END OF WORLD WAR TWO IN INDOCHINA

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THE END OF THE WAR IN ASIA

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The country we now know as Vietnam, which has one of the saddest histories of the twentieth century, was a French possession at the time of the Japanese surrender. It consisted of five territories: the colony of Cochin-China in the south, which had been ceded to France in 1862, the chief city of which was Saigon; and four protectorates: Annam, which held the old capital Hue; Cambodia, which had been a powerful kingdom in the Middle Ages; Laos, a mountainous country bordering Siam; and Tonkin in the north-east, bordering China. The population was around twenty-three million. The country produced rubber, maize, anthracite, zinc, and tin, but its main export was rice: before war broke out its annual product for export was 1,500,000 tons. Like the Siamese, the people were Buddhist, though there was a strong Catholic population. The old administrative structure of the country was based on a Chinese pattern with an Emperor ruling through a mandarinate selected by examination. Under French rule, there was a governor-general, who had under him three advisory councils on economics, defence, and general affairs. The state was administered by both French and local officials. Cochin-China was administered directly by the French, under a governor. The protectorates of Laos, Cambodia, and Annam had a system of indirect rule, as had Tonkin, but the French had so diminished the role of the native government that its protectorate status had virtually disappeared. Nationalist movements had grown up in the twenties and thirties and been savagely suppressed. The Annamites had a long cultural tradition of their own, with a very full
literature and a history of fighting for independence, particularly against China, their great neighbour to the north.

The defeat of France in 1940 weakened her authority in her overseas possessions, and Japan decided to move in. There was no question of obtaining help from Britain or the United States and so in 1940 the French were compelled, in concession after concession, to give way to Japanese demands for a foothold in the country. On 15 July 1941 Roosevelt's envoy to the Vichy Government (Admiral William D. Leahy) was warned by Admiral Darlan that Japan would shortly occupy bases in Southern Indo-China 'for the purpose of projecting military operations southward'. Leahy telegraphed the news to Washington, and four days later conveyed the American government's reaction. It was a warning, couched in the terms of the crudest power politics. 'It was necessary to say bluntly,' he later wrote, 'that if Japan was the winner, the Japanese would take over French Indo-China: and if the Allies won, we would take it.' The Japanese left the French administrative structure intact, under the Governor-General, Admiral Decoux. They occupied railway centres, port installations, and airfields, their first purpose being to stop the shipping of goods to Chiang Kai-shek through the port of Haiphong (it was a much more important supply route than the Burma Road), their second being to ensure the occupation of bases if they decided to embark on a military operation in the rest of South-East Asia. In fact, torpedo-bombers operating from airfields near Saigon played a crucial role in the outcome of the Malayan campaign: they found and sank the Prince of Wales and the Repulse. But throughout the rest of the war in the Pacific, as Decoux pointed out, Indo-China remained a tranquil haven in the centre of a storm. It was Decoux's intention that Indo-China should remain in this happy, if slightly less than honourable position, until the Japanese capitulated. By the end of 1944 this desired aim seemed to be in sight. On the other hand, the liberation of France had given an impetus to resistance, and contacts were made with de Gaulle. Decoux was an unqualified supporter of Marshal Pétain, but after September 1944 there could be no pretence that Pétain's writ ran anywhere, let alone in Indo-China. In November 1944 Decoux was instructed by de Gaulle to retain his post. The Japanese were to be deceived into thinking that the French had no immediate intention of acting against them. De Gaulle's original plan had been to reaffirm the French presence in the Far East by despatching forces across the Indian Ocean under General
Blaizot, who was attached to Mountbatten’s headquarters in Kandy. Later, when it seemed possible that the Americans might land in South China, or Indo-China, de Gaulle envisaged a French expeditionary force participating in such a campaign. He replaced Blaizot by Leclerc, under whose command were to be placed some of the 2nd Armoured Division under Massu, and two colonial divisions (the 1st and 3rd). But demobilization after the defeat of Germany so reduced the ranks of these divisions that they had to be combined. Besides, there seemed to be no way of transporting them to the Far East. French shipping was under the control of the Allied Shipping Pool and could not be released. The only unit actually present in Mountbatten’s command was the 5th Colonial Infantry Regiment, itself only a battalion strong, under Colonel Huard. A Senegalese brigade was awaiting orders in Madagascar.3

