon on 9 October. Again he belaboured them, stressing that negotiations with the nationalists must continue. But the conference was interrupted with news that once more the truce had been broken and that this time British troops had been killed. While continuing to insist that attempts to negotiate must continue, Mountbatten felt that 'the Vietminh spokesmen were incapable of ensuring that agreements into which they entered would be honoured, I ordered that strong action should be taken by the British/Indian forces to secure further key points, and to widen and consolidate the perimeter of these areas'.[12]

There is no questioning the fact that the Vietnamese did break the truce more than once. While the Vietminh probably did their best to ensure that it was kept, their hold on the nationalist forces had loosened ever since the *coup* of 23 September. It was the extremists, not the Vietminh, who had been proved right about the intentions of the British, the Vietminh policy of moderation resulting only in the

restoration of French rule in Saigon. Accordingly the Trotskyists, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao began to pay progressively less attention to the instructions of the Vietminh Committee of the South. But there is some evidence that the Vietminh were still trying to find a peaceful solution. The War Diary of 'B' Squadron, 16th Light Cavalry, notes that on 10 October (the day after the truce ended) Vietminh leaders came into the H.Q. of the 20th Indian Division to ask for an extension of the truce. They knew that the British were intending to enter Gia Dinh, one of the nationalist strongholds, and said that the British would not be opposed, 'but that any movement of French troops would be resisted to the utmost. It was accordingly decided not to employ French troops in the operations planned on 11 October . . .'.[13]

That same day, Mountbatten's 'strong action' was put under weigh. Gia Dinh was taken by elements of 32 Indian Infantry Brigade, and, as forecast, they met little opposition. Elsewhere the going was not so easy. A British patrol operating from Phan Rang to Dalat was ambushed at Phan Thiet (by 1,000 nationalists, according to the report), and only one man returned. On 11 and 12 October Go Vap was overrun by the 9/14 Punjabis, supported strongly by armoured cars of the 16th Light Cavalry (the first time in the campaign that armoured cars had been used). On Kanh Hoi Island the 3/1 Gurkhas carried out a complete sweep of the island and restored order in three days (11, 12 and 13 October) by way of 'vigorous land and river patrols'. By 13 October 32 Indian Infantry Brigade had taken all the bridges across the River Cho Moi.

The British campaign was speedily accomplished, and by and large successful. The perimeter around Saigon was extended considerably and by day at least was consolidated. But as they were to discover shortly, consolidating a perimeter is one thing, securing the area inside it another.

In the middle of October the Vietnamese launched their

biggest (and last) major offensive against the British. In a concerted effort, remarkable for its fanaticism if not its efficiency, the Vietnamese pushed their way once again into the heart of Saigon. Again the British H.Q. was threatened by Vietnamese insurgents. Two nights running, on 13 and 14 October, desperate attempts were made to dislodge Indian troops from the dock areas of the city. R.A.F. installations and aircraft at Tan Son Nhut were attacked from three directions, and vain attempts were made to fire the transport aircraft and Spitfires on the airfield. At one stage the nationalists got to within 300 yards of the control tower, but were driven off by units of the R.A.F. Regiment, supported by armoured cars and Japanese troops. Arsonists were busy throughout the city, and the resin factory on Kanh Hoi was fired under the noses of the Gurkhas.

Some of the British military accounts were taken aback by the desperation of the Vietnamese. The 32 Indian Infantry Brigade wrote that their perimeter was attacked by 'four hundred men armed with rifles, spears, bows and poisoned arrows and even a mild type of tear gas ...'.[14] An eyewitness account in *The Times* of 15 October eloquently described the scene in and around Saigon as the British, French and Japanese battled with the Vietnamese:

> ... fighting at Saigon was intense with delayed action mines exploding every few minutes, large fires raging on the outskirts of the city and the spatter of machine-guns and light arms fire against a continuous background of 25-pounders. ...

But despite this desperate Vietnamese challenge, the British position was never in any real danger. The nationalist onslaught soon lost momentum, and the Vietnamese were pushed steadily out of the city and back into the countryside. But while British rule in Saigon was never again threatened, it did not succeed in making the city safe. Bombings, snipings, arson and assassination were to continue, no matter how peaceful the boulevards of Saigon seemed. The war was not finished. It had only taken another form.

The Battle for the South: Mid-October 1945–January 1946

THE desperate nationalist attempt of mid-October to regain control of Saigon was, as was seen in Chapter Five, the last large-scale assault on the city. And determined though it was, it was doomed to failure. The attack foundered on the superior discipline and firepower of the British/Indian troops and their allies. Despite the few near successes at the docks and airfield, the issue was never really in doubt. Within a few days the nationalists were driven out of Saigon. For the remainder of the British occupation, that is where they stayed, even if the city itself was never completely 'secured'.

From mid-October 1945 until the British left at the beginning of 1946, the war became a smaller version of the kind that the United States is still fighting. The bitter street battles of late September and early October gave way to the brutal business of ambushes, small-scale guerrilla attacks, terrorism and repressive counter-measures, all carried out in the midst of a sullen and resentful population. No matter how many nationalists the British killed or captured, more appeared the next day. As soon as one hamlet had been 'pacified', trouble flared elsewhere. Roads which were relatively safe by day became deathtraps at night. The enemy were everywhere and nowhere, everybody and yet nobody. To distinguish the nationalist partisans from the rural population was a hopeless task. The war which the 20th Indian Division fought in South Vietnam, was very much the kind of war to which the modern world has become accustomed: a frustrating progression of sudden attacks, hit-and-run engagements, burning

villages and mass arrests. In many ways a prototype for the wars which were to be waged over the same countryside during the next two decades. And in the time when the British command ruled in Saigon, their hold on the countryside to the north, and in the Mekong Delta, was never more than tenuous.

To this new guerrilla war the British authorities responded with suitably draconian measures. Judging from the accounts of some of the British units involved in the fighting, they operated with considerable ruthlessness, and in so doing failed completely to win over the local population. Not that there was any attempt to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the people. As the British command pointed out, they were never sure of the identity of the enemy, so all Vietnamese were regarded as likely hostiles. Many of the 'rebels' and 'subversives' killed, wounded and arrested by General Gracey's troops must have been innocent civilians. Had it been otherwise it would have been a miracle. Exactly how many, of course, can never be known. The numbers of Vietnamese dead quoted in the House of Commons were 2,700, but as the British troops had remarked on the efficiency of the Vietnamese Red Cross teams as well as on many newly dug graves, the total Vietnamese casualties are likely to have been considerably higher. The 20th Indian Division's Gurkha battalions proved very adept at hunting down the nationalists. Their rate of kill was enormous and their casualties very light. The 3/1 Gurkhas, for example, reported eighty-two Vietnamese killed to nine of their own, while the 1/1 Gurkhas killed 102 Vietnamese and lost five men. In one sweep on Hanh Phu Island, the 4/2 Gurkhas killed thirty Vietnamese, took 400 prisoners and lost one man. Other regimental accounts tell a similar story. The machine-gun battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment lost four men killed, while the Frontier Force Rifles lost three killed besides an attached Royal Engineers officer. Total British/Indian casualties were around forty killed (accounts vary slightly) and a hundred or so

wounded. Had the nationalists been better trained and equipped, it is doubtful whether the 20th Indian Division would have got off so lightly. The fact that Japanese troops were used as front-line forces helped considerably in shielding the British and Indian troops from the worst losses. During one period in November 1945 it was estimated that Japanese casualties were more than the British, Indian and French put together.

But although the campaign in South Vietnam was the kind of secret, politically-orientated war that professional soldiers detest, by the end of 1945 it was clear to the British commanders that they were winning in the cities at least. The nationalists were simply no match for General Gracey's veterans and their Japanese and French allies. Gradually the perimeter around Saigon became wider and the territory inside it more and more secure. Armoured patrols were foraging deeper into the countryside, and while ambushes continued, the nationalist forces began to disintegrate. Under the sustained offensive of the British forces, the Vietnamese insurgents steadily lost their effectiveness and capacity for serious military action.

In late October, with the street fighting in Saigon behind them, the British began to adjust their tactics to suit the guerrilla war in the countryside. The War Diary of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade, operating in Cholon and to the south of Saigon, notes on 25 October that '. . . hostile acts of the Annamites to a large extent receded from our expanding perimeter within and on the edge of which they have now confined themselves to minor guerrilla tactics . . .'.[1] The problem now was how to deal with these 'minor guerrilla tactics' in a country thickly populated by innumerable hamlets, any one of which might be a 'rebel' stronghold. Operational Instruction No. 220 of 100 Indian Infantry Brigade of 27 October gives some indication of the problems facing the military and the tactics they developed to overcome them.

There is no front in these operations [the instruction relates].

We may find it difficult to distinguish friend from foe . . . beware of 'nibbling' at opposition. Always use the maximum force available to ensure wiping out any hostiles we may meet. If one uses too much, no harm is done. If one uses too small a force, and it has to be extricated, we will suffer casualties and encourage the enemy. . . .[2]

Regardless of whether such tactics were politically sound, militarily they seemed to be working. Late October was a comparatively quiet period, with only scattered minor operations by the nationalists. On 23 October the 1/1 Gurkhas, moving north with 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, reported that, 'The Vietminh amused themselves by felling trees across roads, throwing grenades at vehicles and sniping at camps, apart from sabotaging anything belonging to the French . . '.[3] Gurkha raids in the villages north of Saigon revealed spears, crossbows and poisoned arrows as well as some Japanese rifles and grenades, but 'the primitive weapons were the most numerous . . .'.

While the British command established an armoured column to patrol the route from Baria–Nha Trang–Dalat, the east coast, with its important communications roads, was never safe. It was, according to the *History of the Indian Armed Forces*, 'the playground of the Vietminh forces who had reduced the isolated Japanese garrisons to a state of helplessness. All Annamite troops were trained here and also in Dalat and the Ben Me Thaut area.' On 22 October the Vietnamese attacked a company of French marines who had landed at Nha Trang, and this attack developed into a 'serious fight'. It was five days before the French, with Japanese assistance, managed to clear the town of nationalists.

While the nationalists used the east coast as a training 'playground' the concentration of forces which gave most concern to the British command was in the large triangle just north of Saigon formed by Thu Duc–Bien Hoa–Thu Dau Mot. This was the area controlled by 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, and in late October it remained fairly

quiet. (So quiet, in fact, that the War Diary of the 1/1 Gurkhas recorded that they had nothing to do and were becoming idle and irresponsible; ' . . . with the rest of 100 Brigade the battalion was in the fortunate position of being responsible to no one'.)[4] In view of the apparent peace and quiet, the British forces began moving out of their perimeter areas and deeper into the countryside.

All British units commenced systematic patrolling beyond the existing perimeter on the principle that offensive is the best form of defence. Peaceful inhabitants who were ready to carry on their normal occupations wanted also evidence of the superiority of the Allies over Annamites, which they were now assured of.[5]

In fact, the peaceful inhabitants were assured of no such thing. They knew better than the British that the nationalists were lying low for the time being, regrouping their forces for the next stage of the guerrilla war.

At the beginning of November fighting flared again. On the first day of the month, clashes occurred to the north of Saigon, and on the night of 2/3 November British positions in Gia Dinh were attacked by nationalists using 'light machine-guns, grenade dischargers and tear-gas bombs'. At the same time a bridge between Go Vap was attacked and fighting around this area lasted for two days. As usual the British military found it impossible to distinguish their enemy from the civilian population, and during the fighting

. . . firm action was taken to search and recover Annamite arms and to prevent grenade throwing and sniping. A large part of the male population was rounded up and subjected to a severe security check.[6]

In an effort to root out the nationalists once and for all in the troublesome area north of Saigon, a combined British–French operation was mounted on 8 November to clean up the Loc Ninh – Tay Ninh – Saigon triangle. British and Japanese infantry, supported by a mobile column of armoured cars, took over Tay Ninh, where they were joined on the 9th by a riverborne force moving up the

Vacio. Next day the British column from Ben Cat moved further north and occupied Chin Tanh. But while this particular operation proceeded smoothly enough, the resistance of the nationalists was far from broken. On 10 November the column was stopped at a road block, and a six-hour battle ensued before the road was cleared. Next day the French occupied the town of Loc Ninh, and the day after that the allies entered Budop. This intensive effort in early November led the British command to think that 'Vietminh resistance in the allied occupation areas was broken'. Probably the British and French columns had had the effect of breaking up Vietnamese concentrations, which is, of course, a very different matter. The guerrillas, simply dispersing and disappearing into the rural population, left the British and French clutching at air.

For the 4/2 Gurkhas, operating with 32 Indian Infantry Brigade in Saigon, November '... wore away in a routine succession of snipings, bombings, arsons, searches and arrests'.[7] At the beginning of the month a platoon of 'B' Company had been ambushed, and a few days later, on 6 November, 'D' Company, working under a Major Sparks in the Ben Cat area, came in for a sharp spell of street fighting, during which they killed twenty-two Vietnamese and took 257 prisoners. Most of the nationalists killed in this action were either drowned or shot while trying to escape in boats across the river. Later in the month, the 3/1 Gurkhas (part of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade in south Saigon and Cholon) were having trouble on the bridges across the Canal de la Derivation, and all the bridges on the road to Long Kien were destroyed.

