

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF 20TH-CENTURY WARS

COURSE COMPANION

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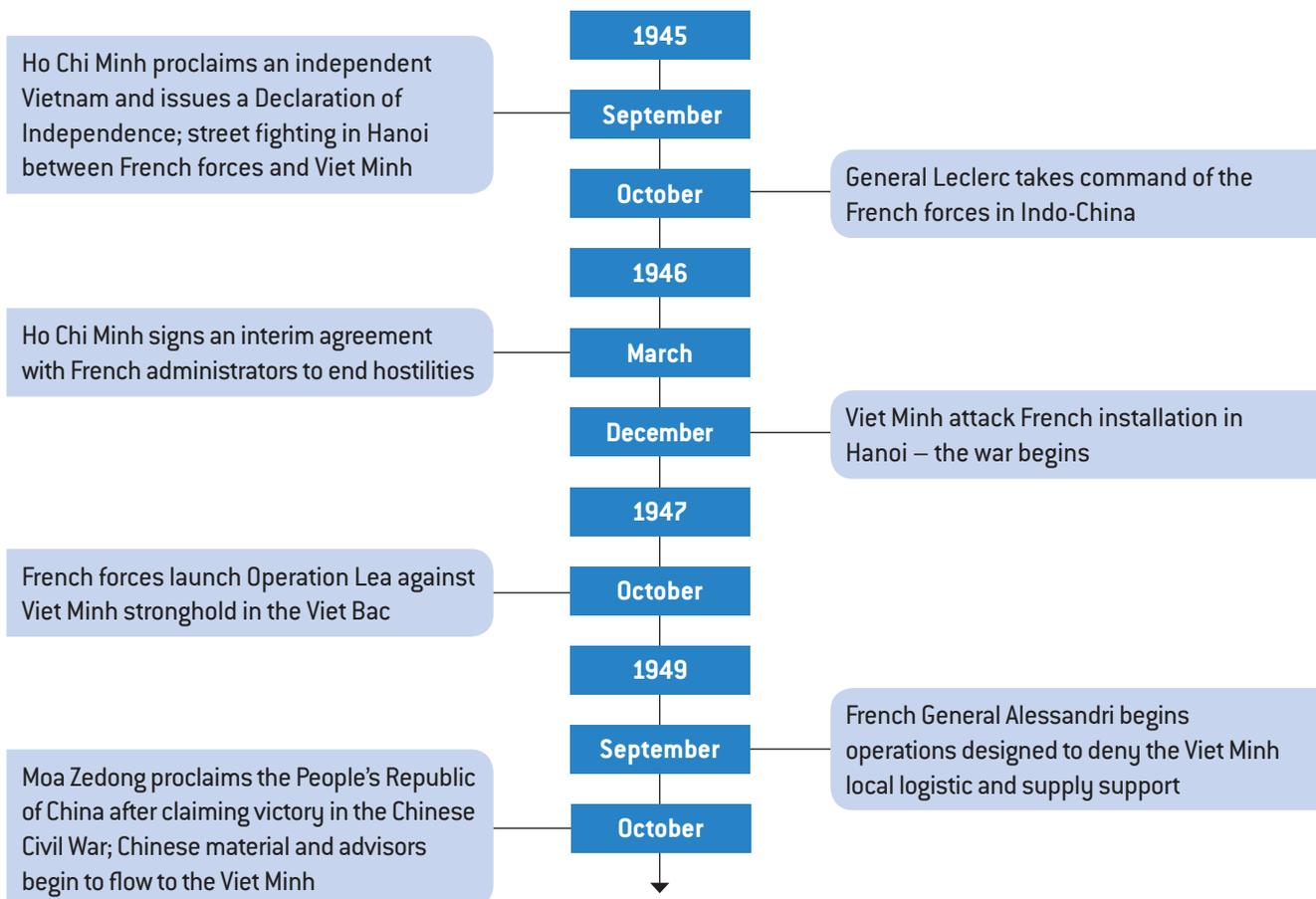
3 THE VIETNAM WAR: REVOLUTIONARY WAR IN INDO-CHINA