There were other troops available, but they were in no condition to intervene. These were the remnants of that part of the French garrison (fifty thousand strong) which fought the Japanese in March 1945, and had been compelled to retreat into China under their general, Alessandri. The Japanese coup de force was perhaps the crucial event of 1945 for Indo-China. On 9 March, in anticipation of a rising which they thought might accompany an American landing, the Japanese moved against the French administration and the French Army. The plans had been drawn up in great secrecy, so that no false move should warn the French of what was happening; planning staff wrote out the plans and printed orders themselves, and they were conveyed by staff officers only to those of regimental commander rank and above.4 In January, General Tsuchihashi’s 38th Army had organized special units distributed in three areas, North, South, and Central Indo-China, to come into action once the signal was given. They were to collect intelligence on French Army dispositions, track down anti-Japanese propaganda, secure key personalities round the Emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, and make contacts with the Vietnamese underground independence movement.5 There were diplomatic manoeuvres, too. At the end of 1944 the old Japanese Ambassador, Yoshizawa, with whom Decoux had for the past three years managed to maintain relations of courtesy, if not cordiality, and who, in Decoux’s view, had often acted on behalf of the French to moderate the excessive demands of the Japanese military, was replaced by Matsumoto, who immediately began pressing Decoux to increase occupation expenses levied on the Govern-
if an American landing took place. As he saw it, Indo-China had in fact been in a state of war with Japan since Marshal Pétain had left France (virtually a prisoner of the Germans at Sigmaringen) and the new Metropolitan Government had declared war against Japan; this was certainly the case juridically, though the Japanese had not so far taken any action.7

Had he but known it, he was serving the Japanese purpose by going south to Saigon at this juncture. They intended to demand that Decoux place all his armed forces and police under the command of the Japanese, who would also control all internal and external communications. If he accepted, then there would be no need to use force; if he did not, then the Japanese Army would intervene. This was to be what was termed Operation Mei. These demands would have to be put to Decoux and negotiated, and the venue of the negotiations was of considerable importance to Japanese movements. Since Hanoi was the seat of the Government-General, it would be no more than appropriate for any demands by the ambassador to be made there, in which case both ambassador and commander-in-chief would have to go to Hanoi. But at that time the Japanese Army's signals network in Indo-China was based in Saigon, and it would not be easy to maintain from Hanoi the kind of simultaneous contact with all forces that a surprise coup de force required. If the disarming of French troops did not go according to plan, and if French troops controlled the Hanoi airfield, then General Tsuchihashi would be trapped in Hanoi and unable to exercise his command. So the Japanese needed a meeting with Decoux in Saigon. They knew that the governor-general customarily spent some time there in spring and autumn, 'to remind the natives of the place who governed them', as the Japanese official history puts it.8 When Tsuchihashi called on Decoux on 4 February he made it his business to learn at what time the governor-general was likely to be in the South, and was told that if the situation in the North was unchanged he would be in Saigon for about three weeks from the end of February. There would be no need to make any special moves to negotiate in Saigon: negotiations could be carried out there quite naturally, if the governor-general happened to be there.9

Decoux came south on 20 February. He was in a state of some perplexity. In contradiction to the secret order he had given to his local authority heads to aid an Allied landing if it took place, de Gaulle had sent him an instruction at the beginning of February to

proclaim the neutrality of Indo-China in such an eventuality. As soon as he arrived Matsumoto contacted him. There was a rice agreement between Japan and Indo-China, which was renewed at intervals. Matsumoto sent in a request that an agreement to cover the deliveries for 1945 be signed as soon as possible and suggested 9 March as a convenient date, to which Decoux agreed. In this way, Matsumoto ensured that the governor-general would be in Saigon when the Japanese Army came to the moment of decision. The meeting had been fixed for 7 p.m. Tokyo time (local time 6 p.m.).