As Long Kien was known to be a hot-bed of nationalist forces, a two-pronged attack was made by the Gurkhas to smoke them out. On 18 November Major E. W. MacDonald, with two platoons, set out across country, while two more platoons under Major E. Gopsill made their way to the town up the river in a launch. At Ben Ho, MacDonald's force ran into stubborn resistance from well-

bunkered nationalists and was forced to withdraw. Gopsill's launch was brought to a halt only 600 yards short of Long Kien. While waiting for the tide to turn to get back down river, they were attacked by nationalists, who turned heavy automatics and an anti-tank gun on the Gurkhas' launch. The vessel was badly holed, but thanks to the poor shooting of the Vietnamese, only two Gurkhas and one Japanese were wounded. Long Kien remained unsubdued. A few days later the 3/1 Gurkhas tried again, this time in company strength ('G' and 'C' Companies) supported by the 25-pounders of the 114th Field Artillery. Again they were resisted at Ben Ho, but this time, 'good shooting by the gunners' prevailed, and 'C' Company cleared the village. In the action at Ben Ho, thirty Vietnamese and two Japanese deserters were killed, and large quantities of ammunition and equipment taken. As for Long Kien itself, it was occupied shortly after by 'A' Company under Major M. H. Kelleher. Having got to the town and taken it with little resistance, the British were not sure what to do with it. They decided that to remain there overnight was decidedly unsafe, so the company withdrew at dark. On the way back they had to fight two rearguard actions, 'A' Company estimating that Vietnamese casualties on the Long Kien raid were at least forty killed. Apparently, General Leclerc was highly delighted with this operation. Shortly afterwards the 3/1 Gurkhas were in action in a sweep along the banks of the Saigon River, with their regimental colleagues of the 1st Battalion patrolling the other bank to prevent escapes. In this digging-out operation the Gurkhas killed ten Vietnamese.

By the end of November the British were again assuming that the resistance of the nationalists was over. While attacks on outposts, patrols and isolated garrisons continued, life in the 'key' areas seemed to be fairly quiet. At the end of the month Mountbatten himself was in Saigon to take the surrender of Field-Marshal Count Terauchi and to mull things over with the new high commissioner, Admiral

Thierry d'Argenlieu. The Japanese surrender ceremonies of late November were the familiar chivalrous affairs of flag saluting and a handing-out of Samurai swords and dress uniforms all round. But while the British and their former enemies were bowing and saluting one another, the countryside was still very much alive with discontent and insurrection.

At the beginning of December, Colonel Kitson of the 4/2 Gurkhas felt that life had settled down enough to relax.

> We gave a cocktail party and dance on 2 December [he wrote later], and about 100 guests turned up. We thought it a great success, marred only by the fact that two Frenchmen were murdered almost within sight of our house, an hour before the party started.[8]

As an indication of the state of the peace in the British-occupied South Vietnam in December 1945, the colonel's laconic description is better than most. No matter how 'secure' an area was, or how 'pacified' a hamlet, nationalist snipers, saboteurs and guerrillas were never far away. Consequently there was usually something happening to keep the British infantry brigades busy, particularly Brigadier 'Roddy' Rodham's 100 Indian Infantry Brigade in the north. Early in December the brigade were occupied in 'patrolling against harassing opposition' in Bien Hoa and Thu Dau Mot. On 3 December the Frontier Force Rifles were clearing a forest area between Tan Phong and Ben Cat, the 1/1 Gurkhas were busy in and around Bong, while the 4/10 Gurkhas, in a routine search for arms, captured £2,000-worth of opium. (Then, and for many years after, opium was common currency in South-East Asia. In the Franco-Vietminh war, the Vietminh invaded Laos for the sole purpose of harvesting the opium crop, which was then sold in Hong Kong for arms.) About the same time, 'X' Company of the 9th Jat Regiment's machine-gunners was ambushed and two sepoys killed, another sepoy, Randhir Singh, winning himself a Military Medal by manning a machine-gun and silencing the Vietnamese attackers.

In the middle of December there was still trouble in and around Saigon. On 14 December, at a British football match in Saigon, a grenade was thrown into a crowd of Gurkha spectators and ten soldiers were killed. Next day, Han Phu island in the Cho River, only five miles from the city, had to be softened up by a concentrated mortar barrage before the 4/2 Gurkhas and the 9/14 Punjabis could take it. In the course of the assault they killed thirty-one Vietnamese and took 415 prisoners. The day after, the 4/2 Gurkhas were involved in an 'unfortunate three-sided fracas' when a column of French armoured jeeps, after being fired upon by Vietnamese guerrillas, turned their guns on the Gurkha pickets. Before the French columns withdrew, the Gurkhas had suffered several casualties.

But although Cholon, Saigon and the Mekong Delta continued to be the scene of sporadic fighting and sniping, by the end of December the worst trouble-spot remained the 100 Indian Infantry Brigade's patch to the north of Saigon. Attacks on the Brigade were increasing in number and becoming more serious. And the British command had received word that the nationalists were planning a big attack some time between the end of December and the beginning of January. *The Official History of the Indian Armed Forces* records that 'Instruction No. 63 of 31 December stated that the Vietminh bands had been placed under the control of one man, and he was said to have stated that this would be the last offensive before the British leave'. Probably the nationalists were smarting under the treatment they had received from the British, and were determined to give General Gracey something by which to remember Vietnam. British intelligence reported that the Vietnamese concentrations 'were four in number, viz. between Thu Dau Mot and Ben Cat, west and south-west of the Bing, Ben Go area, and north-east of Bien Hoa'. The British plan to pre-empt this attack was for 'the army to strike at these areas and demoralize them even at the starting point'. In these raids, one of the main problems

was, as always, to distinguish between innocent civilians and Vietnamese combatants. The British units were directed not to be too scrupulous ' . . . the Commander recognized the difficulties of the actual fighters. He said as follows. "The difficulty is to select him [the enemy] as immediately he has had his shot or thrown his grenade he pretends to be friendly".' The commander (presumably Brigadier C. H. B. 'Roddy' Rodham) continued, ' "It is therefore perfectly legitimate to look upon *all* locals anywhere near where a shot has been fired as enemies, and treacherous ones at that, and treat them accordingly".'[9]

After this directive of the last day of 1945, fairly heavy fighting again broke out in 100 Brigade's area. On the night of 2/3 January the Frontier Force rifles at Bien Hoa came under fire from a force of nationalists estimated at 200, equipped with heavy and light machine-guns and grenade dischargers. The attack was repulsed with no losses to the Indians, though once again the Vietnamese paid a heavy price, thirty-three of their number being killed. The same day the machine-gunners of 'Z' Company of the 9th Jat Regiment (attached to Divisional Infantry) were involved in a three-hour battle with nationalists numbered at 800. On 10 January the 4/10 Gurkhas of 100 Brigade raided Thu Duc, after having been warned to expect an attack, and killed seven Vietnamese and arrested 120.

But, for the British, these were the final engagements of the war. The British occupation of South Vietnam was almost over. At the end of December many of the British units (80 Brigade, for example) had been pulled out, as the French began to take up the reins of power. Many of the British battalions were being transferred to Indonesia to fight a very similar, but much bloodier, campaign to restore Dutch rule there. In the last week of January 1946 all military control passed to the French, during February 20 Indian Division H.Q. was closed, and by March only two British battalions were left to guard the remaining

Japanese. At the end of March they too were shipped out.

As a counter-insurgency force, General Gracey's 20th Indian Division had proved themselves efficient, and, judged by their own accounts, ruthlessly so. At a comparatively light cost to themselves they had ousted the nascent Vietnamese administration, restored French colonial rule, and suppressed the military forces of nationalism – for the time being, at least. The Punjabis, the Dogra Regiment, the Hyderabad Regiment, the Frontier Force Rifles, the Jat machine-gunners and, of course, the five battalions of Gurkhas had proved too much for the Vietnamese. Fanaticism and courage, with little else to back it, proved no match for the division's expertise and overwhelming firepower. Militarily the British campaign in South Vietnam was a resounding success. If Gracey had ever believed that the restoration of French rule was what the people of Vietnam wanted, he must have been quickly disabused of the notion. If he thought British action in the south would earn the gratitude of the people, he had only to read the intelligence reports to see how wrong he was. The War Diary of 32 Indian Infantry Brigade for 22 November 1945 records that 'Although disturbances have decreased, there is, however, still an atmosphere of animosity towards us among the indigenous population, and there has been no improvement of our relations with them . . .'.[10] Throughout the occupation there was no evidence of friendly shoulder-rubbing between the Vietnamese and their British/Indian self-styled liberators. According to the *History of the Indian Armed Forces*, any Vietnamese complaints against the British troops were dismissed. The account talks of the 'indifference of commanders to the complaints of the people against the units or individuals, and even if the pretence of an investigation was made the offenders were let off'.[11] As late as 20 January 1946, the *Monthly Summary of Security Intelligence* reported that 'There is no contact as yet between the troops and civilian population either Annamite or Chinese. The troops view

them with suspicion.' The report goes on to blame the hostility of the people on the Vietminh: '. . . friendly Annamites and Chinese are still frightened to co-operate to any great extent for fear of possible reprisals . . .'.[12] Certainly the Vietminh had issued dire warnings against fraternizing with the British, French or Japanese. But the real reasons for the hostility of the Vietnamese towards the British are not hard to find. The British had subverted and destroyed a genuine popular revolution. In the war that resulted thousands of Vietnamese died. No Vietnamese was ever safe from harassment or arrest by the British. Instruction No. 63 to 100 Brigade makes this quite clear: '. . . If when following up a report', the instruction directs, 'no enemy is met with, suspects must be brought in from the area concerned. They are probably the hostiles reported, who have for the moment become friendly villagers. . . .'[13] If there were nationalists in a hamlet, the villagers were likely to be killed ('it is therefore perfectly legitimate to look upon all locals . . . as enemies'), and if there were *no* nationalists around, the villagers were likely to be arrested ('They are probably the hostiles reported . . .').

For their work in Vietnam the 20th Indian Division received its round of medals (M.C.s and M.M.s mostly). With his Gurkhas the general was well pleased. 'A fine job of work in an unpleasant situation,' he wrote later. All ranks involved in the Vietnam operation were awarded the General Service Medal, green and mauve riband with the clasp 'South-East Asia, 1945-46'. 'We have done our best for the French,' General Gracey told the American reporter Harold Isaacs. 'It is up to them to carry on.'[14]

Chapter Seven

The Battle for the South: the Role of the Japanese

WHEN the advance units of the 1st Gurkhas (the heroes of the Shenan 'Saddle' in Burma) deplaned at Saigon they had been shocked to find that, 'Fully armed Japanese guards and patrols had to be allowed to carry on as willing and well-disciplined "allies", outrageous as this seemed to all ranks at the time.'[1] The 1st Gurkhas were not the only British unit to feel a sense of outrage. Between late 1943 and the Japanese surrender the 20th Indian Division had, as part of the British 14th Army, seen much blood-letting in the course of the war against the Japanese in Burma. From the defence of the Imphal Plain to the crossing of the Irrawaddy, the division had harried the Imperial Nipponese Army out of British territory. For two years the Japanese had been the division's sole and formidable enemy. It was hardly surprising that the British/Indian rank-and-file found difficulty in reconciling themselves to the idea of working alongside fully armed Japanese 'fascist' troops, whom they had until then regarded as an evil and brutal enemy.

But shocking though it may have seemed to the Punjabis and the Gurkhas, their commander, General Gracey, was perfectly within his rights to make full use of the Japanese forces in South Vietnam. Article 10 of General Order No. 1, issued by President Truman on 15 August, stated that 'all Japanese and Japanese-controlled military and civilian authorities shall aid and assist the occupation of Japan and Japanese-controlled areas by the forces of the Allied powers'. And Article 12 added that 'Any delay or failure to comply with the provisions of this or subsequent orders

... will incur drastic and summary punishment at the hands of the Allied Military Authorities ...'.[2] And the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, Mountbatten, had already decided 'to instruct the Japanese, through their Supreme Commander, to maintain order in the areas for which they had been responsible up to the termination of the hostilities, until they were relieved of that responsibility'.[3] So the legality of Gracey's deployment of the Japanese in Vietnam was never an issue. Militarily it is difficult to see how he could have managed without them. But the political wisdom of using them was another matter. Enlisting the aid of the Japanese (who had been the butt of four years of Allied propaganda) to suppress a popular liberation movement must have seemed to the Vietnamese a particularly blatant piece of British perfidiousness. It is hardly surprising that the British mission in Vietnam ended its days there roundly detested by the country's Asian population.