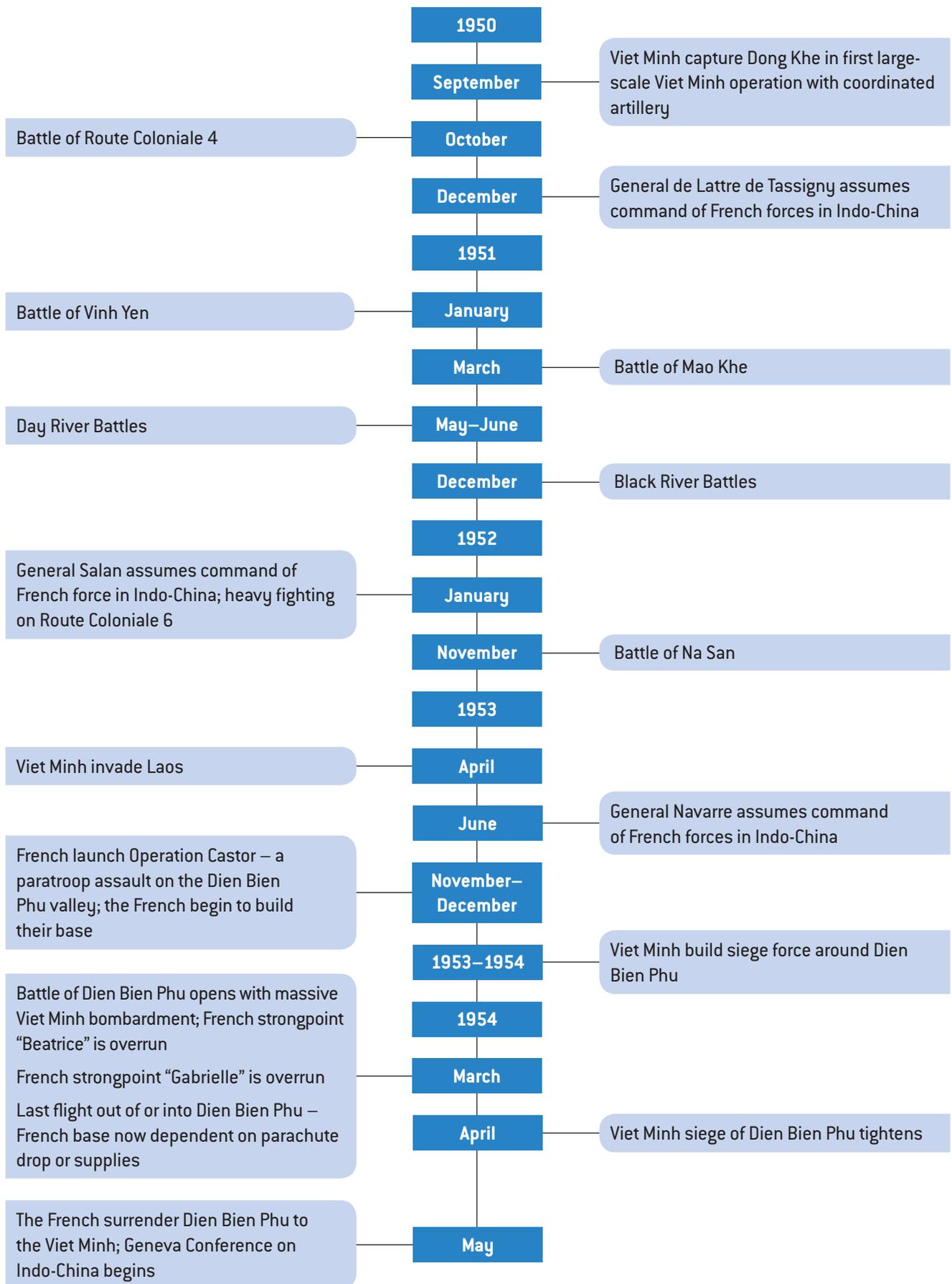
Global context

As with the end of the First World War, the end of the Second World War threw the international order into flux. The collapse of the Japanese Empire with its army still in the field made a complex situation even more uncertain. The spectre of an ideological-based world order grew more likely each month in the post-war period. France's place in this new world order was unclear and the status of its former colonies even more so.