Meanwhile Decoux entertained the Japanese in a desperate endeavour to keep relations working smoothly. On 2 March he invited Matsumoto, with Tsuchihashi and his chief of staff, to dinner. Then on 4 March he went to Dalat to visit his wife's grave. The Japanese then had great misgivings about the signature for the rice agreement, but they breathed freely again when he was back in Saigon by the evening of the 7th. On the evening of the 8th Tsuchihashi invited to his residence the Chief of Staff of Southern Army, Lieutenant-General Numata, the Chief of Staff of the 38th Army, Kawamura, the Ambassador Matsumoto, and his Minister Tsukamoto, for a last-minute conference. It was arranged that negotiations with Decoux were concluded, and the governor-general's reply should be delivered to the ambassador there by ten o'clock in the evening. The address of the headquarters was to be written down and handed to the governor-general (a very odd precaution). If there was a delay in the arrival of the reply, then five minutes' grace was to be allowed - 'the generosity of the samurai' (bushi no nasake wo motte).10 The decision whether or not to accept Decoux's reply would be Tsuchihashi's, thus clearly demonstrating that the diplomats were being contemptuously treated as mere go-betweens for the military.11 Lastly it was decided that Numata, Tsukamoto, and all the chief officials at the Embassy should assemble at 38th Army Headquarters at 7.30 in the evening of the 9th.

7 Tsuchihashi had already had a furious argument with Matsumoto over the role of the officials attached to the Embassy if the Japanese Army took over from Decoux. The country would then no longer be independent, and the ambassador and his staff would become redundant. Tsuchihashi proposed that Matsumoto should become his 'supreme adviser', which Matsumoto rejected. Pressure was then applied, and Matsumoto finally accepted the situation, his officials becoming shokutaku, civilians attached to the Army.
To keep up appearances of normality on the 9th, Tsuchihashi had invited guests for lunch and dinner. When night fell his house was ablaze with lights, but at 7.15 he slipped out and within five minutes was at his headquarters, impatiently waiting for Matsumoto to arrive.

When Matsumoto had left Decoux, after dinner on the 7th, he had mentioned that he would like a short discussion with him about the occupation expenses after they signed the rice agreement. In the evening of the 9th, in the magnificent palace of the Government-General, Matsumoto’s audience with Decoux began shortly after 6.30. He spoke about the situation in Europe, and Decoux agreed with his view that it was serious. Germany would soon be out of the war. Decoux thought Matsumoto seemed nervous and preoccupied, and somewhat incoherent. Suddenly the Japanese shot a question at him: ‘Are you in contact with the French Government?’ Decoux said he was not, and reminded the ambassador of the powers which the previous French Government had bestowed, intimating that he acted independently of the metropolis. ‘My Government is disturbed,’ Matsumoto went on, ‘by certain declarations made by General de Gaulle concerning Indo-China. He has recently expressed the hope that Indo-China will soon take its place again within the French community. He has also announced that France intends to grant a more liberal régime to the peoples of Indo-China.’ Decoux answered that this seemed to be a normal development, but he felt as he did so that Matsumoto was only pursuing the conversation to gain time. The Japanese Ambassador kept looking at his watch, and as soon as the hour of seven drew near, he brought up the question of the war in the Pacific. It was reaching a decisive phase, and the Government in Tokyo was deeply concerned. An American landing might take place at any moment on the coast of Indo-China. Collaboration between Decoux and the Japanese Government would have to become closer.

Then at seven o’clock Matsumoto, in Decoux’s words, ‘unmasked his batteries’. ‘I have received formal and precise instructions from my Government,’ he said, ‘which deem it necessary to strengthen our mutual defence agreement.’ Decoux replied that the agreement had been in force for four years and had never been called upon, and he saw no reason to change it now. ‘That is not the view of Imperial General Headquarters,’ replied Matsumoto, and produced from his pocket a memorandum which he read to Decoux and then handed over. It was an explicit demand to put the French forces under Japanese command, in preparation for an eventual American landing. The governor-general’s affirmative reply was awaited by nine o’clock.*

Given the gravity of the situation, Decoux wanted a witness to what he was going to say. He summoned the Director of Diplomatic Affairs, de Boisanger, and in his presence protested energetically to Matsumoto about the conditions in his document, the character of an ultimatum which it bore, and the unacceptably short period of two hours within which to reply. He could not in any case, he told Matsumoto, make any dispositions about the French forces without first conferring with the French commander-in-chief. ‘But you have full powers,’ expostulated the ambassador, ‘you can therefore give your agreement immediately.’ Whatever his powers, Decoux replied, he was bound to consult the commander-in-chief whenever the latter’s responsibility was involved. In any case, with or without full powers, he would sign no agreement contrary to his own honour or that of the French forces. Matsumoto began to cavil, in a clumsy manner. How unsubtle he was, thought Decoux, how lacking in nuance – so unlike his predecessor.

