

Paper 2



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History for the IB Diploma Programme



Conflict (from 750 CE onwards)

 Pearson

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The Vietnam War—
(1954–75)

Key concepts:
Cause and consequence
Significance
Perspectives
Continuity and change

This chapter contains detailed descriptions of violence and war atrocities. Please proceed with caution and take breaks if needed.

The Vietnam War was part of a 30-year conflict in South-East Asia. The Vietnam War itself lasted from 1954 until 1975, but the immediate cause of it was a conflict that had started nearly ten years previously. Some historians view the Vietnam War as part of a long **nationalist** struggle for liberation by the Vietnamese people. Others see it as an **ideological** struggle between communism and Western democracy. They see it as part of the **Cold War**, the global struggle for dominance that developed after the Second World War between the communist Eastern bloc and the West.

You will find a PDF of the timeline below in your eBook resources.



Timeline

1887	Vietnam becomes part of French colony of Indochina (See map of Indochina on page 202)
1930	Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) formed
1939	Start of the Second World War
1940	France occupied by Nazi Germany
1941	Japan occupies French Indochina The League for Independence of Vietnam, known as Viet Minh, formed as a nationalist group to oppose Japanese occupation
1945	Defeat of Japan and withdrawal from Indochina Hô Chí Minh declares independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam
1946	France decides to re-impose colonial control over Indochina War breaks out between the Viet Minh and the French government US sends financial aid to French
1954	France defeated at Battle of Điện Biên Phủ France decides to withdraw from Indochina
1954	Geneva Accords divide Vietnam into a communist North Vietnam and a pro-Western South Vietnam US sends aid to South Vietnam government led by Ngô Đình Diệm
1957	Formation of the Viet Cong, a military group to oppose Diệm's government
1960	Formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF), the political wing of the Viet Cong
1961	John F Kennedy becomes president and steps up aid to South Vietnamese government
1964	Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
1965	Lyndon Johnson sends first US combat troops to Vietnam
1968	Tet Offensive My Lai Massacre
	Start of Paris Peace Talks

1969	Richard Nixon's 'Peace with Honor' and Vietnamization policy introduced Start of withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam
1970	Secret talks between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese
1973	Ceasefire Agreement signed Withdrawal of US troops
1975	North Vietnam defeats South Vietnam and reunites the two countries

Inquiry question: Why did conflict emerge?



Conceptual focus: Cause and consequence

The *causes* of the conflict in Vietnam were a combination of long-term (the French colonization of South-East Asia), short-term (the war between the French government and Vietnamese nationalists for control of Vietnam), and immediate (the division of Vietnam into two states, one communist and one pro-Western). The *consequence* was a long and drawn-out war between the north and the south of Vietnam in which the United States became increasingly involved.



Figure 5.1 US troops being dropped into Vietnam by air in the 1960s.

To understand what caused the conflict known as the Vietnam War, we have to understand both the local and the global **contexts** and how they affected events in Vietnam:

- Locally, the conflict emerged from an anti-colonial struggle between the Vietnamese and the French, as France tried to re-impose colonial control over the area.
- A global factor was the Second World War (1939–45) during which the occupation of Vietnam by Japan led to the growth of a nationalist movement which was determined to liberate Vietnam from all foreign occupation and control.
- Another global factor was the start of the Cold War and the struggle for ideological, political, and economic dominance between the capitalist West and the communist Eastern bloc. The victory of the communists in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, as well as the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–53)—which started after communist North Korea invaded non-communist South Korea—strengthened US determination to prevent the further expansion of communism in Asia.

Activity 1

ATL Thinking skills, Research skills

In pairs discuss why it is important to understand the broader context in which historical events happen. Do some research to investigate how French colonialism, the Second World War, and the Cold War all contributed to the causes of the Vietnam War (1954–75). Then create a spider diagram to illustrate this.

We also need to differentiate between what can be considered long-term, short-term, and immediate causes of the conflict. These are often interrelated:

- A long-term cause was the legacy of French colonisation of parts of South-East Asia, (including Vietnam) which the French called **French Indochina**.
- A short-term cause was the war between the French and the Vietnamese, when France tried to re-impose colonial rule after the Second World War.
- An immediate cause was the decision made in 1954 to divide Vietnam into two states—with a communist government in the north, and a pro-Western one in the south.