By the end of the war in the Pacific Vietnam had become a key point in the chain of the Japanese military command. The headquarters of the Japanese Expeditionary Forces of the Southern Regions were situated in Saigon, under the experienced command of Field-Marshal Count Terauchi. All the Japanese services in the South-East Asia (not just in Indo-China) were controlled from Saigon. In Indo-China itself the Japanese forces numbered 71,000, 31,000 of whom were situated north of 16 degrees of latitude. The total figure included approximately 9,000 air-force personnel, scattered with their sixty-seven aircraft among the thirty-five airfields in the country (mainly in Cambodia), and 5,000 naval personnel divided equally between Haiphong in the north and Saigon in the south. Of the 40,000 or so Japanese scattered around South Vietnam, nearly 20,000 were in the Saigon – Cholon area. They consisted of the Headquarters Southern Army (1,500), Rear Headquarters of the 38th Army (500), the 2nd Division (8,000) and non-divisional troops (7,700), plus approxi-

mately 2,500 naval personnel and a small number of air-force men at Tan Son Nhut airfield. In addition there was a regiment of troops (roughly 1,000) at the Headquarters of the 55th Division in Cambodia. Quite a formidable force, in fact, and one which the British had justifiably viewed with some concern. Field-Marshal Terauchi's forces in Indo-China were never defeated in battle, and so were probably more resentful of the Japanese capitulation than their exhausted compatriots in Burma and elsewhere in the Far East. According to the *History of the Indian Armed Forces*, 'the strength of the Japanese Army was still unknown, its morale after surrender was not gauged, and its dispositions were not easy to trace'. In fact, the British were not quite sure how the Japanese might react when they arrived, or even if they would be in any way impressed by the threats of 'drastic and summary punishment at the hands of the Allied Military Authorities' promised in President Truman's General Order No. 1.

As an added complication, it was known that the Japanese had been encouraging, and in some places arming, various anti-European Vietnamese nationalist factions. Ever since their *putsch* against the French on 9 March, the Japanese had been cultivating, in a rather muddled way, the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, or those at least that seemed to fit into the Japanese scheme of things. Definitely excluded from this category were the Vietminh, with their well-armed, well-drilled Communist partisans, who became increasingly troublesome to the Japanese occupation forces as the summer of 1945 wore on. It was mainly to resist the Vietminh that the Japanese had armed the Cao Dai and some Hoa Hao groups. They even offered arms and assistance to Ta Thu Thau, the leader of the Vietnamese Trotskyists, if he would turn his guns against the Vietminh. Thau, however, did not accept, or even acknowledge the offer. Even the puppet administration which the Japanese set up under the Emperor Bao Dai proved troublesome and unreliable. Japenese dabbling in Vietnamese nationalist

politics was never a success. The Vietnamese were no fools, and remained deeply and justifiably suspicious of a power which had stood by and allowed the Vichy French ruthlessly to stamp out the nationalist insurrections which occurred during the war. Perhaps if the Japanese had acted otherwise, or had ousted the French earlier, they might have enlisted the support of the Vietnamese to their cause. Certainly the Vietnamese had no love for the Imperial might of Europe. But Japanese duplicity, heavyhandedness and ignorance had also alienated the Vietnamese. To the population the Japanese were just one more invasion force, whose back they would be glad to see.

After the Japanese capitulation, the British had made contact with Terauchi's headquarters on 22 August by radio. When Gracey's SACSEA Commission was formed in Rangoon preparatory to entering Vietnam, Japanese officers from Saigon were in attendance so that British instructions would be understood and carried out by Japanese Supreme Headquarters. On 15 September, the day after the commission had been established in Saigon and two days after Gracey's arrival, the first plenary session with Terauchi was held. At that meeting the Japanese field-marshal came in for his sharp admonishment from the British general. And after the riot in Saigon on 2 September Gracey had sent Terauchi the strongly worded order reminding him of his responsibility to keep law and order in the area and instructing him to arrest all those Vietnamese involved in the disorders. But still little improvement followed, and again Gracey reminded Terauchi that responsibility for order was his, and that he must make sure the peace was kept. Chastened, Terauchi promised to do his best.

But Terauchi was facing real difficulties. The situation in the south was so confused that getting orders to isolated Japanese garrisons was often difficult, and even if the orders arrived there was no way of knowing whether they

would be obeyed. The morale of the Japanese rank-and-file was low. Throughout the country the soldiers felt humiliated, bitter at defeat, uncertain of their enemies, knowing only that they had no friends. And while the high brass might have agreed to serve the British, the men in the field and some of their officers were proving reluctant to co-operate (or collaborate) with their new masters. During the first week or so of the British occupation it was no easy matter to persuade Japanese soldiers to accept orders from their former enemy. But towards the end of September, after another reprimand from Gracey, Terauchi did, with a few exceptions, regain control over his forces. According to Mountbatten, 'the categorical orders to Field-Marshal Terauchi had the desired effect; and in the future the Japanese were to fulfil their obligations satisfactorily'.[4] Pleased as the British commanders were, to the British front-line units arriving in Saigon it still appeared very ironical. As the chronicler of the 4/2 Gurkhas eloquently put it, 'Colonel Kitson and his men arrived to be confronted with a paradoxical situation in which former friends and associates were enemies, in which former enemies were auxiliaries, and in which a new war was in the making.'[5]

When the serious fighting began after the *coup* of 23 September, the Japanese were immediately brought into it. Indeed, Gracey had no choice. His own division was so far under-strength that he could not possibly have dealt with a full-scale insurrection with only the British/Indian and French troops at his disposal. A report in the *Daily Mirror*, dated 25 September, stated, 'Jap troops have been fighting alongside British and French in an effort to re-establish order in Saigon. . . .' And that, 'Truckloads of Japanese soldiers with rifles are driving through the street to fronts just outside the city. . . .' Already the Japanese were proving useful allies. The same newspaper on the next day carried a quote from a British officer in Saigon, who said, 'They (the Japanese) are in charge, and they could clean out the Allied forces in one night, but their behaviour is

excellent.' Some of the Japanese who had already been disarmed were hastily re-equipped, often with 3-inch mortars and bombs which they themselves had captured from the British in Singapore.

As the battles continued and reached their peak around the middle of October, the Japanese were growing used to taking orders from and fighting alongside the British, though a few isolated Japanese garrisons, at Baria and at Nha Trang, for instance, did try to do a deal with the Vietnamese. In the campaign launched on 12 October, Gracey used the Japanese in the tricky area north of Saigon, where they acquitted themselves well. Brigadier Taunton, commander of 80 Indian Infantry Brigade, said, 'Their discipline was excellent.' So pleased were the British with the performance of Terauchi's soldiers that, on 18 October, British Headquarters thanked the Field-Marshal, 'with highest praise', for his co-operation. One American eyewitness, Harold Isaacs, reported how 'the British were delighted with the discipline shown by their late enemy and were often warmly admiring, in the best playing-field tradition, of their fine military qualities. It was all very comradely.'[6] The initial outrage of the British units was steadily replaced by a sense of relief as the Japanese were seen to be taking most of the casualties.

In the guerrilla war which followed the desperate street fighting of mid-October, the Japanese were used just as extensively. The *History of the Indian Armed Forces* notes that, 'all the dirty work to fight and disarm the Annamites was assigned to Japanese troops', [7] and that the Japanese, by November, were proving willing allies. Attacks on Japanese began to increase, particularly on isolated garrisons, some of whom, such as those in the Mekong Delta, were very vulnerable. North of Saigon the 100 Indian Infantry Brigade had to look after an area of 200 square miles which contained 22,000 Japanese. The 1/1 Gurkhas reported that they had 4,500 Japanese simply on guard duties, and that one Japanese battalion was given the job

of keeping order in Ben Cat on its own. The 4/10 Gurkhas had two battalions of Japanese under them, and the machine-gunners of the 9th Jat regiment had a total of 731.

The British policy of using the Japanese to do the 'dirty work' was paying off. The historian of the 4/10 Gurkhas stated that, 'The Japanese were freely used in all these operations and they did the job with their characteristic efficiency', adding gratefully that, 'a satisfactory result of their use was greatly to reduce the casualties among our troops'.[8] It was a report in *The Times* of 14 November 1945 which claimed that Japanese casualties were more than British, Indian and French combined, and then continued:

> In the last few weeks Japanese losses have been at least 50 killed and 80 wounded. . . . The Japanese say that Annamese feeling against them is so strong that around Saigon the Annamese forces have forbidden the people to sell provisions to the Japanese under pain of death, and have threatened to punish those speaking to them.

But by the middle of November, with the continual arrival of French reinforcements, the British began to get down to what they had officially come to do – that was, to disarm and repatriate the Japanese. The surrender ceremonies were in preparation, and gradually Japanese troops were phased out of the confused fighting. On 30 November Mountbatten was in Saigon to take the personal surrender of Field-Marshal Terauchi; on 15 December the last 8,000 Japanese formally surrendered, the SACSEA Commission drawing up its lists of 400 Japanese war criminals and Vietnamese collaborators for appropriate justice. By the end of January all the remaining Japanese troops had been concentrated around Cap St Jacques on the coast south of Saigon, and on 13 March Terauchi and his staff were removed to Singapore. Mountbatten's decision to keep the Japanese chain of command intact had been successful. 'I consider that if the Japanese Chain of Command had been disrupted,' he wrote, 'it would have been impossible for us

to use their forces for our own purposes as effectively as we did.'[9]

During the campaign in Vietnam some odd relationships had been struck. When the Frontier Force Regiment was shipped out from Cap St Jacques on the H.T. *Islami* on 29 March, it was recorded that,

> Many Japanese senior officers and men lined the route to say goodbye to the battalion, and it was a curious, if not pathetic, scene to find the very men who had fought against us so bitterly, now so manifestly sorry to bid the battalion farewell. . . .[10]

But General of the Army, Douglas MacArthur, whose agent in Vietnam Mountbatten was, felt inclined to take a less sentimental view of Anglo-Japanese co-operation at the expense of the Vietnamese.

> If there is anything that makes my blood boil [he said in Tokyo], it is to see our allies in Indo-China . . . deploying Japanese troops to reconquer the little people we promised to liberate. It is the most ignoble kind of betrayal.[11]

Reactions at Home

THE war in South Vietnam did not go unnoticed. At that time the full horrors of the Nazi régime were finally becoming public knowledge through the tribunals at Nuremberg, millions of servicemen were restlessly awaiting demobilization to a country where almost everything was in desperately short supply, and the new, untried Labour government was struggling to pull the country together, but even so, most British newspapers found space to cover events in Indo-China at least to some extent. Press coverage was certainly sporadic, in some cases positively casual, but there were notable exceptions in *The Times*, which paid admirably close attention to the affair, and in the radical, now defunct, *Reynold's News*, which had an excellent reporter in Tom Driberg. The House of Commons, in a busy and crowded session, also made the time to worry about what was happening in South-East Asia (though its concern was never echoed in the Lords). General Gracey's campaign in Vietnam, together with the subsequent even more massive British intervention in what is now Indonesia, considerably agitated the conscience of the Labour left of the time.

Usually the British occupation of South Vietnam was considered in conjunction with the very similar affair in Indonesia, then, of course, the Dutch East Indies. Both interventions were regarded as having essentially the same ends, namely the restoration of a European colonial power in Asia. In both cases an indigenous régime was overthrown by the British (Soekarno's in the case of Indonesia), and in both campaigns the British command made extensive

use of the defeated Japanese. So, in many respects, the British involvement in both areas was very similar, though the fighting in Indonesia was on a much bigger scale and much bloodier. Therefore comment and criticism of British policy in South-East Asia tended to lump together events in French Indo-China and the Dutch East Indies.

Reactions to the war were not confined to the United Kingdom. When the dust from the fighting had settled and it became clear that the battle had been fought to reinstate the French in Indo-China, criticism from abroad came winging in. At the end of January 1946, Moscow Radio broadcast a comment that,

> If the peoples of Indo-China had to deal only with their former colonial masters . . . the French, they would have been able, relatively easily, to emancipate themselves. However, they are up against much stronger forces – the intervention of the British troops.[1]

Making a stab at British motives, Moscow came to the conclusion that 'British armed intervention can be explained by the fear that the national liberation movement will spread to other colonial countries'. And while General Gracey's Indian officers were muttering in corners about being used to suppress Asian nationalism, Pandit Nehru was in the United States, expressing his feelings in no uncertain terms. He told the *New York Times* on 1 January 1946:

> We have watched British intervention there [Vietnam] with growing anger, shame and helplessness, that Indian troops should be used for doing Britain's dirty work against our friends who are fighting the same fight as we.

Most foreign comment on the British intervention in Vietnam was hostile, particularly in the United States. The French, of course, tended to take another view. According to *Le Figaro*, in October, 1945, it was being realized 'with increasing clarity' in London that the troubles in Vietnam were 'the work of the Japanese'. It was almost a tradition with the French that trouble in their colonies was the result

of foreign meddling. The thesis was extended to Vietnam in 1945, and was fairly typical of French refusal to face the facts of the situation. By the end of 1946, however, *Le Monde* was not ducking the issue.

> It is altogether impossible [they wrote] to overestimate the strength and extent of the nationalist movement which has aroused all classes of the Cochin Chinese population.

Among British newspapers, as we have said, by far the most detailed and balanced coverage of the Vietnam affair was given in *The Times*. As early as 18 August (the day before Ho Chi Minh took power in Hanoi) a *Times* leader on Indo-China was pointing out that the

> situation is one of some delicacy. The war record of Indo-China has been that of a liability rather than an asset to Allied arms. . . . Under the ignominious régime of Vichy there was a measure of collaboration with the Japanese which no one in France will now recall with complacency. . . .