The demand was a natural one in the circumstances, Matsumoto pointed out. The Japanese general staff wanted a single supreme command, the necessity of which had been realized by both sides in both world wars. Decoux retorted that a single command might be obtained by agreement but not by veiled threats, and that such an agreement might possibly be made between allies, which Japan and Indo-China certainly were not.

‘If a favourable reply to the points in the memorandum is not received by the Japanese military authorities by 9 o’clock,’ Matsumoto told him, ‘Japanese troops will be forced to take emergency action. Have you thought of the fate of the 40,000 French people who are in Indo-China?’

‘Do you mean that reprisals will be carried out against the French?’ Decoux asked. ‘In that case, the Japanese Command, and your Government will be entirely responsible in the eyes not only of France and Indo-China, but of the whole world.’ Matsumoto did not reply, but handed Decoux a letter of acceptance already made out, lacking only his signature. Decoux spurned it.

* The discrepancy of one hour between French and Japanese accounts is presumably due to the fact that Decoux is using local time, while the Japanese plan was drawn up with Tokyo time in mind.
De Boisanger then intervened, attempting to bridge the gap, and suggested that if the time for a reply were extended some solution might be found. But de Boisanger had realized the memorandum was couched in the terms of an ultimatum, and was trying to gain time himself in order to alert the French military command. He managed to leave the room for a few moments, and sent a warning to the various authorities throughout Southern Indo-China.

Matsumoto indicated that no further delay would be acceptable, but offered to come to the governor-general’s palace at nine o’clock for an answer. Decoux told him briefly that he had done everything he could, within the limits of what was possible, to maintain acceptable relations between France and Japan for the past four years; if Japan used force against Indo-China now, she would dishonour herself. The Emperor had given a solemn guarantee that Japan would respect French sovereignty. He drew the interview to a close, assuring Matsumoto that a French officer would bring a reply to the memorandum within the time required. He also asked him to withdraw the Japanese detachment which had just been placed at the gates of the Government-General, on the pretext of ensuring Decoux’s safety. Matsumoto left at 8.15, and Decoux at once convened a meeting of his advisers, together with the French Army and Navy chiefs. With their agreement, he composed a note rejecting the Japanese demands, but leaving the door open to further negotiation. The note accepted that the Japanese Army Command should assume entire responsibility for operations in the event of an American landing, but made it clear that Decoux could only come to an agreement about the disposition of French forces after consultation with the French High Command. He assured the Japanese that French forces would commit no hostile act against them, unless the Japanese attacked them first.

The French naval captain Robin, who is described by Decoux as ‘Commissioner-General for Franco-Japanese Relations’, was to carry Decoux’s note to Matsumoto. The Japanese say that Robin did not know where the Japanese headquarters was, and burst into their Public Relations Office demanding a guide to take him there. The headquarters was quite close – as near as an eye to a nose, in the Japanese expression – so he should have been there almost at once, but fifteen minutes went by and still he had not appeared. Meanwhile, at 9.18 p.m. (local time; 10.18 Japanese time), a telephone call came through from the army general headquarters that fighting had already broken out at Hanoi. Tsuchihashi wondered if there had been some mistake, but it was already twenty minutes past the agreed time. Probably some unit had been rushing at the bit, or had anxiously feared an order had not been transmitted – either way, it had decided to act on its own initiative, thinking its honour would be compromised if it delayed. The fact that things had been set in motion at Hanoi would cause no problem if the French rejected the Japanese memorandum; if, on the other hand – it was a thousand to one chance – they accepted the terms, someone might have to accept the responsibility for starting the action. Even though the French envoy would probably show up at any moment, they should not wait for him any longer. This was Tsuchihashi’s view at the time, and he called his Chief of Staff, Kawamura, and his chief staff officer in charge of operations, Saeki: ‘We shall send out the operation orders now,’ he told them. Kawamura attempted to dissuade him: ‘The envoy’s likely to come at any moment, shouldn’t you wait a little longer?’ But Tsuchihashi gave the following verbal orders:

i Regrettably, the Governor-General has rejected the Japanese demands.

ii All units are to act at once.