The United States, a French ally, was still moderately anti-colonialist, but was struggling with the implications of combining new global forces such as ideology with more traditional global paradigms such as nationalism and imperialism. The instability of the post-war years provided great opportunities for nationalist movements around the world that sought to capitalize on the vulnerable condition of the old imperial powers.

Timeline





3.1 Causes of the Vietnam War

Conceptual understanding

Key questions

- How did Ho Chi Minh combine nationalism and communism in the Viet Minh movement?
- How did the end of the Second World War in the Pacific affect the beginning of the war?

Key concepts

- Cause
- Consequence
- Continuity



▲ Map of Vietnam, July 1954

Long-term causes

France asserted imperial control over Vietnam over a 30-year period. By 1885 what is now Vietnam had come under centralized French control. Throughout this period and after, various Vietnamese nationalist groups staged armed resistance to French control. The French authorities introduced a programme of westernization. The emphasis on western education and the Roman Catholic Church provided an affront to traditional Vietnamese culture, further aggravating Vietnamese nationalists. An overly complex bureaucracy designed to further this assimilation made for inefficient rule. Meanwhile Vietnamese resources were used to enrich metropolitan France at the expense of the colony. Although there were a number of significant uprisings against French rule in the 19th century, they failed for lack of widespread organization. In this sense Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh can be seen as a continuation of this nationalist tradition.

Short-term causes

The first act of the 30-year conflict in what is now Vietnam developed amid a dynamic and confusing international situation emerging from the end of the Second World War. The complex relationship between the victorious superpowers was deteriorating, adding the amorphous element of ideology to traditional power politics in a way unseen before. Defeated empires were adrift in administrative chaos. The pre-war colonizers were trying to reassert colonial authority while nationalist movements were trying to use the flux to establish independent states. In South-East Asia the confusion was compounded by the fact that the Japanese had not been defeated in the field, but rather as a result of the cataclysmic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This strange situation left hundreds of thousands of armed Japanese troops still in charge of vast amounts of territory throughout Asia and the Pacific with no real plan for the transfer of power, let alone an idea of to whom that power would be transferred.

Into this gap stepped Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Viet Minh, a Vietnamese nationalist party with communist leadership. From 1941 he had led a small guerrilla force against the Vichy French (who administered the colony for the Japanese) and against the Japanese directly, for which they received American support. As the Japanese withdrew and before the French could send troops, Ho and the Viet Minh entered Hanoi and proclaimed independence on 2 September 1945, issuing a Declaration of Independence deliberately modelled on the American document of 1776.

In the months that followed, Ho juggled the competing interests of his own Viet Minh Party, those of the Chinese Nationalist troops occupying the north of the country and the French occupying the south. Choosing between what he believed the lesser of two evils, Ho agreed to the re-occupation of the north by French troops in exchange for recognition of an independent Vietnam “within the French Union”. The French government never ratified the agreement and further negotiations yielded no results. As Ho’s frustration rose so did levels of violence between French and Viet Minh troops in and around Haiphong and Hanoi. Open warfare erupted in December with the Viet Minh retreating to their Viet Bac stronghold from which they would conduct the rest of the nine-year struggle against the French.

Class discussion

To what extent was a war between the French and the Vietnamese inevitable given the goals of each side?



Source skills

The Viet Minh

Source A

Ho Chi Minh

Vietnamese *Declaration of Independence*,
2 September 1945

“All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Liberty, Life and the pursuit of Happiness.” This immortal statement appeared in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, it means: all the peoples on the earth are equal from birth; all the peoples have a right to live and to be happy and free.

Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice. Politically: they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty...

The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated. Our people have broken the chains, which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland. Our people at the same time have overthrown the monarchic regime that has reigned supreme for dozens of centuries. In its place has been established the present Democratic Republic...

“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.”

Source B

Ho Chi Minh to US Intelligence Officer Charles Fenn, 1945. From Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*.