The article reminded the French that the forces of nationalism alive in the land were genuine and inevitable ('a general awakening of peoples weary of being held in tutelage –') and warned prophetically that nationalism, 'if subject to measures of repression may easily become a focal point for serious disturbances of the peace . . .'. *The Times* was among the few papers to realize the significance of the *coup d'état* of 23 September and to report it. On 3 October, while anxious about the fighting in South Vietnam, the newspaper continued to point out that the claims of the Vietminh were legitimate, and indeed unavoidable. Throughout October the paper assiduously traced the course of events, the beginning of the truce, the breakdown of talks, the heavy fighting of mid-October ('intense' was how they described it). The attempts by the Vietnamese to storm the airfield and the docks were all extensively reported, and with some eloquence. The use of the Japanese by the British command was not passed over (27 October):

> One of the strangest features has been the use of Japanese forces in Saigon. . . . The Japanese are moving about freely under arms in many parts of the country.

Next month, on 14 November, under the heading of 'Confused situation in Indo-China; Japanese help to fight Annamese', the newspaper described the situation in the south:

> The French are still trying to re-establish their sovereignty in Indo-China, while the British continue to disarm the Japanese, who, simultaneously, are fighting the Annamese rebels, while the Annamese are fighting all three.

Later that month *The Times* pointed to the difference between Saigon and Hanoi, where the French community were living in a state of tension, although 'the Vietminh government has not yet attempted any extreme legislation and has allowed the French community a certain amount of freedom ...'.

There was little that *The Times* missed. The peculiar savagery of the French forces in the south was well chronicled from the outset, and when the fighting was dying down, in January 1946, the paper ran several lengthy reports on the disgraceful behaviour of the French military throughout the pacified south ('the wave of military crime', as they called it). On 5 March 1946, the newspaper reported that, on the previous day, South Vietnam had ceased to be part of South-East Asia Command, but it continued to give good coverage to events there. On 8 March the Ho Chi Minh–Sainteny agreement, signed in Hanoi on 6 March, was reported and discussed in a leader, *The Times* finding the document 'encouraging'. Two days later the paper concluded its coverage of the British régime in South Vietnam with a well-balanced retrospective article which set out to explain the circumstances under which General Gracey was operating, gave a useful history of his régime in Saigon, discussed the limitations of his mandate, coming to the debatable conclusion that, 'These limitations have been observed.' However,

despite this final note of vindication, no careful reader of *The Times* could have failed to receive a reasonably clear and largely unbiased picture of events in South Vietnam between August 1945 and March 1946.

Apart from *Reynold's News*, whose coverage is described in detail later in the chapter, the rest of the British press tended to confine its reporting to the dramatic events of the heavy fighting, while making very little comment. Prior to the 23 September *coup*, the *Manchester Guardian* carried rather vague reports of disturbances in South Vietnam and of threats to the French. It also mentioned that Gracey had been trying to whip the Japanese into line to maintain law and order in Saigon. On 25 September the paper reported the *coup*, but stated that 'British and Japanese troops are not taking any part in this internal conflict'. Yet the next day a headline stated, 'Indo-China Revolt; British Troops Act', and a report of the fighting around Saigon was carried. The newspaper also printed an interesting quote from the C.B.S. reporter in Saigon, Bill Downs. 'When the British entered the country on September 12,' he said, 'it became clear they were committed to return the country's rule to the French.' The first reports in the *Daily Mirror* made the front page (on 26 September) under the banner 'Japs Aid British in Battle'. According to the *Mirror* report, 'hundreds of people' had 'been killed', and 'some of the Annamite raiding parties are infiltrating towards the centre of the city, where the French and the British have their headquarters ...'. Next day, the *Mirror* reported that 'British troops have used mortars and heavy machine-guns against the rebels', and that the situation was 'complicated by the fact that the Japanese are still the most powerful force in Saigon'. The liberal *News Chronicle* picked up the story a day later ('British Troops sent to Far East Risings'), and on 28 September, after a brief account of the fighting, stated that 'a warning has gone out to the Japanese from the British authorities in Saigon that unless order is restored in the city the Japanese commanders will

be considered as war criminals'. (No such threat was ever, in fact, issued.) On 29 September, the *Daily Mirror* carried a prominent headline which stated baldly: 'Lawson Says Britain Will Not Intervene'. Both the *Manchester Guardian* and the *News Chronicle* reported the ceasefire and the beginning of the truce talks.

When heavy fighting began again in mid-October, the *Daily Mirror*, on 15 October, wrote, 'Fighting in Saigon ... has reached a new pitch of intensity', and that 'British guns brought down a heavily defended pagoda'. The newspaper quoted Vietnamese casualties as being '100 killed and 800 captured'. Two days before, the *News Chronicle* had given prominence to the renewed warfare – 'Fighting in Indo-China begins again', and on 15 October that, 'Gracey ... has warned the Annamites that he will not tolerate attacks on British troops'. The same account remarked on the scale of the fighting, 'armoured cars, jeeps, radio units are now being thrown into the attack against the Annamites', and also on the fact that any Japanese deserters caught with the rebels were being summarily shot while Vietnamese prisoners were being handed over to the French. The *Manchester Guardian* reported the new battles as 'More Fighting in Indo-China; British in Action', and followed with details of the Vietnamese attacks on the airport and the attempts to dislodge the British from the docks. Next day, 16 October, the *Manchester Guardian* noted that, 'Many Indian troops are protesting at their use in putting down the Annamese whom they regard as civilians and not soldiers trained to their standards....' There was little editorial comment from most of the press, though the *Manchester Guardian* was of the opinion that Indo-China should be returned forthwith to France.

As has been commented earlier, some of the best reporting from Vietnam (and the most trenchant opposition to British policy there) was carried in the pages of the left-wing Sunday paper, *Reynold's News*. Many of their reports were from their own man in South-East Asia, Tom Driberg

(who, as a newly fledged M.P., was to carry his concern back to Westminster). On 23 September *Reynold's News* carried a statement of Vietminh intentions which had been made the day before – the day before the French *coup*.

'We shall fight for our independence and if necessary die rather than be slaves,' declared Dr Pham Van Bach. 'The only solution to the present political crisis in Indo-China,' he asserted, 'was for France to renounce all her claims to Indo-China and give the country complete independence.'

Next week, on 30 September, in a long article carried on both front and back pages, Driberg discussed the situation in Saigon and South Vietnam: '... a small British force is relying, because it has to, on overwhelmingly larger Japanese forces to help it in the job of reimposing an intensely unpopular French régime on an acutely nationalist people'. Driberg went on to describe the British mishandling of the affair, particularly the *coup*. General Gracey had made a mistake, he asserted, in assenting 'to French occupation of the Town Hall last Sunday without insisting on a preliminary round-table conference with the Annamites' – though he did also comment that no one could have imagined that the French would make such a terrible botch of what was a fairly straightforward operation. Driberg was clearly horrified by the behaviour of the French after the *coup*.

Disgraceful scenes of vengeance against helpless Annamites continued all Sunday ... [he wrote]. French municipal police roam the streets all night in small bands, occasionally shooting or provoking shots. Equally trigger-happy French degenerates haunt the opium dens.

Two weeks later, on 14 October, *Reynold's News* delivered an anti-French editorial which declaimed, in an oddly worded sentence, that 'London should tell the world that it will not restore the colonial sweaters to their former power ...'. Next week's editorial (probably written by Driberg, who had returned for the Opening of Parliament) was a more vigorous expression of dissent.

The British people [it declared], who fought for six years to ensure the liberation of Europe from fascism, cannot but be alarmed at the prospect of British forces being used to reinstal French Imperialism in the Far East. . . .

After considering the nature of the French régime in Indo-China, the leader reached the conclusion that,

The record of the French in Indo-China is one not such as to justify a blank cheque of support from Britain. . . . France must understand that the liberation of the peoples of Asia and the right to the promises of the Atlantic Charter are among the war aims for which the people of Britain fought.

It also rebuffed the then fairly widespread criticism of the Vietminh for collaborating with the Japanese as a criticism which could 'hardly be pressed if we acquiesce in the use of Japanese troops against the native forces'.

But perhaps the most damning criticism of all, and the one which may have given most concern to Attlee's government, came from the then Chairman of the Labour party himself, Professor Harold Laski. Writing on the situation in Vietnam and Indonesia in *Reynold's News* on 18 November 1945, he remarked how the progress of events in these countries raised 'fundamental issues which go to the heart of socialism. I beg the Labour Government to reflect upon the impact of this policy upon colonial peoples all over the world.' He reminded the Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin that he himself had organized the British dockers to subvert Churchill's intervention in Russia, and described it as tragic that Britain was seen to be restoring France to Indo-China. He asked the government to note the 'speed and care' with which the Americans had washed their hands of the situation, and pointed out that British policy was putting Britain in a position where 'we are left alone to bear the responsibility of a choice which is found to be far wider in its results than it is pleasant to contemplate'. Despite the French claims to legitimate possession of Vietnam, to Laski the issue was clear. 'What may appear to us no more than an enlarged police operation,' he wrote, 'is to the people concerned the destruction of hope.'

Tom Driberg then took the battle to change British policy into Parliament. On 23 October he asked Jack Lawson, the war minister, for details of British casualties in South Vietnam. 'Up to 14 October, one British officer and forty Indian other ranks,' was the reply he received. Next day, 24 October, Nigel Bullock asked for information on developments in South Vietnam and received an official, but elusively worded, statement of policy from Bevin: '... the liberal attitude on the part of the French government has been reflected in the very conciliatory manner in which the local French representatives have dealt with the Annamite leaders'. By the middle of November, questions on events in South Vietnam began to speed up. Willie Gallagher asked for the text of the Civil Affairs agreement between Bevin and Massigli to be published, and was told that the government would 'consider it'. Assurances were demanded that British troops were not being used to 'support the French ... in any consequences that may arise from a refusal to recognize the independence of Indo-China', and that there was no possibility that 'British forces were being used to suppress the native populations of Indo-China'. Some anxiety was also expressed about the tactics of the military in South Vietnam, and some complaint was made of reports that Vietnamese villages had been burnt as reprisals for terrorist attacks.

On 11 December Tom Driberg was once again on his feet in the Commons, claiming that the British people had 'learned with dismay that four months after the end of the war in the Far East, British and Indian troops were engaged and were suffering heavy casualties in a war in ... French Indo-China ... the object of which appeared to be the restoration of the ... French Empire'. He made use of the fact that Terauchi's soldiers were being used against the Vietnamese: '... their [the British people's] dismay was not lessened when they learned that we were also employing Japanese troops in a campaign which was not a trifling or a guerrilla one but something quite

important'.[2] Driberg called for a conference between the nationalists and the French to be held in London. Six days later, he was asking for more information on 'renewed operational activity' and was told in a written reply that there had been 'no renewal of operational activity', though the government did admit that 'occasional clashes between French or British forces and armed Annamites continues to take place. As late as the end of January, Driberg was still pressing for information on the activities of the British forces of occupation. On 28 January he demanded a statement on British withdrawal, details of casualties, and an assurance that guarantees of future independence would be given by the French. He was told that, 'Allied casualties during the period from mid-October up to 13 January were 126 killed and 424 wounded. Of the killed, three were British and thirty-seven were Indian.' The government also estimated that the Vietnamese dead numbered 2,700. No figure was given for Vietnamese wounded.

There was considerable protest also on the fringes of parliament and among the various semi-political colonial freedom groups. One of the main protagonists of that cause, Fenner Brockway, M.P., wrote to Attlee in late September to express his concern over the press reports of British military actions in South Vietnam. And on 5 October Attlee wrote back soothingly, warning him to 'be careful about accepting at their face value reports of this kind' and assuring him that 'he may be certain the government is carrying out the principles for which it has always stood'. At the end of October, after it had become transparently clear that British units had been engaged in bitter fighting against the nationalists of Vietnam, sixty Labour M.P.s issued a statement concerning events in Vietnam and Indonesia. With regard to the nascent governments, they said, 'however confused and misguided', they did in fact 'stand for genuine popular forces of national liberation and progress'. 'The French government should be urged to recognize the new forces in their liberated colonies and to negotiate with the people's leaders', but meanwhile 'our own troops must not be used in military operations calculated to restore French Imperialism in the Far East'. In November, 1945, the Union for Democratic Control was circulating a rather moving pamphlet which comprised an open letter from a Vietnamese entitled 'To an unknown English friend'. And while the Indian Congress was bitterly railing against the deployment of Indian troops to suppress the nationalists of Vietnam, the Pan African Congress, held in 1945 in Manchester, sent their 'fraternal greetings' to the 'struggling peoples of Indo-China in their fight against French Imperialism'.[3]

As Tom Driberg had said in Parliament, the British war in South Vietnam was not a trifling affair, but something quite important. No doubt had the government in power been a Conservative one, the entire British left would have been vociferous in their outrage. As it was, under a Labour government, the outrage was muted by embarrassment and confusion. But both *The Times* and *Reynold's News*, between them representing a wide range of public opinion, were acute enough to realize the long-term implications of the British intervention. The warning of *The Times* that Asian nationalism might 'if subject to measures of repression ... easily become a focal point for serious disturbances of the peace', has been only too completely fulfilled. For Harold Laski and *Reynold's News*, the British régime in Saigon made 'the British claim to have been engaged in a war for democracy and freedom seem a hollow mockery all over South-East Asia'.