The time was 9.21 and Lieutenant-Colonel Saeki went immediately to the wireless room and ordered the signal to be made continuously: ‘7. 7. 7’. The transmission ceased at 9.23. At 9.25, Tsuchihashi saw Captain Robin being taken to Matsumoto’s room near by. After a few moments he heard Matsumoto shout ‘This is clearly a rejection’. By this time the arrow had already left the bow.*

Decoux is probably right when he suggests that whatever reply he had made, the Japanese High Command would not have altered its decision to take over Indo-China.† French garrisons all over the

* The Japanese official history says it is not clear what the contents of the reply brought by Captain Robin from the governor-general were, and quotes Maurice Martin du Gard’s La Cercle impériale for a summary of its contents. In fact Martin du Gard’s version is that given by Decoux, and since the latter figures so largely in the Japanese account, and his memoirs are quoted by at least one author (Ellen Hammer), whose book figures in the notes of the Japanese history, it is surprising that no direct reference to A la Barbere de l’Indochine is made. Decoux’s reply with the time (9 p.m.) and the date (9 March 1945) is given in his book.

† Imperial General Headquarters had issued an order dated 28 February 1941, to the effect that centres of administrative and military power in Indo-
country were attacked simultaneously, and they soon surrendered, though there was bitter fighting, notably at Lang Son and Dong Dang in the north, where the Japanese massacred the survivors. Decoux was placed under arrest, and the Japanese military police (Kempei) began to round up Frenchmen suspected of working for the resistance. They turned the Saigon Chamber of Commerce into a temporary gaol which was, in effect, a torture chamber. Water-torture, fearful beatings, the tearing out of toe-nails, and an almost total lack of medical care—the cumulative effect was horrifying. The Kempei did not have many French-speakers, and either used English in their interrogations or employed Annamite interpreters. Either way, the results were not very accurate, and violence became a substitute for intelligence.* There is no doubt that some Frenchmen had been consistently providing intelligence to the US Air Forces which operated from China in bombing raids against installations in Hanoi; wireless communication with the 14th Air Force seems to have been fairly regular. So Japanese suspicions were not unfounded, but their method of verifying them involved the obscene brutality now linked with the name of Kempei.

The resistance did not react very sharply. Its chief, the retired

China should be taken over. The French military attached in Chungking had told the Americans that the French Army in Indo-China was being pressed to disband and disarm. This information was given on 2 February 1945, and passed by Wedemeyer to Washington.** Paris does not seem to have reacted swiftly either. Colonel Dominique Renucci, the French military attached in Canberra, had sent a warning of what was likely to happen, on 5 March. His information was derived from MacArthur's cryptic services.* In Indo-China itself, other information was available. A police official, Pleutot, told Bonfils, an administrator, that the Japanese were preparing a coup; Bonfils in turn conveyed this to a number of civil and military authorities in Hanoi. The date was not certain, it was to be either the night 8–9 March, or 9–10. When nothing happened on 8 March, the Hanoi authorities stopped worrying and relaxed precautions. In the far North, at Cao Bang, a French double agent, Liông Sui Lan, who was employed in a gambling den, informed the commander of the territory during the night of 5–6 March that the date would be 9 March. Sabattier was in command of the troops in northern Tonkin and took Liông's warning seriously. He gave general alerts on 8 March and left Hanoi at nightfall that day. The troops had been ordered to disperse throughout the area in the case of a general alert, but unfortunately the warning was not received by all units.††


†† General Mordant, refused at first to believe that a coup de force was likely. When he heard firing in the evening of 9 March, he climbed the wall of the citadel in Hanoi, sprained his ankle, and took shelter in the quarters of the chief medical officer, Botreau-Roussel, where the Japanese arrested him on the evening of the 10th. Under Generals Sabattier and Alessandri, some units managed to gain the comparative shelter of Yunnan Province in Southern China. At Dong Dang, near Lang Son, which the French call 'the gates of China', a Japanese unit attacked a French military post at 9.15 in the evening of the 9th, but retreated with heavy losses. On the 10th they brought up ladders and tried again, but with no success, though the French commander was killed. The fort was defended by the 3rd Regiment of Tonkinese tirailleurs, and on the third day of the fighting their captain, Anosse, still refused to surrender. On 12 March the Japanese made a mass attack with three thousand men, who swept into the fort when the French and Tonkinese ran out of ammunition. The Japanese brought Anosse before them. A Japanese officer beat him on the nape of the neck with a sword scabbard, and as he fell other officers fired pistols into his body. It was the signal for a general massacre of prisoners, who were tied up and beheaded, including the civilian customs official and two army concubines.18