Line of inquiry: Economic factors

European colonization in Asia

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, European countries such as Britain, France, and Germany colonized Asian and African countries. The European countries gained great wealth and became colonial powers by the exploitation and control of Asian and African peoples, as well as their land, resources, and trade. European powers justified this to themselves through a perceived racial and religious superiority. Asian countries were rich in raw materials as well as products such as silks, spices, and timber, which were prized in Europe. During this period of European colonization, France gained control over a large area they called French Indochina in South-East Asia (now Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam).

The French in Indochina

French Jesuit (a Roman Catholic religious order) missionaries had been active in South-East Asia since the early 17th century. They set up mission stations to further their quest to convert the Vietnamese to Christianity. At the same time, French traders became active in the area. It was an important source of rubber and was close to lucrative markets in China.

During the 19th century, tensions between missionaries and the Vietnamese government led to more active French intervention. On the pretext of protesting against the persecution, expulsion, and even execution of some missionaries, France sent a naval and military force to the area in 1858 and occupied the coastal city of Đà Nẵng. Despite local resistance, the Vietnamese emperor sought a settlement to bring peace to the area. The resulting treaty in effect gave control of the three southern provinces of Vietnam to the French. This was the heart of the rice-growing area of Vietnam. The French called the area **Cochinchina**. Although the Vietnamese emperor remained the nominal ruler over the northern provinces at this stage, he was forced to make various concessions to the French. In this way the French extended their control northwards. This brought France into conflict with China, which had valuable trade links there and also wanted political control. The resulting brief Sino-French War of 1884–85 ended with a French victory and the removal of Chinese competition for trade in the north. After this, France declared that Vietnam would be part of a French colony called Indochina. The new French administration set up the framework for the economic **exploitation** of Indochina.

Under French rule, Vietnam became a major rice-exporting area. French companies and settlers (or '**colons**') owned the large estates and made huge profits from rice exports. The amount of land planted with rice quadrupled in 20 years. This destroyed the traditional subsistence form of agriculture (farmers only grew enough crops to feed their families) which had sustained peasant communities for thousands of years. Small landholders worked instead as laborers for low wages on the plantations. Sometimes force was used to conscript enough laborers. A law called 'corvée' required Vietnamese men of all ages to do 30 days of unpaid labor per year on government buildings or infrastructure.

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The term 'peasant' is used here to refer specifically to small-scale farmers and agricultural laborers in Vietnam, particularly those who worked in rural or less developed areas of the country. Please note that this term can carry negative connotations.



Figure 5.2 French officers with Vietnamese soldiers of the Tonkinese Rifle Regiment in Làng Nác, northern Vietnam, 1885.

The French established vast rubber estates to produce a product which was in high demand after the development of the motor car. Working conditions on these plantations were hard and dangerous and many Vietnamese workers died. The French also built factories and mines to exploit Vietnam's deposits of coal, tin, and zinc. Vietnamese people worked on the estates, in factories, and mines to earn cash to pay the taxes imposed by the French. These included an income tax on wages and a **poll tax** on all adult men. The French also imposed **monopolies** on the sale of salt, alcohol (rice wine), and opium. This placed an additional burden on the peasants.

French officials and colons also benefitted from the growing demand for exports of opium: a drug derived from poppies which were specially cultivated for this purpose.

In general, France derived great economic benefits from its colonization of Vietnam, such as cheap natural resources and markets for French manufactured goods. At the same time, French economic policies placed a substantial burden on the Vietnamese people, changing their traditional systems of land use and land ownership, and forcing them to seek employment on plantations, in factories, and mines in order to pay the taxes which the French imposed. This caused hardship and resentment but there was little organized resistance before the Second World War, partly due to strong French military control and also due to a lack of unity amongst any resistance groups.