Chapter Nine

North of the 16th Parallel

In the 1968 preface to the long-suppressed 'Section E' of his report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Mountbatten writes,

> In French Indo-China the decision to divide the country on the 16th parallel, and put the north under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, caused great difficulty at the time and sowed the seed for even greater conflict in the years to come.

The implication seems to be that it was events north of the 16th parallel which gave rise to the still progressing tragedy of Vietnam. We may well feel, however, that it would have been more accurate, and more just, had Lord Mountbatten written that it was the decision to put the south under General Gracey which caused 'great difficulty at the time'. While the Chinese occupation of the north proved a great hardship for the people of Hanoi and Tonkin, it never involved the months of warfare and bloodletting that marked the British occupation of the south. The descent of Chiang's rag-tag Kuomintang armies on northern Vietnam was a depressing and nerve-racking experience for the Vietnamese, but infinitely less destructive than the incursions of the 20th Indian Division and the French. The Kuomintang commanders (and their American aides) created considerable political and administrative problems for the Hanoi government, but to the population their actions were preferable to General Gracey's.

Shortly after the Japanese surrender, the Vietminh held a 'people's congress' on 16 August at Tam Trao in Tryen Quing Province. During the course of this meeting, the

National Liberation Committee was formed, under the chairmanship of Ho Chi Minh, to prepare to step into the power vacuum left in Hanoi by the Japanese collapse, and to take over the government of the country. Three days later, on 19 August, Ho's committee made their move. Swiftly, and against only token resistance by a few Japanese and puppet Vietnamese units, the Vietminh assumed control of Hanoi and the North. With little difficulty, and hardly any bloodshed, the Vietminh committee found themselves in control. The years of planning and hope had been realized with an almost bewildering simplicity. In the days that followed, Ho's committee made the maintenance of law and order their overriding aim. It had to be demonstrated to the great powers that the Vietminh were capable of generating responsible and law-abiding government, that they were not simply interested in plunder, revenge and mayhem. Law and order were easily restored. The August Revolution of 1945 commanded the support and enthusiasm of almost the entire population of the north. And, unlike the south, there was no powerful and xenophobic groups like the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao or Binh Xuyen with which to contend. Hanoi returned rapidly to normal.

At that stage the alien forces in the north presented Ho with few problems. The Japanese simply opted out of the situation and confined themselves to their barracks and garrisons. The French military remained under lock and key in Hanoi Citadel, while the French civilian population stayed at home, scared out of their wits, but quite unharmed. A few changes were made. In place of the 'Tricolour' and the 'Rising Sun', the banner of the new republic, a yellow star on a red field, floated over the city. All the French street names were replaced by Vietnamese ones, and fervently patriotic slogans were posted everywhere. The mood was one of high elation. For the first time since the advent of the French adventurer Gardenière in 1873, Hanoi was in the hands of the Vietnamese. On 28 August the National Liberation Committee was dissolved,

and a proper provisional government formed. Then, Ho Chi Minh, with the provisional government and the people of the north, settled down to await events.

In the shape of the Chinese Kuomintang forces, they were not long coming. At the beginning of September, at the same time as the British were entering the south, the Chinese crossed the border. Like a plague of ground-borne locusts, Chiang's armies entered Vietnam as a huge force variously estimated at between 150,000 and 185,000 men. Whatever their exact numbers, the Chinese armies were the most powerful force the Vietnamese had ever seen. Under the command of General Lu Han, a dyed-in-the-wool Kuomintang militarist, the Chinese occupation force consisted of the 60th, 62nd and 93rd Armies, reinforced by the 23rd, 39th and 93rd Divisions. The well-equipped military units were attended by a horde of ragged porters and hangers-on, some of whom possessed firearms. Despite its highly unmilitary appearance, the force was a formidable one, the pride of Yunnan Province and South China. And along with Lu Han's staff came Americans, men of the Combat Section, U.S. South China Command, under Major-General Phillip Gallacher, and the laconic, knowledgeable operators of the American O.S.S. In all it took this vast force more than six weeks to cross a hundred miles of country. What really terrified the Vietnamese was that the Chinese, as was their custom, were living off the countryside. Following the war conditions which had prevailed in Tonkin since the Japanese *putsch* of 9 March, the food supply was already precarious. In the densely populated Red River delta there was hardly enough to feed the Vietnamese. The addition of nearly 200,000 hungry Chinese troops was hardly a welcome sight. Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh government watched the approach and the arrival of Lu Han's armies with understandable trepidation.

While Ho had every reason to be concerned about the Chinese, there were a few factors operating in his favour.

Normally a Communist-dominated administration could have expected short shrift from the representatives of Chiang's Kuomintang. But these were not normal circumstances. For one thing, there was a sizeable complement of Americans with the Chinese, and they took their orders from a command still orientated towards the policies of the late President Roosevelt. A straightforward overthrow of the Vietnamese nationalist régime would have met the severe disapproval of General Wedemeyer and Ambassador Hurley. And at all costs Chiang had to hang on to the support of his American allies. So Lu Han was under orders to tread gently with the new Vietnamese régime, and General Gallacher was there to make sure he did so. Besides which, the Chinese did not favour a return of the French power to Vietnam, particularly after the Vichy débâcle and the open collaboration with the Japanese. Natural hostility to an Imperialistic European power, aggravated by this memory of Franco-Japanese collaboration during 1941-5, therefore formed the policies which Lu Han was to put into effect. The Vietminh partisans were also the only troops in Vietnam to set up an effective resistance to Terauchi's Japanese army, and this was well known in China.

Thus, in a supreme stroke of post-war irony, the rabid anti-Communists of the Kuomintang promptly recognized the Vietminh as the *de facto* government of Vietnam, while the British, under a highly liberal supreme commander, were simultaneously busy overthrowing a similar régime. Lu Han, while he does not seem to have been touched with genius, was no fool either. He recognized that the success of the Vietminh was due more to genuine grass-roots nationalism than to Communist intrigue. The popularity of the régime among the Vietnamese was obvious, as obvious as was the unpopularity of the French. And Lu Han knew his stay to be temporary. He saw no reason to antagonize fifteen million people in the interests of French rule. So keeping the French troops firmly locked away, Lu Han set

about extracting his pound of flesh from their government and let the Vietminh get on with the difficult enough jobs of policing and administration.

Not that relations between the Vietminh and the Chinese ever brimmed over with cordiality. While Lu Han was prepared to put up with the Vietminh Communists, he would certainly have preferred another, more amenable form of government, and of this Ho Chi Minh was well aware. He was therefore concerned to see arriving with the Chinese armies two reconstructed Vietnamese nationalist groups who had been driven into exile in China in the 1930s. These ghosts from the nationalist past were the once powerful Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dong (VNQDD – Vietnamese Nationalist party) and the Dong Minh Hoi. Both were remnants of their former selves, but at the same time they were orientated towards, and in fact modelled on, the Kuomintang. In the months that followed the VNQDD and the Dong Minh Hoi, with Chinese backing, forced Ho to make extensive concessions.

But with the Chinese busy shaking down the French and disarming the Japanese, the Vietminh decided to put into effect a programme of badly needed reforms. By the sober standards by which economic reforms are usually judged, most of Ho's measures were possibly ill-considered, reckless and in part downright disastrous. The economy of the north was in a fragile condition, and highly vulnerable to reckless treatment, regardless of how well intentioned. But Ho knew that change was needed, for the sake of change as much as for genuine improvement. By acting as they did, the Vietminh made it plain that they would at least attempt a more equitable distribution of wealth. Obviously these reforms were of a political rather than a practical nature, but the psychic jolt they produced did Ho nothing but good. The programme was a swingeing one. Within a short space of time at the end of 1945 the mandarinate and the councils of village elders were abolished, to be replaced by various levels of 'people's committees'. Legislation in

favour of the workers and women was passed, together with benefits for the poor. All the most onerous (and some not so onerous) taxes were abolished and replaced by a largely ineffective system of voluntary subscriptions. Prostitution, gambling and the consumption of alcohol were banned. More importantly, opium smoking and dealing was heavily proscribed. Some of the measures, particularly those against illiteracy, were eminently sensible, and the most important innovation of all was the compulsory use of the Romanized script called 'Quoc Ngu'.

By late 1945, with these somewhat flashy measures to their credit, the Vietminh felt able to stage elections. Despite the political threat created by the re-emergence of the VNQDD and the Dong Minh Hoi, Ho felt confident of his own and Vietminh popularity. After an initial run on 23 December (in which Ho guaranteed fifty seats in the new assembly for the VNQDD and twenty-five for the Dong Minh Hoi), genuine elections were held in January 1946. It was an extraordinary business, involving a wide range of candidates from conservative mandarins to fanatical Marxists standing for the new assembly (many odd candidates, including the former Emperor Bao Dai, were in fact elected). But, despite a leavening of new factors, the strength and popularity of the Vietminh proved overwhelming. Ho was completely vindicated. The Chinese were rather startled at his success, but to assuage their nervousness he introduced into the new government, in important posts, representatives of the VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi (dropping, incidentally, the Vietminh hero General Vo Nguyen Giap). It was a clever move and it worked well.

So the Chinese policy of non-interference in the politics of Vietnam (or at least of only very limited interference) allowed Ho to consolidate the position of the Vietminh. While the Vietnamese paid the price of sustaining and putting up with the Kuomintang armies (who were not the best-behaved troops in the world), in the long run they

benefited from the Chinese occupation. As Ellen Hammer remarks in her book *The Struggle for Indo-China,*

> Although the Vietnamese suffered from the behaviour of the Chinese army of occupation . . . the cause of Vietnamese independence profited enormously from the presence of the Chinese. . . .[1]

The 31,000 Japanese north of the 16th parallel presented little or no problem to the Chinese. Compared with the south, the north was settled and peaceable. There was no necessity to use Japanese troops to secure 'law and order', and the Chinese army was anyway big enough to handle any disturbances had they arisen. The Japanese therefore simply sat tight, did what the Chinese told them, and remained outside the affairs of the country. Quickly, and without any trouble, they were rounded up, disarmed and concentrated at Haiphong prior to repatriation. As soon as transport became available they were shipped out.

Under the Chinese occupation of the north it was the lot of the French which was hardest. For the first time the Chinese were tasting the heady delights of power over a European Imperialist nation who had, in the past, extracted many a treaty from China at gun-point. With the roles reversed, the Chinese made the most of it. All French troops in Hanoi and the north remained disarmed and locked up. General Allesandri's French units, who had been in China since the Japanese *putsch* and who were itching to get back into Vietnam, were refused permission to return. All French officers arriving from the south were subjected to humiliating searches, no Frenchman being allowed to carry firearms. Even the French diplomatic mission was not allowed to fly the 'Tricolour'. Jean Sainteny and his group, who had come to Hanoi to arrange talks with the Chinese, were forcibly ejected from the Governor's Palace. At the Japanese surrender ceremonies of 27 September no French flag was flown, and the French were allocated seats to the rear behind junior Chinese officers.

All requests by the French for civil administrators to be brought in were refused, and no French troops were permitted in from the south. French civilians went in terror of their lives, though in fact the streets of Hanoi were safer for them than those of Saigon and there was no Hanoi equivalent to the Cité Herodia massacre. Every device, no matter how petty, that could be used to humiliate the French was used time and again. Grimly, Sainteny and his mission held on. They reasoned, quite rightly, that China had problems of her own, and that sooner or later the Kuomintang armies would have to depart. But through late 1945 and into 1946 the French were put through hoop after hoop, the Vietminh being quite content to watch their humiliation. Every little abasement was a further lowering of French prestige. For the high-handed *colons* of Tonkin it was their worst hour. Under the Chinese they were allowed nothing.

If the French thought that their fellow whites, the Americans, would ameliorate their problems they were mistaken. The American commanders in the China theatre were Roosevelt men, sympathetic to both the Chinese Republicans and the Vietnamese nationalists. Among them, French colonial rule was commonly regarded as a disaster, particularly since the days of Vichy–Japanese collaboration. The Americans attached to the Chinese army of occupation refused to lift a finger to help the French, General Gallacher, according to Bernard Fall, acted 'as if the French did not exist'.[2] So blatant was American hostility that Jean Sainteny radioed his superiors in Calcutta saying that he had come 'face to face with a deliberate allied manoeuvre to evict the French from Indo-China' and that 'at the present time the Allied attitude is more harmful than that of the Vietminh'.[3] The Americans assumed that their attitude was supported by the Potsdam decisions. Major Archimedes Patti of the American O.S.S. told Jean Sainteny that their instructions from Potsdam had made no mention of French rule in Vietnam, and that therefore the

French had no right to 'interfere in affairs which were no longer of concern to them'.[4]

At the turn of the year things began to change. The Truman régime was now making its own policies felt, and the policies of Roosevelt were no longer the policies of Washington. Pressure began to be put on Chiang to return Indo-China to France. In February 1946, the patience and determination of the French negotiators paid off and talks between the French and the Chinese began in earnest. Not that the Chinese were giving in easily. They were still determined to extract every possible concession, and France had no option but to concede. On 28 February 1945, General Raoul Salan (later to become notorious as a leader of the French O.S.S. underground) signed an agreement in Chungking by which the Chinese promised to withdraw on 31 March. In return France signed away all her claims to territory in China and acquired minor rights to the Yunnan railroad. Meanwhile, on 6 March, Sainteny had negotiated a fairly reasonable agreement with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi (See page 126). So, still humiliated and in a weak position, the French were allowed back into the north. Their return, however, was marred by a bloody incident at Haiphong when a French warship was fired on by a Chinese shore battery and eighteen men were killed and forty injured. Whether it was a mistake or a parting gesture by a Chinese commander has never been found out. But it was a bad omen for post-war French rule in North Vietnam.