“First, you must understand that to gain independence from a great power like France is a formidable task that cannot be achieved without some outside help, not necessarily in things like arms, but in the nature of advice and contracts. One doesn't in fact gain independence by throwing bombs and such. One must gain it through organization, propaganda, training and discipline. One also needs a set of beliefs, a gospel, a practical analysis; you might even say a bible. Marxism-Leninism gave me that framework.”

Source C

Viet Minh directives to its soldiers (1948)

- 1** *Not to do what is likely to damage the land and crops or spoil the houses and belongings of the people.*
- 2** *Not to insist on buying or borrowing what the people are not willing to sell or lend.*
- 3** *Never to break our word.*
- 4** *Not to do or speak what is likely to make people believe that we hold them in contempt.*

- 5 *To help them in their daily work (harvesting, fetching firewood, carrying water, sewing, etc.).*
- 6 *In spare time, to tell amusing, simple, and short stories useful to the Resistance, but not to betray secrets.*
- 7 *Whenever possible to buy commodities for those who live far from the market.*
- 8 *To teach the population the national script and elementary hygiene.*

Source D

Ho Chi Minh, July 1952

Ho's Selected Writings

"Army cadres concern themselves solely with military affairs, Government cadres with administrative jobs, Party cadres with Party business. They are like men standing on one leg. It is wrong for a cadre to be acquainted only with one field. He will not be truly proficient because army, mass, government and party work forms a whole which would not be strong and complete should one of its components come to miss."

Questions

- 1
 - a To what extent is Ho's contention "Our people have broken the chains, which for nearly a century have fettered them and have won independence for the Fatherland" [Source A] accurate?
 - b What message is being conveyed by Source D?
- 2 With reference to its origin, purpose and content, analyse the values and limitations of Source C for historians studying the methods of the Viet Minh.
- 3 Compare and contrast what Source A and Source D tell us about Ho's strategy for independence.
- 4 Using the sources and your own knowledge evaluate the role of ideology in Ho's guerrilla strategy.

In this sense then, the French Indo-China War was among the first of the wars of decolonization that would sweep the world in the post-war era. It would also be among the first, along with the ongoing Chinese Civil War, that would add the Cold War notion of ideology to the mix of motives. In the end though, ideology played a secondary role in the motives of the two main combatants. Ho and the Viet Minh wanted a Vietnam free of foreign control and in the years 1945–1954 this meant ousting the French. For their part the French wanted to reassert their imperial control over South-East Asia and by extension reclaim their pre-war world power status. In a way the French wanted to turn the clock back and the Viet Minh were willing to fight and die in large numbers to prevent that.

3.2 Combatants

Conceptual understanding

Key questions

- How were the French hampered in the early years of the war?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the Viet Minh structure?
- How did political considerations affect both the French and the Viet Minh?
- What role did foreign involvement play for both the French and the Viet Minh?

Key concepts

- Perspective
- Significance

The Viet Minh

To say that any part of this war was strictly a guerrilla war is inaccurate and this is well illustrated in the design of the Viet Minh forces. From the late 1940s, the Viet Minh had the ability to conduct local, small-scale guerrilla operations while at the same time maintaining large-unit organization and combat capability. The Viet Minh forces were structured into three components, organized hierarchically. At the bottom were local, part-time guerrilla forces – the Dan Quong or Popular Forces. The Dan Quong were recruited and based in small villages and hamlets. These units were used as porters and maintained transportation routes while providing intelligence on enemy positions and movements as well as on their neighbours. For instance, when regular force units moved through an area, the local Dan Quong force would be required to supply porters to support the movement of the larger force, always on the lookout for abandoned French material that could be scavenged.

In terms of combat, the Dan Quong conducted small force ambushes, sabotaged transport and set booby traps. While these units were local, they were directed from the Viet Minh central command. Distinguish yourself at this level and you were eligible to serve in the next level of Viet Minh military organization, the full-time guerrilla forces that were organized regionally and were better equipped than the local forces. They operated in battalions of up to 1,000 men later in the war. In the years 1946–1950 these units shouldered much of the Viet Minh's military operations using "traditional" guerrilla hit and run tactics. As the regular force grew in size and sophistication, these regional forces were occasionally used in support of large-scale operations.