Checkpoint

Create two lists, one to show the economic benefits that France derived from Vietnam, and one to list the economic disadvantages to the Vietnamese people. Suggest how the relationship between the economic benefits and the economic disadvantages of colonialism in Vietnam could have become a cause of conflict later on.

Figure 5.3 The colony of French Indochina.



Line of inquiry: Political factors

French colonization

When France took over Vietnam in 1887, it combined the regions of Tonkin (northern Vietnam) and Annan (central Vietnam) with Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) into the colony of French Indochina. Cambodia and Laos were added later.

France appointed governors, assisted by French officials, to replace local officials and administer the areas. These officials had a great deal of power which sometimes encouraged self-interest and corruption. Vietnamese people were forced to pay high taxes to support the French administration. Policies were based on a strategy of 'divide and rule,' creating competition or conflict between different regions, communities, and religious groups to the advantage of the French. The traditional Nguyen emperor was retained as a figurehead, but he had little political power.

SKILLS

Making connections

In pairs, discuss what 'divide and rule' means. Do some research to find out how France applied this policy in its administration of Vietnam. Discuss why a policy of 'divide and rule' was an effective tactic to use during the process of colonization. Can you think of any modern context where leaders or governments have used this tactic?

Under French rule, Vietnam was tightly controlled, and any signs of opposition were crushed. There was little effective resistance to French rule before the Second World War, although there were growing anti-French sentiments.

The Japanese occupation

The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in 1939 seemed to offer an opportunity to change the status of Asian colonies while France and other parts of Europe were occupied by Nazi Germany. Indochina and other Asian colonies were occupied by Japan, Nazi Germany's ally. Although initially the Japanese were welcomed as potential liberators from European colonial rule, this soon changed under the reality of the harsh Japanese occupation. Japan used Indochina as a source of raw materials (rice, rubber, and coal) and of forced labor for their war effort. This led to the emergence of a strong anti-Japanese resistance movement, the **Viet Minh** (see Info box). The Viet Minh was determined to throw off any form of foreign rule and hoped to seize power once the Japanese had been defeated. However, after the end of the war, France wanted to reimpose colonial control—partly due to the economic benefits it derived from the colony (especially from rice and rubber exports) but the French also saw it as a means of restoring French prestige as a major power.

The emergence of the Viet Minh gave people hope for independence after the war. It was led by Hô Chí Minh, a Vietnamese nationalist and communist. During the Japanese occupation, the Viet Minh gained support by offering effective resistance against the Japanese. It also gained valuable experience in **guerrilla** tactics which it later used effectively against other opponents.

Hô Chí Minh (1890–1969)

Hô Chí Minh became a communist during his time in Paris, where he campaigned unsuccessfully for Vietnamese independence at the Versailles Peace Conference (1919). He then worked as a **Comintern** agent in Asia before founding the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. During the Second World War, he led the Viet Minh. Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, he declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. When this was not recognized internationally, he led Viet Minh forces first against the French, and then the Americans. He became the symbol of nationalism, continuing to inspire the Vietnamese in their resistance against the US even after his death in 1969. The former capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, is now named Hô Chí Minh City in his honor.

The power vacuum in Vietnam after the withdrawal of Japanese forces allowed the Viet Minh to consolidate power in the north and establish the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The US had initially supported the idea of an independent Vietnam and had even supplied the Viet Minh with arms to fight the Japanese. However, this view changed after the start of the Cold War, and the appointment of Harry Truman to replace Franklin Roosevelt as US president after the latter's death in 1945. Truman had a more hardline attitude toward communism than his predecessor had had.

The Atlantic Charter

Truman's predecessor, Roosevelt, had signed the Atlantic Charter with Churchill in 1941. This declaration of the wartime aims of the Allied leaders promised support for the 'right of self-determination' for all people after the war. This served as an inspiration to colonial subjects around the world, including Indochina, in their struggles for independence from colonial rule. This was part of the reason why Hô Chí Minh and the Viet Minh hoped that the US would recognize the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

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Viet Minh

The Viet Minh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam) was a nationalist organization formed by Hô Chí Minh in 1941. It was led mainly by communists but operated as a national front organization. Members included people of different political beliefs, united in their determination to resist the Japanese occupation. It was the only organization which provided an effective opposition to the Japanese. As a result, it received the backing of the Allied powers, including arms and equipment from the US. The guerrilla tactics which the Viet Minh used against the Japanese were later used effectively against both the French and the Americans.