Despite their humiliation at the hands of Lu Han, the French had reason to be grateful to the Chinese. While Lu Han's occupation favoured the Vietminh (as Gracey's in the south favoured the French), in the end the result was the same. French rule was restored. But it is clear that it could never have been achieved by the French alone. Leclerc himself stated that, even with a base in the south, he would never have been able to occupy the north against Vietnamese resistance. France needed, and in the end

recieved, the co-operation of powers a lot stronger than herself.

For the Vietminh, the Chinese army of occupation was a minor blessing in disguise (if a very heavy disguise). Despite the depredations of this awesome force, they did hold the French at arm's length for six valuable months. During that time Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh government established a hold on the imagination of the country which they were never to lose. Despite confusion, muddle and hard times, the Vietminh accomplished certain hopeful things. Their achievement was not forgotten by the people of Vietnam, either in the north or south. The end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946 were, for the north, a time of real hardship but genuine hope. For the south, under the régime of General Gracey, it was a time of bloodshed, destruction and ruined ambitions.

The Relinquishing of Responsibility

TOWARDS the end of 1945, although British and Japanese troops were still out hunting down the nationalists, General Gracey was preparing to hand over the reins of power to the Gaullist French authorities. There never seems to have been any doubt in the general's mind that that is where they belonged. Before he even got to Saigon he had stated, in Burma, that, 'the question of the government of Indo-China is exclusively French,'[1] and that complete military and civil control in the country was only a matter of weeks away. In the event, it had proved considerably more difficult to establish French control than Gracey had anticipated, thanks to the bitter hostility of the Vietnamese. And while de Gaulle's men were not the men of Vichy, to the Vietnamese the distinction was largely academic. The French were the French, and whatever label they wore they were going to be resisted.

General Gracey's energetic pursuance of the French cause was, in terms of war-time loyalties, somewhat surprising. Throughout the war the French administration and military had co-operated wholeheartedly with the Japanese, particularly against the Vietnamese nationalists. Mountbatten has admitted that,

> The spectacle of France's betrayal had greatly undermined French prestige in her colony: particularly in view of the fact that the Vichy administration in F.I.C. [French Indo-China] had at all times collaborated openly with the enemy.[2]

Even after the *putsch* of 9 March, French resistance to the Japanese had been practically non-existent, and even where a few attempts had been made, the Vietminh spoke

witheringly of the nerve of the French soldiers, General Gracey, on the other hand, is on the record as saying that 'their (the French) resistance movement was excellent'.[3] But whatever the general's personal prejudices, he was under orders to turn the administration over to the French as soon as possible. His chief, Mountbatten, wanted as little to do with the country as possible. At the end of 1945 Gracey began the transfer of power.

The French had been preparing for this event for some time. In fact, since 26 October 1944, a French military mission had been established at Mountbatten's H.Q. in Kandy, Ceylon, under the control of Lieutenant-General Blaizot. The job of this mission was, among other things, to make preparations for the eventual deployment of French forces in South-East Asia and to co-ordinate and organize underground operations in Indo-China. At the outset the mission consisted of Blaizot (who was Commander-Designate of French Expeditionary Forces in the Far East), Commander Doignon, French Navy, Major de Langlade (Blaizot's political adviser), and a 'light echelon' of personnel from French H.Q. including ten officers. During 1945 the strength of this mission had been doubled, and in June Group-Captain Fay of the French air force was appointed Blaizot's deputy. Then, in August, Blaizot was replaced as Mission Head by the more formidable figure of General Leclerc. With the war against Japan now over, Leclerc and his men could concentrate on other things, namely how to go about reclaiming Indo-China.

But, whether the French liked it or not, for the time being the boss in Saigon and in South Vietnam was General Gracey. Not that Mountbatten was entirely happy with this arrangement. Originally it had been intended that the British should be responsible only for certain 'key areas', and even inside those the civil administration was supposed to be carried out by the French. But the small French force available had not proved capable of handling the continuing turbulence, and Mountbatten was forced to

seek fresh instructions with regard to his position vis-à-vis the civil administration. The new orders which he received on 1 October were, in effect, to give the French all the help they needed, a shift in British policy which meant that Gracey, as Mountbatten's agent, was in direct control of all French forces and civil affairs in South Vietnam. Even Vice-Admiral d'Argenlieu, when he arrived in Saigon on 30 October to take up his job as French High Commissioner, was under the operational command of General Gracey. So, for four critical months at the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946, the direct responsibility for events in South Vietnam remained clearly on the shoulders of the British commander on the spot, General Gracey.

When the British had arrived in Saigon in mid-September, the French troops in the country were nearly all disarmed and under lock and key. Those in Saigon were mainly men of the 11th Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale (11th R.I.C.). For nearly seven months they had been languishing in jail or in barracks, guarded for the most part by armed Vietnamese. As a consequence they were demoralized, bitter and spoiling for revenge. They were to prove unreliable and destructive allies. The small French force attached to Gracey's 20th Indian Division were experienced soldiers of the 5th Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale (5th R.I.C.). These Gaullists were useful troops, but few in number. They consisted of one company of 178 men, and one light commando of 623 men. Between them they possessed about a dozen vehicles (trucks and jeeps). So, in the critical early days of the British occupation, the only French forces available to Gracey were the jumpy P.O.W.s of the 11th R.I.C. and the 800 men of the 5th R.I.C. As it happened, he would have been better off without any of them. The French force attached to the 20th Indian Division was too small to be of any military use, but big enough to disturb the already nervous Vietnamese. The 5th R.I.C., no matter how well-disciplined, proved to be political dynamite. The sight of them walking the streets of

Saigon, armed and in British uniforms, convinced many Vietnamese that the extremists were right and that the British had come only to reinstate the French. As for the P.O.W.s of the 11th R.I.C., when they were armed and turned loose during and after the *coup* (see page 62) their vengeful behaviour was instrumental in stirring up and adding to the hostility of the Vietnamese.

But, once serious fighting started, Gracey needed all the troops he could get. And since in the final analysis the battle in the south was a French fight, the more French forces who were available to wage it the better. The French military build-up began in October, 1945, and carried on through into 1946. On 3 October the remainder of the 5th R.I.C. landed by ship at Saigon, and shortly after were reinforced by another 1,300 infantry. On 14 October the French force received real stiffening by the arrival of the 2nd Armoured Division in Saigon. (The 2nd Armoured Division were a crack force who had fought brilliantly in Europe under Patton, the American tankmaster.) By November the French had, in and around Saigon, two complete regiments of colonial infantry, the 2nd Armoured Division, 300 marines, strong elements of the long-awaited 9th Colonial Infantry Division, plus 1,500 Vietnamese levies. And, most significant for morale, the whole force was under the command of one of the heroes of France, General Jacques Phillipe Leclerc, who had arrived in Saigon at the beginning of October. In all, something more than 30,000 troops were deployed under a skilful and experienced commander.

The Vietnamese were left in no doubt that the French were back, and literally back with a vengeance. Most of the foreign eyewitnesses, and some of the British military, testified to the peculiar ferocity with which the French carried out the campaign against the nationalists. In the heavy fighting around mid-October, the British United Press report carried in the *Daily Mirror* of 15 October said that the methods being used by the French were infuriating the Vietnamese.

Prisoners are being handled roughly, and French troops burned to the ground a small village north of Saigon because they had found hidden weapons there. The Annamites, even old women, were tied up and practically dragged all the way to Saigon. . . .

Even the dry *Official British History of the Second World War*, while discussing casualties in Vietnam, remarks with clear disapproval that, 'Casualties among the rebels in the French sector were reported to be very much higher'[4] – higher, that is, than casualties in the British sector (which were high enough in all conscience). Even the Vietminh, who had no reason to be grateful to the British, were prepared to make a distinction between the French and General Gracey's own troops on the occasion when they told the H.Q. of 20th Indian Division on 10 October that, while British entry into Gia Dinh would not be opposed, 'any movement of French troops would be resisted to the utmost'.[5] As late as December 1945, when it must have been plain that French rule was secure, the *History of the Indian Armed Forces* notes that, 'the French were still anxious to decimate the rebels'.

In the early stages of the fighting, the small French force was given the central area of Saigon to control, with 32 Indian Infantry Brigade on their left and 80 Indian Infantry Brigade behind them to the south and in Cholon. At some points they were seconded, together with French police and Japanese, into small mobile forces for house-to-house searches being operated under British officers. But as their numbers increased, they were deployed more widely around the countryside. Throughout October the French were used by their British commander in many of the anti-guerrilla operations and skirmishes throughout the country. On 25 October they were strong enough to clear (by day at least) Colonial Highway No. 1, the vital road which runs up the coast to the north. They also penetrated the difficult territory in the Mekong Delta to relieve beleaguered and isolated Japanese garrisons. In late October French marines were involved in a serious fight up the

coast at Nha Trang, where even with the help of the Japanese, it took them five days to clear the town of nationalists. At the beginning of November, the French, together with the British, launched a determined action to clear up the Loc Ninh–Tay Ninh–Saigon triangle to the north of the city. Gradually the French were taking on most of the fighting and occupying more and more of the country.

At the beginning of December they assumed responsibility for 80 Indian Infantry Brigade's area in south Saigon and Cholon, and occupied Tra Vinh, followed by Can Tho. Acting under a British commander, and with the help of British and Japanese troops, General Leclerc was steadily consolidating and extending his grip on South Vietnam. By the beginning of December General Gracey felt that Leclerc was now in a position to do without many of the British and Japanese units. Leclerc agreed. The British and the Japanese had done their bit. The French were very grateful.

The formal symbol of Paris in Indo-China, the French High Commissioner, Vice-Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, made his appearance in Saigon on 30 October. His arrival had been delayed by Mountbatten, who had held him back until Gracey and Leclerc thought the time propitious. Now that the threat of massive Vietnamese insurrection seemed over, d'Argenlieu arrived to take up his job as France's first post-war High Commissioner in Indo-China. And once again France had made a bad mistake. The appointment of d'Argenlieu was described by the late Bernard Fall as 'France's first major post-war blunder in South-East Asia'.[6] Certainly as someone to represent France in the confused, highly charged political situation, which existed, there could have been no stranger choice than d'Argenlieu. An ex-Carmelite monk, he possessed fiercely-held and semi-mystical reactionary views concerning the role of France and of Christian civilization in the Far East. He was ascetic, disciplined, highly principled, and completely impervious to the logic of Asian nationalism. According to

one of his more waggish aides, d'Argenlieu possessed 'the most brilliant mind of the twelfth century'.

The day after his arrival in Saigon, d'Argenlieu made a broadcast on Saigon Radio in which he propounded the vague and very limited offers of autonomy which the French government was prepared to make. The response of the nationalists was immediate. They let d'Argenlieu know in no uncertain terms that his offers were meaningless, his threats unconvincing, and that French troops would continue to be attacked and French rule continue to be resisted. Without deviating an inch from his initial policy, d'Argenlieu went on the air again on 14 November, and once more on 23 November. Each broadcast was answered by attacks on French troops and installations. But despite the evidence before him, d'Argenlieu could never be persuaded that the independence movement was widely spread or deeply felt. In his eyes it was the result of agitation by a tiny minority of extremists, particularly the 'godless' Communists of the Vietminh. (This bitter anti-nationalist line d'Argenlieu continued to hold to until he was replaced in 1947, when the French decided they could no longer afford him.) Fortunately for the High Commissioner, the forces of Christianity, in the shape of Leclerc's troops and their armour, were proving more persuasive than his words. The intransigence of d'Argenlieu was a source of concern, even to the commissioner-designate for Cochin China (the South), Colonel Cédille. Cédille was just as determined to bring about the rule of France as was his chief, but his attitude was fairly realistic. He knew that there would have to be some accommodation of Vietnamese aspirations.

Mountbatten, who still had an ultimate responsibility for affairs in South Vietnam, was troubled by the line adopted by d'Argenlieu in Saigon. Concerning Asian nationalism, Mountbatten was liberal, even sympathetic to that cause. He knew that in the long run policies such as those being laid down by d'Argenlieu would prove disastrous. On 30 November, while Mountbatten was in Saigon to take Field-

Marshal Terauchi's personal surrender, he held meetings with d'Argenlieu and all the ranking French officers. While he does not say so in his report, it is difficult to believe that he did not take the opportunity to try to inject some liberality into French policies. But in the end Mountbatten had no political leverage over d'Argenlieu. They both knew that the British commander's suzerainty over South Vietnam was strictly temporary. All Mountbatten could do was to try to persuade the High Commissioner to modify his policies. But d'Argenlieu's uncompromising hostility to the nationalists in general and the Vietminh in particular prevailed. The *History of the Indian Armed Forces,* while discussing events at the end of November, notes that while 'Mountbatten was pressing for some substantial changes in the French policy', Admiral d'Argenlieu had 'repeated his country's intentions to pacify the hostile elements in the population'.