The question naturally arises whether Allied intervention could have helped the beleaguered French. The French Ambassador in Washington, Henri Bonnet, asked the American government to intervene with the combined chiefs of staff to ensure that the French resistance in Indo-China was supported in its operations by the parachuting of arms, medical equipment, quinine, and food. He suggested that the American Air Forces in China were best placed to give such help. The approach was made on 12 March. The following day de Gaulle spoke to the American Ambassador Caffery, in Paris, and told him that the American military authorities in China and the British authorities in Burma had refused to send help to the French, the British having simply followed the American lead. He warned Caffery that if the French public thought the USA was acting against them in Indo-China there would be intense disappointment which might have post-war repercussions in the balance of power between Russia and the United States. 'We do not want to become Communists,' de Gaulle said, 'we do not want to fall into the Russian orbit, but I hope that you do not push us into it.'19 A week later the French Ambassador Bonnet called at the State Department
in Washington and said that the 14th US Air Force, under Major-General Claire Chennault, had planes already loaded in China to take supplies to the French, and asked for this to be authorized immediately. In the end, Admiral Leahy, Roosevelt’s Chief of Staff, gave the authorization. Chennault’s planes did take in supplies, and strafed Japanese columns which were attacking the five thousand French troops making their way north into Yunnan. The American pilots observed British planes over Indo-China, delivering infantry weapons. This report incensed General Wedemeyer, who believed that British forces should not intervene in Indo-China without permission from Chiang Kai-shek, since it fell in the China Theatre and not in Mountbatten’s South-East Asia Command. He also objected to Mountbatten’s headquarters organizing clandestine operations into Indo-China, but Mountbatten justified this by claiming a gentleman’s agreement with Chiang, a claim that Churchill backed. It was finally agreed, at the very highest level, between Roosevelt and Churchill, that Mountbatten would operate in areas deemed to be in the China Theatre only after rearrangement with Chiang.

This hesitation and political debate, while men were dying for lack of help, reflects Roosevelt’s attitude towards the French in Indo-China. He had already made it clear that nothing was to deflect the main American effort against Japan, and he used this as an argument not to become involved in operations in Indo-China. But de Gaulle was not deceived. Caffery visited de Gaulle on the afternoon of 24 March to introduce Samuel I. Rosenman, Roosevelt’s Special Counsel who was then on a mission to Europe. As they took their leave, de Gaulle said to Caffery, ‘It seems clear now that your Government does not want to help our troops in Indo-China. Nothing has yet been dropped to them by parachute.’ When Caffery spoke of the great distances involved, de Gaulle retorted, ‘No that is not the question; the question is one of policy I assume.’

Summing up the operation, the Japanese general Tsuchihashi reflected that its success was due to the poor quality of the French

* Some Frenchmen attributed Wedemeyer’s hostility to his German antecedents. ‘Don’t forget I’m a former pupil of the Berlin Kriegsakademie,’ he is supposed to have said, when asked by the French why he delayed assisting their compatriots in Indo-China. ‘I don’t give a damn for the French.’ On relations between Mountbatten and Wedemeyer, see top secret memorandum by Roosevelt’s Special Counsel who was then on a mission to Europe. As they took their leave, de Gaulle said to Caffery, ‘It seems clear now that your Government does not want to help our troops in Indo-China. Nothing has yet been dropped to them by parachute.’ When Caffery spoke of the great distances involved, de Gaulle retorted, ‘No that is not the question; the question is one of policy I assume.’