Figure 5.4 Hô Chí Minh

General Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013)

Võ Nguyên Giáp was a law graduate of Hanoi University and became a professor of History. He joined the ICP and became the military leader of the Viet Minh after it was formed in 1941. He successfully led the Viet Minh forces against the Japanese. The success of the Viet Minh forces was partly attributed to Giáp's leadership and tactics, especially at the decisive victory in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, which led to the French decision to withdraw from Indochina.

His leadership also contributed later to the North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam and the United States. After the reunification of the two Vietnams in 1975, Giáp served as Minister of Defense.

In 1946, determined to reassert its former dominance, France sent troops to re-establish French control over Indochina, setting the scene for a long and costly colonial war. Although the reasons for this decision were partly economic, it was also linked to the French government's perception that it needed to demonstrate its status as a major European power, after its defeat and occupation by Nazi Germany.

The war between the French and the Viet Minh (1946–54)

The war that started in 1946 was a conflict between the French and the Viet Minh for the control of Vietnam. Some historians refer to it as the First Indochina War. France had control of the key positions, such as the major towns and communications infrastructure. It also had superiority in numbers, with 100,000 French troops and 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers fighting on the side of the French. These vastly outnumbered the 117,000 guerrilla fighters recruited by General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the military leader of the Viet Minh. But the Viet Minh had the support of large numbers of the local population in the countryside, especially in the north. The Viet Minh used the same kind of guerrilla tactics which they had used effectively against the Japanese.

The Viet Minh had high levels of morale, commitment, and discipline. They won over the hearts and minds of the peasants by treating them with respect, and by promoting land redistribution and healthcare programs. They also received support from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, also known as the Soviet Union) and China, especially after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949 and established the People's Republic of China.

The US gave financial support to the French. At this stage the US military did not become actively involved in Vietnam. Although the motivation for US support was mainly political, to prevent a perceived communist victory at the start of the Cold War, there may also have been an economic element. Vietnam had been a valuable source of raw materials to France, and it could be a valuable trading partner to the capitalist West.

US policy in Vietnam was based on the '**domino theory**'—the belief that if one country in Asia became communist, the rest would follow like a row of falling dominoes. This term was first used by US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1954. China had already become communist, as had North Korea. The US was determined to prevent any more countries 'falling' to a communist takeover. The US viewed Vietnamese communism as a direct threat to its own interests in Asia. This was linked to the US policy of 'containment' in Europe, where the US was determined to prevent the further spread of communism into Western Europe.

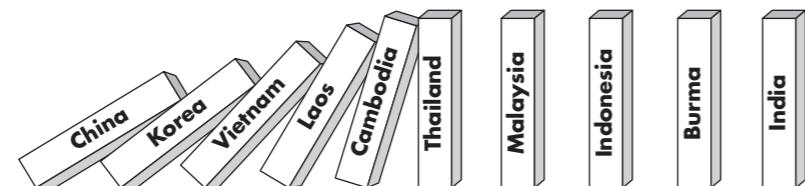


Figure 5.5 US policy was based on the 'domino theory': the fear that if Vietnam became communist, other countries in Asia would become communist too, like a row of falling dominoes.

The battle at Điện Biên Phủ

Despite the advantages of manpower and weapons that it held, the French were defeated in battle at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. The French had occupied a jungle position close to the border of Laos which they saw as invincible. It was in an isolated position, surrounded by high mountains and dense forests. The French believed it would be impossible for the Viet Minh to bring in sufficient supplies of heavy weapons to launch an effective attack on their position. From there they planned to launch attacks on the Viet Minh forces and to try to halt the supply of weapons which the Viet Minh received from China. However, the Viet Minh military leader, General Giáp, outwitted the French and took the French by surprise. The Viet Minh managed to bring vast supplies of heavy military equipment in secret through the jungle to surround the French position at Điện Biên Phủ. In addition, thousands of peasants delivered food, supplies, and ammunition to the Viet Minh forces on bicycles through the jungle. The French garrison was eventually forced to surrender after a 167-day siege. After this defeat, France decided to withdraw from Indochina.