With the French military forces building up steadily, and the French civil administration beginning to assume its role, the time had come for General Gracey to pull out his forces. The Japanese under his command were to be taken out of action so that they might be disarmed and concentrated before repatriation. The British units were to be transferred to India or redeployed elsewhere in South-East Asia. The first British brigade to be relieved of responsibility and replaced by the French was the 80 Indian Infantry Brigade, whose area in south Saigon and Cholon had never been particularly troublesome. (The nationalist cause was never deeply rooted in the Chinese population of Cholon, which made up most of the brigade's area.) On 6 December 80 Indian Brigade was ordered to hand over to the French, but to stand by in full readiness in case of emergency. Three days later, on 9 December, Saigon Radio passed from British into French hands. Complete French control of Saigon was established on 19 December, and a week later, 32 Indian Infantry Brigade (3/8 Gurkhas, 4/2 Gurkhas and the 9/14 Punjabis), who had been responsible

for a large slice of Saigon, sailed for Borneo. It was the last week of 1945.

'The year 1946,' according to the *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces,* 'started therefore with everything moving quickly towards the firm establishment of the French Authority in Southern Indo-China, and the withdrawal of the British occupation forces in the first month.'[7] On 11 January 1946, 80 Indian Infantry Brigade was relieved of all operational commitments, and also in that week the 23rd Indian Mountain Regiment and the 114th Field Regiment Royal Artillery left the country, together with the armoured cars of the 16th Light Cavalry. On 20 January the H.Q. of Allied Land Forces French Indo-China (ALLFIC) was closed, 80 Indian Infantry Brigade (the 4/17 Dogra Regiment, 1/19 Hyderabad Regiment and the 3/1 Gurkhas) sailing for Makassar at the same time. The only British brigade left intact was 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, spread out to the north of Saigon across an area 'in which the French had not been able to attain mastery'. But, in the last week of January, their battalions were being recalled to Saigon.

On 28 January command of all French forces in south Indo-China (Vietnam) passed to Leclerc from General Gracey, who then left the country, his job completed. Command of the remaining British troops and the reduced inter-service mission was taken up by Gracey's Chief of Staff, Brigadier M. S. K. Maunsell. On 8 February the H.Q. of 20th Indian Division was closed, and the day after the H.Q. units of 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, together with the Frontier Force Rifles and the 1/1 Gurkhas, left Saigon. Next to go, on 12 February, were the H.Q. units of 20th Indian Division, the machine-gunners of the 9th Jat Regiment and the 4/10 Gurkhas. By the middle of February only two British battalions were left: the 2/8 Punjabis and the 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment of the Divisional Infantry. Their sole function was to guard the Japanese down on Cap St Jacques on the coast south of Saigon.

On 1 March Mountbatten received word from the Combined Chiefs of Staff that, as from 4 March, south Indo-China would cease to form part of South-East Asia Command. On 13 March, Field-Marshal Terauchi and his staff were transferred from Saigon to Singapore. Two days later, Mountbatten paid a farewell visit to d'Argenlieu in Saigon and passed over the remaining Japanese to the French. At the end of March the 2/8 Punjabis and the 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment departed, leaving as the only relic of the British occupation a small R.A.F. staging-post at Tan Son Nhut airport. Then, on 3 April, Mountbatten was informed that he was no longer General of the Army MacArthur's agent in Indo-China. British responsibility for the affairs of South Vietnam was formally at an end.

With the south forcibly placated, and their position in Saigon secure, the French turned their attention to Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh, always astute, recognized that it would now be them with whom he would have to deal. The British intervention in the south had dashed his hopes of complete independence, and so it was up to him to get the best terms he could. Jean Sainteny, the hardworking French diplomat in Vietnam, went to Hanoi at the end of February to hold talks with Ho. The results of these were set down in a bulletin issued by Paris on 18 March 1946, which stated that, 'The French government recognize the Republic of Vietnam as a free state having its government, its parliament, its army, its finances and forming part of the Indo-Chinese Federation and the French Union.'[8] But Ho was to discover that French notions of a 'free state' were not the same as his own. One of the provisions of the agreement was that the Vietnamese army was always to be outnumbered by the French troops, 15,000 to 10,000 being the figure quoted. But whatever Ho's misgivings about the document, it was the best he could do at the time in the face of Leclerc's army. Accordingly, on 18 March, he sent a telegram to the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, saying, '... on behalf of the Vietnam people and government, I respectfully request the government of Great Britain to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state'.[9]

While these negotiations were going forward in the north, events in the south boded ill for the future. Flushed with their success against the poorly armed nationalists, the French troops there had begun to run wild. Military courts martial were working flat out to handle their criminal activities. *The Times* of 25 January 1946 reported how 'several hundred members of the French Expeditionary Forces in Indo-China have been arrested during the past few weeks, on charges ranging from petty theft to robbery under arms, and murder committed during hold-ups'. In Saigon, no one was safe. Vietnamese, Chinese and French civilians all suffered at the hands of Leclerc's troops. *The Times* report goes on to tell how, 'The prosecutor in one case recalled that at a private meeting a few days ago, General Leclerc had expressed keen disappointment with the general conduct of the troops under his command in Indo-China.' In addition to widespread thieving, hooliganism and brutality, there were other incidents of an obviously more political significance. Liberal French civilians, who were known to be sympathetic to the ideas of Vietnamese nationalism, found themselves to be never safe from the attentions of the military and the police. At least one young woman attached to the French army in Saigon had her head shaved and her hands tied before being frogmarched through the streets of the city bearing a placard stating that she had signed a manifesto in favour of Vietnamese independence. Vietnamese whose names were attached to such political manifestoes were likely to be beaten up and to have their shops or stalls wrecked.[10]

To the French *colons*, under de Gaulle as under Vichy, Vietnamese nationalism was seen as an affront to the natural God-given order of things. The liberals who endorsed that cause were regarded as traitors to the white race. This characteristic intransigence of the French *colons*

was to lead to much bloodshed, both in Vietnam and, later, in Algeria. The seeds of the Franco-Vietnamese war of 1946-54 were sown during these days. In an eloquent and perceptive leader on the subject of Indo-China, published as early as 18 August 1945, *The Times* had said:

> In renewing her connection with Indo-China France will find that many changes have taken place since her authority lapsed ... as the British found in Burma, a new spirit of nationalism calling for guidance rather than repression is transforming the attitude of the east to the west. ... National movements of this kind need to be treated with respect. They are symptomatic of general awakening of peoples weary of being held in tutelage, and, if subject to measures of repression, may easily become a focal point for serious disturbances of the peace. ...

That kind of reasoned, sensible thinking, while it pervaded the British Labour administration, never held much sway in French government circles. So, in the period 1945-6, instead of 'guidance' and 'respect', what the people of Vietnam received were the reactionary idiocies of Thierry d'Argenlieu backed by the armour of Leclerc.

Conclusions

DURING the second half of the 1960s the undeclared war in Vietnam became one of the obsessive issues of our time. Literally millions of words were, and continue to be, written on the causes and progress of the war, in official reports, in learned accounts and in the pages of the daily press. No conflict in history has been so heavily documented, so vividly illustrated and so extensively discussed. But somehow, throughout all the ferment, the British occupation of South Vietnam during 1945-6 has remained a largely unknown incident. Concerned, often highly knowledgeable people have no idea (or only a very hazy idea) of the facts of the British régime. One reason is, quite simply, that the memory of General Gracey's short rule in South Vietnam has become buried by the enormity of subsequent tragedies. But it is only fair to add that the British Foreign Office have to a certain extent taken precautions to keep the story under wraps. 'Section E' of Mountbatten's report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff (written in 1947) was released only in 1968. In his specially written Preface, Mountbatten admitted that 'Section E' was 'subject to political considerations not applicable to the rest of my narrative and H.M. Government have only recently approved its publication'. The reason that he gives for the suppression of the facts was that, 'many of the problems to which I referred ... involved the interests and policies of allied and other governments and remained unresolved for many years after the completion of my report.'[1]

The reason for the nervousness of successive governments is obvious enough; at the time when Mountbatten's

report was first published, in 1951, the French were up to their ears in the war with the Vietminh. From the official viewpoint, there could have been no advantage in the British embarrassing their NATO ally by releasing 'Section E' and implicating themselves in the causes of the war. And, of course, as the situation in Vietnam continued to cause concern, the British preferred to remain outside it as far as they were able.

Yet the fact remains that, for several crucial months in 1945-6, southern Vietnam *was* the direct responsibility of the British. As the record of General Gracey's régime was not a good, or a liberal one, it raises a number of issues which remain unresolved and questions which remain unanswered. Over British colonial policy, for example, why were the British government so hostile to President Roosevelt's ideas of United Nations Trusteeships, and why were Churchill and Eden so anxious to restore Indo-China to the French after the war? Was the Potsdam decision to incorporate half Vietnam into a British command a purely military one, or were the motives of the British Joint Chiefs of Staff covertly political? Why did Mountbatten, who was remarkably liberal in his colonial dealings elsewhere, not have more influence over events in South Vietnam? Was he double-crossed by the French – and, by association, by General Gracey? As for Gracey himself, was he really bitterly hostile to the Vietminh and personally determined to reinstate the French? Did he exceed his orders when he arrived in Saigon by suppressing the Vietnamese press and declaring martial law? Was the decision to stage the *coup d'état* of 23 September his own, or was he pressured into it by the French? Did he realize what the consequences would be? Was the use of the Japanese in the subsequent fighting wise, or ethical? Did the British/Indian division act with unnecessary violence and ruthlessness in their campaign against the Vietnamese? Did the Attlee government in London know what was being done in Vietnam in their name and that of the British people? For the last

word on all these questions and a few others we will have to wait until the war diaries, cabinet papers, and so forth, become available in 1976. But until then it is valuable to consider them in the light of information already available. Though perhaps the biggest question of all remains one which can never be answered. Did the actions of the British occupation set the scene for the decades of warfare which have followed?

British colonial policy throughout the war with Japan had been preoccupied with that enemy. Any concessions made during the war to the burgeoning forces of nationalism (such as the Indian Congress) were made reluctantly and with an eye to preventing defection to the Japanese. It is quite clear from their reluctance to endorse proposed declarations of colonial independence that the War Cabinet were fighting for a return of the pre-war Imperial *status quo*, not for the political independence of Asia. Consequent upon this policy were the British refusals to countenance President Roosevelt's schemes for United Nations Trusteeships for colonial territories. Roosevelt's complaint, that the British feared the effects the trusteeship system would have on their empire, was perfectly accurate. Political freedom is a highly contagious virus, and once introduced, almost impossible to stamp out. With regard to the European empires in the Far East, the trusteeship idea was clearly subversive. The British in particular had reason to fear it being set in operation in French Indo-China, which, after all, abutted on to Burma and was only a stone's-throw from India itself. Churchill knew that nationalism was spreading fast in British territories. He had no intention of fanning the flames by permitting the enfranchisement of adjoining parts of the Indo-Chinese peninsula. It was this, rather than any love of de Gaulle's France, which prompted the British to insist upon the return of Vietnam and the rest of Indo-China to France at the end of the war. Eden has frankly admitted that, at Yalta in 1945, Churchill considered the intention of this report (on the

U.N. Trusteeship system) might be aimed at the British Empire, and he was not the man to let that go by'.[2]

British policy, therefore, on the one hand blocked Roosevelt's far-sighted proposals and on the other guaranteed the return of France to the Far East. Considering the succession of brutal colonial wars which have taken place there since 1945, it may perhaps be thought tragic that it was a British policy that prevailed. Roosevelt's trusteeship scheme, while flawed in detail, was potentially workable. A U.N. Trusteeship for Indo-China might well have saved twenty-five years of war in Vietnam. No one did more to prevent one being set up than the British government.

The Potsdam decision to include southern Indo-China in the British South-East Asia Command was taken on the recommendation of the British Chiefs of Staff. The American commanders on the spot were not at all willing to concede the territory. Indo-China had long been part of General Wedemeyer's China Theatre, and the Americans were frankly suspicious of British motives. The purpose of British wartime incursions into Indo-China, were, in the eyes of the American commanders in China, 'to re-establish French Imperialism', and not 'for the purpose of participating in the main battle against Japan'.[3] The Roosevelt men, Ambassador Hurley and General Wedemeyer, were forthright in their condemnations of British actions in the area, and furious at the inclusion of Indo-China in South-East Asia Command (although Wedemeyer had predicted it).

Were they right to be so suspicious? There were good military reasons for including south Indo-China in Mountbatten's command. There were probably better reasons for the country remaining within General Wedemeyer's theatre. Certainly it is difficult to see any overwhelming reasons for adding another 500,000 square miles and 128 million people to South-East Asia Command, which was already hard pressed for men and materials.

However, this was the decision which was made. But why, if the military advantages were not overwhelming, were the British Chiefs so keen to include French territory, stretching Mountbatten's resources to their limit in the process as well as antagonizing a powerful American commander? Were their reasons political? As yet there is no direct evidence that they were, but in the light of known British policy towards Indo-China, it can be said that the Churchill government at least must have been well pleased with the decision. Ironically, the Potsdam decision was rubber-stamped not by Churchill but by Attlee.