The highest level of the Viet Minh forces was the regular force. As in most western armies, the Viet Minh regular or main force was organized into divisions, which contained all the elements needed to conduct large-scale operations – intelligence, artillery, supply and eventually armour and air support. Divisions were sub-divided into regiments and battalions. For the

majority of the war a Viet Minh division would have a strength of around 10 000 men. It is no coincidence that these larger units such as divisions were formed in the period after 1949 when equipment and expertise began pouring south from Mao's recently conquered China.

Commanding these various components was a command structure centred on a commander-in-chief who controlled the whole military organization through a system that grouped several regions into territories – the so-called **interzone system**. This interzone system was more comprehensive than simply another level of military organization and reflected the Viet Minh philosophy of revolutionary warfare. The interzone managed all aspects of the conflict including elections, assassinations, taxation, recruiting, propaganda and supply.

The total strength of the Viet Minh changed over time. In 1947 Giap, the Viet Minh commander, had about 50 000 regular force troops and about 40 000 popular and regional troops at his disposal. By 1951 this strength had swelled to 110 000 regular force and about 225 000 regional and popular forces. As the war reached its crescendo in 1953, Giap commanded 125 000 regulars, 75 000 regional troops and 250 000 popular force troops.

Viet Minh equipment

Just as with the French, the Viet Minh were armed with a motley assortment of small arms including French, Japanese, Czech and American rifles. When the war broke out in 1946 the Viet Minh had around 60 000 rifles and a few thousand light machine guns as well as some mortars, grenades and about six small artillery pieces. They would continue to use whatever weapons they could lay their hands on, such as Chinese cast-offs including US material captured during the Korean War. Each victory over the French brought new weapons into the Viet Minh arsenal. After 1950 each month brought ever-larger shipments of weapons south from China. Early in 1952, 250 tons of munitions and other supplies reached the Viet Minh's main base area, a territory called the Viet Bac, north-east of Hanoi, each month. By the time the two sides faced off at Dien Bien Phu this number had risen to 4,000 tons per month. As the Korean War wound down this monthly shipment contained large quantities of artillery and recoilless rifles, many of which would prove crucial to the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu.

Material wasn't the only assistance the Chinese offered their new clients. After 27 years of nearly constant warfare the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had gained a considerable amount of practical military experience and they seemed more than willing to share it. In 1950 the PLA sent 79 officers south to help the Viet Minh with planning and logistics. Although handfuls of Viet Minh fighters had trained at PLA schools since 1946, this increased dramatically after the PLA's victory in 1949. In the period 1952–1953, 10 000 Viet Minh officers and 40 000 soldiers were trained in China.

The French

The French forces in Indo-China suffered political and structural issues every bit as daunting as those faced by the Viet Minh. Political fractures ran deep in post-war France. Retribution for collaborators,

interzone system

Short for integrated zones, these were administrative zones used by the Viet Minh. Within each zone, a central committee coordinated ideological, political and administrative functions of the Viet Minh. There were six of these zones in Vietnam.

Class discussion

How might the Viet Minh recruit its members?



ideological divisions, economic weakness, and dependence on Marshall Aid made a unified approach to the war in Indo-China impossible. The **Fourth Republic** was plagued by weak coalition governments – 19 in total during the course of this war. The fact that the French Communist Party was a member of some of these governments and a vocal opponent of the war added a level of contradiction and confusion to the situation that made any effective military action close to impossible.

Throughout the war the French forces suffered a chronic shortage of manpower. Yalta had tied a sizable portion of France's post-war army to the French zone of occupation in Germany. Conscripts were legally forbidden from serving in colonial theatres of war. As a result the French Far East Expeditionary Corps was cobbled together from diverse military units from all corners of what was left of the French Empire. Only about 42% of the French forces in this war were born in Metropolitan France. Instead the troops came from France's North African Army and colonial regiments from Africa and Asia. The legendary **French Foreign Legion** provided a reliable professional formation, as did the regular parachute units of the French army. The French attempted to augment these units with locally recruited but French-led auxiliaries – generally local tribesmen who had various reasons for fighting the Viet Minh. These auxiliaries were trained in secret camps by covert western operatives.