Checkpoint

In pairs, make a list of the advantages which the Viet Minh had over the French in their war to control Vietnam.

Line of inquiry: Social factors

As well as economic domination, French culture was enforced in multiple ways on Vietnamese people. This included the insistence on the use of the French language in the administration and education system. The French language pre-dominated and those who could speak it had significant advantages. Business and government were conducted in French. Architecture too reflected French styles, and parts of the center of cities like Saigon looked more like European cities than South-East Asian ones. In some cases, the place names of towns, suburbs, or streets were changed to French.



Figure 5.6 The Hanoi Opera House, built between 1901 and 1911 by the French colonial government. The architecture is modeled on a Parisian opera house.

TOK

To the French the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ was a 'humiliating defeat'. To the Viet Minh it was a 'decisive victory'. Both of these phrases reflect a certain bias or perspective. How could a historian describe the outcome of the battle in neutral terms?

The colonial powers used language as a means of control in their colonies. They insisted on the use of European languages—in this case French—in the administration and education system. Those Vietnamese who mastered French (like Hồ Chí Minh) were at an advantage. However, the use of French for all official business put the vast majority of the Vietnamese population at a distinct disadvantage.

How does this information illustrate the notion that '*Language is power . . . the instrument of domination and liberation*' (a quotation from the English writer Angela Carter)?

TOK

The French presence created divisions in Vietnamese society in other ways too. There were never enough French troops or administrators to control or run the colony. Therefore, the French relied on Vietnamese people to fill the gaps, working as soldiers, officials, and bureaucrats. They often had positions of authority in businesses, banks, or local government. It was obviously those Vietnamese who spoke French who had the advantage to gain these positions.

Collaborators with the French were usually motivated either by self-interest or because they supported the French. An example was the emperor Bảo Đại who had been educated in Paris and held distinctly pro-French views. However, many other Vietnamese regarded such people as traitors.

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Bảo Đại (1913–97)

Bảo Đại was the son of the previous Vietnamese emperor. He was educated in France and became the last reigning emperor of Vietnam in 1926. Under the Japanese occupation, he was an essentially powerless figurehead and fled to Hong Kong when the Viet Minh took over in the North in 1945. He returned to South Vietnam at the invitation of the French in 1949 and was reinstated as emperor and made head of government. However, he did little to play an active part in the ineffective government, leaving the administration to pro-French Vietnamese appointees. When the Vietnamese people decided in a 1955 referendum that Vietnam should become a republic instead of a monarchy, Bảo Đại left Vietnam and spent the rest of his life in France.

Another source of division under colonial rule was religion. The main religion in Vietnam was Buddhism and 90 per cent of the population were Buddhists. However, French missionaries had been working to spread the Christian religion for several centuries (see page 200) and by the early 20th century there were about 400 French missionaries still actively working in Vietnam. Despite their efforts, it is estimated that only about 10 per cent of the population was Christian.

Some argue that the French colonists did provide some benefits. Missionaries and officials opened primary schools and taught lessons in both the French and Vietnamese languages. The French also established the University of Hanoi which became an important center of learning. But these schools were mainly in urban areas. Importantly, they also reinforced French ideas about culture, values, and learning.

Activity 2



Do some research to find two quotations from historians who consider that colonialism had some positive social effects, and two quotations from historians who believe that the effects were mainly negative.

Line of inquiry: Environmental factors

Historians have written a great deal about the environmental impact of the Vietnam War (which you will learn more about in this chapter) but not much has been written about any environmental causes of the conflict.

Vietnam's strategic location close to China—for trade and lucrative markets—attracted French interest in controlling the area. The French were also interested in Vietnam as a source of valuable rubber. Its tropical monsoon climate was also ideal for rice production. So environmental factors certainly influenced the French decision to colonize it in the first place. French colonization in turn was key to the conflict.