Mountbatten's role in the British/Vietnam affair was ambiguous and, to him, probably unpleasant. Here was an intelligent and far-sighted British commander, known for his liberal views on colonial emancipation, charged with the responsibility of allowing a repressive European régime to climb back into power over an Asian people. As he says in his report, this period in his command was, 'in many respects more difficult and a more testing time than during the war'.[4] It should be emphasized that his problems were vast. He had one and a half million square miles of territory to police, nearly a million Japanese to disarm and repatriate, and 80,000 Allied P.O.W.s to ship home; he had more than only South Vietnam to concern himself with. Nevertheless, from his own account, the way events unfolded in that country caused him great anxiety and took up much of his time.

There are, however, a few anomalies in his account of the affair. For example, he says that his authority in French Indo-China 'was strictly limited and temporary', which he claims he would have welcomed had he possessed the 'adequate French Forces which had been promised to me at Potsdam'. But, according to the American diplomatic papers of the conference, he was clearly told that he could not expect French forces in strength until the spring of 1946. Elsewhere he refers to the Vietminh government as having been fostered by the Japanese.[5] It is difficult to

believe that he did not know that the Americans had been supplying the Vietminh with arms and instructors for some time.

Mountbatten's relations with General Gracey in the early days of the British occupation of South Vietnam appear to have been strained and he speaks with marked disapproval of some of Gracey's actions. After the general's Proclamation of 21 September, Mountbatten felt that this might be construed as British government policy, and he 'warned Major-General Gracey that he should take care to confine operations of British/Indian troops to the limited tasks which had been set'.[6] In the end, however, he backed Gracey's actions, but only after consultation with the British Chiefs of Staff. Of Gracey's staging of the *coup d'état* of 23 September he clearly disapproved, demanding that negotiations with the Vietminh begin immediately. Reading between the lines of Mountbatten's report (as well as sometimes along them), it becomes evident that his relations with Gracey were none too amicable. According to Adrian Dansette, only the intervention of Leclerc saved Gracey from being disavowed by his chief.

It must have all been very difficult. Mountbatten was too far from the spot to ensure that the situation was being treated with the caution and delicacy it obviously required. There was not much he could do besides putting as much pressure on the French as possible to moderate their policies and hope that General Gracey was acting wisely. At the end of 1945, his position must have been like that of a juggler with three balls too many in the air.

But, ultimately, the policies of the British government, via the Chiefs of Staff and Mountbatten, were interpreted and enacted on the spot by General Gracey. It is with him that the key to the story lies. Certainly his position was not an enviable one, nor his role easy. The situation in Saigon and South Vietnam was turbulent and fraught with difficulty. Gracey and the British force had stepped into what Air Chief Marshal Keith Park later described as a

'divided house',[7] and the divisions were far from clear-cut. On the one hand, an enfeebled French power was anxiously seeking to resume its control of the country, while on the other that control had fallen to the Vietminh, who in turn were being harassed by a variety of other nationalist groups. It was a situation of great political confusion, desperately complicated by intrigue and the threat of violence, over which the Vietminh held tenuous sway. There is no doubting that the general was faced with carrying through a difficult job in very trying circumstances.

Yet, almost immediately, General Gracey got off on the wrong foot. On their arrival in Saigon, the British troops quickly took over control of such vital installations as the airfield, the banks, the power station, the police stations, the jail, and the post and telegraph offices. In a military occupation, these procedures are routine and in such circumstances the general would have been acting properly. But the circumstances were not routine ones. The Vietminh had been gradually managing to gain control of the city, and this quick action removed vital levers of that control from their hands. It could only be seen as a direct move against the nascent nationalist government. It was later admitted that this speedy action 'deprived the Annamites, who were in administrative control of Saigon, of their hold over the capital and forced them into opposition to the Allied Army.'[8]

One important question which has never been resolved is did Gracey refuse to deal with the Vietminh on his arrival in Saigon? Most accounts claim that he did, and Harold Isaac's eyewitness report claims that all Vietnamese demands and requests were channelled through Field-Marshal Terauchi's H.Q., the Vietminh day after day writing to Gracey to ask for discussion on the possibility of direct negotiations. Certainly Gracey's own public (and now famous) remark that 'I was welcomed on arrival by the Vietminh ... and I promptly kicked them out',[9] lends credence to these accounts. Against them, Jean

Michele Hertrich, a French eyewitness who was sympathetic to the Vietminh, claimed that Gracey had '*quelques entretiens courtois avec les chefs du Vietminh*'. There is therefore conflicting evidence, with the truth probably lying somewhere in between. Considering the exaggerated reports of the riot of 2 September (in which three people were killed), Gracey was probably highly suspicious of the Vietminh and their ability to maintain law and order and vital services in Saigon. There was certainly some justification for his anxiety. But there is also evidence of strong pro-French feelings on Gracey's part. In their later war with the Vietminh, he stated that they were doing 'a magnificent job of work' and that 'we must give them all the assistance we can'. He was (or possibly later became) markedly anti-Communist:

'Unless we do everything in our power with all the determination we possibly can, the only hope for the independence of Indo-China is under Ho Chi Minh.'[10] Also, as further evidence of the regard in which he was held by the French, he was invited back to Vietnam in 1951 to advise them on how to organize a westernized Vietnamese army to fight the Vietminh.

One of Gracey's first moves in Saigon was to suppress the Vietnamese newspapers, on the grounds that they were stirring up trouble. Was this wise? In so far as it was an overtly political act, certainly not. The Vietminh begged him to restore their communications with the people, if only so that they could explain British policies. They also protested, and quite rightly, that the action had 'stifled their political aspirations'.[11] With their voice removed, the nationalists had no option except to register their protests in a more direct way. Hence the wave of strikes, boycotts and market closures which swept through Saigon after the suppression of the press.

Did Gracey do right in issuing Proclamation No. 1 on 21 September (although it is dated 19 September)? It was, after all, a virtual declaration of martial law. Certainly

Mountbatten thought it unwise, at least at the outset. In his opinion Gracey had exceeded his orders by addressing the proclamation to the country as a whole, and not just to the 'key' areas. But its effect on the Vietnamese was more important than its effect on Mountbatten. The proclamation simply added to their growing suspicions of British intentions.

But if the proclamation was a mistake, the *coup d'état* of 23 September was a tragedy. While initial tactics and the proclamation could be justified in terms of maintaining law and order in Saigon, General Gracey's decision to rearm the French and allow them to stage the *coup* is baffling. Was he under pressure from the French to carry through this move? Certainly it seems likely. Yet how did he miscalculate the morale of the French which led to the brutality during and following the *coup?* Was he misled by Cédille? Did he not realize the implications and the likely consequences of what he was doing? Did he really believe that the Vietnamese would just sit back and allow him and Cédille to take over completely? One can only assume that Gracey failed to realize the depth and feeling of the nationalist movement. Otherwise why did he stage the *coup* when he did not have the forces on hand to handle the consequences? On 23 September he did not even possess one brigade that was up to strength. He had no way of controlling Saigon with his small forces, and as a consequence hundreds of French civilians were massacred at Cité Herodia. (It is worth re-emphasizing that in Hanoi, where there was no violent overthrow of the Vietminh, French civilians continued to go about unscathed.)

Of all the events of the British occupation, the 23 September *coup d'état* was the most contentious and the most overtly political. In allowing it to happen, and in arming the French to perpetrate it, the general took sides. By so doing he jeopardized the safety of his own small forces and of the French civilian population, and precluded the possibility of a negotiated French re-entry. By the *coup*, Gracey

overthrew a genuine popular revolution, and in the war of repression which followed incurred the deaths of thousands of Vietnamese, French, Indian, Japanese and British. Until that point there had always been options open to the Vietminh. From then on there were none. After the *coup* French rule could only be restored by the use of force. There was no alternative.

Some disturbing questions are raised by the war which followed the *coup d'état*. It was a dfficult, frustrating, and demanding campaign, and the British commanders were clearly uncertain how to wage it. On the one hand, they were restricted by orders which put theoretical limitations on their actions, but on the other they were being attacked by a fanatical and tricky enemy. In the pursuit of this enemy, did the British/Indian troops ever proceed with unnecessary violence and ruthlessness? From some of their own accounts it seems that they sometimes did.

To the seasoned troops of the 20th Indian Division, used to fighting a regular uniformed enemy, it must have been an infuriating campaign. Operating in the densely populated area around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta, they were harassed at every turn by an antagonist who could at will melt back into the population to become an apparently innocent villager. They never knew which Vietnamese peasant was concealing a grenade or a machine pistol. They were constantly under sudden attack, were sniped at and bombed, and saw their comrades murdered with often appalling brutality. In the face of this unpleasant little war they operated with skill, but with a lethal directness.

The two operational orders mentioned earlier (pages 77-8 and 83-4) stand out as indicative of the way in which the war was raged. Both are disturbing in their implications. They were issued to 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, operating to the north of Saigon (the worst area) under the command of Brigadier Rodham. The first is Operation Instruction No. 220, dated 27 October, 1945, which states that, 'We may find it difficult to distinguish friend

from foe ... always use the maximum force available to ensure wiping out any hostiles we may meet. If one uses too much no harm is done'.[12] Thus, while admitting that it was often impossible to tell combatants from civilians, the British units are exhorted to use 'maximum force', which means that in this thickly peopled territory any hostile act could have brought down fire from mortars, 25-pounders and the guns of the 16th Light Cavalry's armoured cars. With such firepower, in these conditions, how could civilians (who were 'difficult to distinguish') have avoided high casualties? Similarly, the second order, Instruction No. 63, dated 31 December 1945, states quite categorically that it was 'perfectly legitimate to look upon all locals anywhere near where a shot has been fired as enemies – and treacherous ones at that – and treat them accordingly . . . '.[13] Therefore, if a lone Vietminh partisan chose to take a pot shot from a village, the entire population was likely to incur the 'perfectly legitimate' wrath of the British. With instructions such as these being issued to well-equipped troops, it is not difficult to see how it was that Vietnamese casualties were so high. The obvious and unanswerable question is how many of these casualties were defenceless and harmless civilians?

It seems peculiar, not to say distasteful, that the Japanese, against whom the Vietminh had fought, were used so extensively by the British during the course of the campaign. General MacArthur's condemnation of their use as 'the most ignoble kind of betrayal' was, in fact, echoed in Parliament by British Labour M.P.s. But having precipitated a determined and large-scale insurrection, General Gracey had no choice but to make use of Field-Marshal Terauchi's army. Yet how it must have discredited the British command in the eyes of the Vietnamese! Here were the ruthless 'fascists' of the Imperial Nipponese Army, against whom the British had railed so long, being used to suppress the political freedoms supposedly so cherished by the western powers. It must have seemed a final vindication

of the warnings about British intentions issued by the extremists. Apparently the British would stop at nothing to reconstruct the European empires in Asia.

In a well-argued but inaccurate and unconvincing defence of General Gracey, Dennis Duncanson, who was a member of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, wrote that General Gracey's only objects were to 'ensure public order temporarily against the consequences of war until the surrendering enemy forces were out of the way and the power recognized by the Allies as sovereign, namely France, was in a position to resume its administrative responsibilities'.[14] In these terms British policy, as enacted by General Gracey in Vietnam in 1945-6, can be made to appear eminently reasonable and responsible. At such bland levels of thinking, the later American policies in Vietnam can be made to appear just as reasonable and responsible. But framing these events in this way necessarily precludes the bloody minutiae of the affair, the cause and effect of violence and counter-violence, terrorism and counter-terrorism, which were the reality of the situation in South Vietnam in late 1945. In the end, it is the people killed by British shellfire and British bullets, the villages destroyed by British mortars, which lodge in the minds of those who had to suffer the occupation. In the end, these are the facts of the affair remembered by the people of Vietnam.

Despite all the arguments of International Law and the niceties of Imperial possession, in a final analysis the British force in Vietnam was used to overthrow a genuine and respected popular revolution and to suppress the risings which followed. Without the British intervention, it is most unlikely that the French could ever have returned to Vietnam after the war, at least on their old Imperial terms. And if the French had been forced to assume a moderate position in 1945, would the world have seen the protracted Franco-Vietminh war of 1946-54 and the American-Vietnamese war of today? That is one of the biggest 'ifs' in modern history.

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Following the collapse of the Japanese in South-east Asia in 1945, British troops occupied south Vietnam. Their mission: to disarm the Japanese forces there, arrange for their repatriation—and establish order in a country ravaged first by ruthless French colonialism and then by a brutal, confused war between the Japanese and their French Vichy allies on one side and guerrilla resistance fighters and opportunist gangsters on the other. Far from restoring order, the British embarked on a violent suppression of the Vietnamese liberation movement (allies in the war against the Japanese until a couple of months previously.) How they did it—thus setting the scene for decades of bloodshed in a country that has become the flashpoint of the world's tensions—is revealed in detail in this startling book. The carefully authenticated story it has to tell of political cynicism and military brutality is one that successive governments have kept very quiet about. The revelations in The British in Vietnam should shatter this conspiracy of silence.

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