Local Vietnamese men could find themselves recruited into French army units or conscripted into the new Vietnamese National Army (VNA), created at the behest of the Americans who wished to see the war "Vietnamized" – presaging Richard Nixon's 1969 policy. The VNA was generally poorly led, poorly equipped and added little to the French war effort. It was the unenviable lot of these soldiers to be caught between the increasingly popular Viet Minh with their system of brutal retaliation for collaborators and the "official" and often equally brutal oppressive force of the French overlords enforcing conscription.

Fourth Republic

The French government from 1946–1958. It was created by a constitution after the Second World War.

French Foreign Legion

This is a formation of the French army founded in 1831, made up of non-French nationals who wish to serve in the French army. Initially the Legion's officers were French, but over time the officer corps contained many nationalities. Likewise many French citizens make up the rank and file of the Legion. The Legion has served in every major French conflict since 1831.

ATL Thinking and research skills

As a condition of continued military and financial aid, the United States insisted that the French turn more and more of the fighting over to the Vietnamese National Army (VNA), a process they called "Vietnamization". President Richard Nixon would use this same goal and name in 1969 as a plan for reducing the United States' military commitment to South Vietnam. The notion of replacing foreign occupying troops with local security forces was to be used in other wars.

Research the events of the following wars and answer the questions that follow.

- Vietnam 1969
- Bay of Pigs 1961
- Yugoslav Civil War 1994

- Iraq 2010
 - Afghanistan 2010
- 1 What foreign forces were involved? What was the level of military commitment at its height?
 - 2 What were the motives of the foreign powers?
 - 3 What were the tasks assigned to the local forces? How were local troops prepared for these tasks?
 - 4 What challenges did the local troops face? What challenges did the foreign troops face?
 - 5 How did the foreign power disengage from the country? How well did the local troops accomplish their security goals?

Class discussion

Why would the Vietnamization of the war be important to the United States government?

At the beginning of the conflict the French forces had a total strength of 115 000. In the last years of the war this had grown to 175 000 (French, Africans, Asian and Foreign Legion). To this could be added 55 000 local auxiliaries and 150 000 VNA troops. Again, it is important to remember that these forces were far from equal in fighting ability. This fact is compounded by the nature of the war, requiring as it did a high degree of mobility, a capability of only a fraction of the French forces.

French equipment

On paper the French had a modern army, but in reality its material situation suffered in much the same way as its personnel situation did. This problem was especially acute in the first years of the war when material was gathered and scavenged from diverse sources. British, American, even German and Japanese equipment found its way into the French war effort. It was not uncommon for French units to be armed with a variety of small arms using non-regulation ammunition. As the United States began to bankroll more and more of the French effort after 1950 – they would eventually spend US\$3 billion keeping the French in the field – weapons and equipment became more plentiful and standardized.

The French had about 275 artillery pieces that remained in place and about 250 pieces of mobile artillery. The mobility of the French forces was limited, however, by a road system that was crude at best. On these unreliable roads the French moved their armoured cars and gun carriers. After 1950 they had a steady supply of armoured personnel carriers and some tanks, the effectiveness of which was severely hampered by the topography of the country. Amphibious units were active in the south and used M29C armed amphibious vehicles (Weasels) made in the United States.

The limitations forced upon French mobility by the terrain of Indo-China could have been partially overcome by what later would be known as air mobility using newly developed helicopters. These, however, were severely limited in number and capability and were reserved for medical evacuations in the years 1949–1954. The only other air mobility option available to the French forces was paratroop drops. Throughout the war the French paratroop units were frequently dropped into dangerous situations to rescue other elements of the army and conduct operations against the Viet Minh. In reality, however, this solved only half the mobility issue. Dropping from planes such as a C47 worked well for inserting troops into a combat situation, but airplanes could not be used to extract these same troops when needed in the way that helicopters can. This hard fact condemned paratroopers to grueling and dangerous marches out of remote areas that further limited their effectiveness. The lesson would be learned before France's next war; helicopters would be used to give the French troops in Algeria mobility unknown to those who fought in Indo-China.



▲ French soldiers improvise a raft for a river crossing in 1950. What was the relationship of primitive to new technology during this war?



One nominal advantage that the French enjoyed over their enemy was air power. This air power, however, was seldom sufficient to the task. Fast Bearcat and Hellcat fighter-bombers could strafe and drop underwing mounted bombs, but without any bombsights the accuracy was dubious. Small Morane aircraft made of metal and wood were used for artillery spotting. There were a number of larger level-flight bombers and these could be very useful, but were often hindered by the bad weather, especially in the spring as the Battle of Dien Bien Phu demonstrated. One of the more terrifying weapons employed by the French air services was napalm – jellied petroleum which ignited everything in its path.

Technology and war: paratroopers

Parachute technology existed from the First World War, but in the absence of aircraft that could carry significant numbers of soldiers, the idea of using it to inject troops to places otherwise inaccessible by ground was debatable. As such aircraft became more plentiful in the inter-war period, military thinkers around the world began to imagine how paratroopers might be used in offensive operations. In the Second World War paratroopers played significant roles in the German invasion of both Belgium and Crete. Allied paratroopers were integral to the invasion of Normandy and Operation Market Garden, the ambitious plan to capture the Rhine Bridges intact.

Paratroop operations had a number of elements that were attractive for military planners.

- An airdrop increased the possibility of surprise, expanding as it did the points of possible attack.
- Transport by aircraft minimized the effect of difficult terrain.
- By landing troops behind the front line, the enemy would be forced to defend in multiple directions.

Paratroop operations also had a number of serious drawbacks.

- The number of aircraft required to transport large numbers of troops often eliminated some of the element of surprise.
- Because paratroopers operated independent of supply lines they would have to jump with all the supplies required to sustain them as a fighting unit. This often limited both the time paratroopers could operate without resupply from the air or a link with ground forces as well as the size of munitions they could use – artillery and armour were often beyond their capability.
- In the brief period between exiting the aircraft and gathering into operational units on the ground, the paratroopers were incredibly vulnerable to enemy fire.
- While paratroopers could be inserted into a combat zone by airplanes, airplanes could not extract them. This was a fact of life brutally evident to French paratroopers operating in Indo-China.

Class discussion

To what extent did the United States support the French war effort with money and material? How and why did this support change over the period 1946–1954?

Technology and war: napalm

Napalm is a jellied form of petroleum used in aerial bombs and flamethrowers. Its name derives from its two principle components: naphthenic and palmitic acids. Developed in 1942, napalm was used in the Second World War and became a standard, if terrifying, element of all modern military arsenals. In Vietnam it was generally used in close support of ground troops. When dropped from aircraft it produces a terrifying and deadly spectacle, incinerating large areas of jungle and any people unfortunate enough to be there. Far from a precision weapon and fairly unpredictable once unleashed, napalm was the cause of many civilian casualties during all phases of the Vietnam War.

... All of a sudden hell opens in front of my eyes. Hell comes from large egg-shaped containers, dropping from the first plane followed by others, eggs from the second and third plane. Immense sheets of flame extending to over one hundred metres, it seems, strike terror in the ranks of my soldiers. This is napalm, the fire that falls from the skies. . . [A] bomb falls behind us and I feel fiery breath touching my whole body. The men are now fleeing and I cannot hold them back. There is no way of holding out under the torrent of fire, which flows in all directions and burns everything in its passage. On all sides flame surrounds us . . . I stop at the platoon commander . . . his eyes are wide with terror. 'What is this? The atomic bomb?' 'No this is napalm.'

Viet Minh Officer

Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indo-China* (Harrisburg, 1961), 39–40 cited in Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places: Global Insurrection and the Making of the Modern World*, (New York, Viking, 2013) 224.