* Based on French accounts, the Japanese give the figures of the French troops in Indo-China at the time of the coup de force as 15,000, plus 35,000 native troops. The Japanese forces were estimated to be 40,000.4
Severe as they were, the military humiliations inflicted on the French were as nothing compared to the political ones. The Japanese did not only remove the French from the administration and imprison their forces; they encouraged the native population to declare French rule to be at an end. This was not merely a blow against the vanished authority of Vichy. It was an attempt to frustrate further plans already adumbrated by de Gaulle’s government in Paris. They prevailed upon the young Emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, to denounce the French protectorate and proclaim the independence of his country under its earlier name, Vietnam, which he did two days after the coup de force. Under the Vietnamese scholar, Tran Trong Kim, a nationalist government of middle-class intellectuals was formed, but it proved incapable of fulfilling its most urgent duty, the provision of rice to starving Tonkin. There was plenty in the South, but in Northern Indo-China thousands died of famine in 1945. Bao Dai’s writ did not run in the former colony of Cochin-China, or its capital Saigon, which the Japanese had no intention of permitting anyone but themselves to control.

In Cambodia, the Japanese 2nd Division had been ordered to ‘protect’ the young King Sihanouk, and as a precaution against his attempting to escape from Phnom Penh, the capital was rimed by road-blocks. The divisional commander, General Manaki, ordered all his units to cooperate with the Kempei in a search for the King, who had still not made an appearance on 10 March. On the 11th, the King was discovered in a temple in the grounds of the royal palace, disguised as a monk. Manaki at once despatched his Chief of Staff, Colonel Kinoshita, to the palace. With the Japanese consul Takashima acting as his interpreter, Kinoshita explained that the Japanese operation was aimed only at disarming the French, that it had no objectives as far as Cambodia was concerned other than to have the King take over the government. Sihanouk declared his country’s independence on 13 March.

The Japanese emissary to Laos did not fare quite so well. Luang Prabang, the capital, is in a mountainous area with poor communications, and the Consul, Watanabe Taemi, did not arrive at the royal palace before 20 March. He reported the events of the past fortnight to the King and was taken aback when Sisavang-Vong flatly refused to believe him. The old king – he was past sixty – did not speak French very well, having learned it at the École coloniale in Paris at the turn of the century, and he had suffered a great deal when part of Laos was transferred to Siam as a result of Japan’s mediation in the Franco-Siamese war of 1940. But he was a great friend of France, had negotiated a fresh protectorate agreement with Decoux some years before, and had travelled to Hanoi to visit him. However, the arrival in Luang Prabang of two Japanese infantry battalions on 7 April succeeded in convincing him that Watanabe had not lied, and, bowing to the inevitable, he proclaimed the independence of Laos the following day.

Japan had done to the French what she had done to the British three years before. By planting the Japanese flag over Singapore she had brought British rule to an end. There would be an attempt to re-establish the old régime, but the forces Japan had liberated would ensure that it would never succeed in implanting itself again. She had replaced French rule by that of the local monarchies, supported by her Army. But there was another actor in the wings.

Among the various nationalist groups in Indo-China, one had been as hostile to Japanese as to French control: the Communist Party of Indo-China under its leader Nguyen Ai Quoc, later and somewhat better known as Ho Chi Minh. In his youth a seaman and then a dish-washer in London hotels, an accomplished linguist and a puritanically dedicated patriot (that is what the name Ai Quoc means), Ho took part in the Chinese Communist movement in Canton and founded in that city the Revolutionary Youth Association, to work in Indo-China. He was not an enemy of France: in 1930 he had taken part, as a delegate, in the Socialist Congress at Tours and had made an impassioned speech on behalf of his oppressed fellow Vietnamese to the assembled Socialists and Communists of France. His theme was ‘Comrades, rescue us!’ but he knew that his people would first have to rescue themselves. Conditions were not ripe for Communism in Indo-China. His people were a peasantry, not an industrial proletariat. The country’s first step out of the clutches of the French exploiters would have to be political independence under a régime of bourgeois democratic nationalism. Such a programme was likely to win outside support, whereas Communism was not.
For decades he worked in obscurity. The French police savagely repressed nationalist movements in Indo-China in the 1920s and 1930s, and the cells in the offshore island of Poulo Condore, the Pacific equivalent of Devil’s Island, were crammed with political prisoners. A number of Vietnamese revolutionary groups met in South China in the spring of 1941, close to the border with Tonkin. A joint anti-French programme was agreed, and a united front formed, called Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam), Viet Minh in its abbreviated form. In its first manifesto, dated 25 October 1941, the party’s aim was said to be ‘the union of all anti-Fascist forces in the struggle against French and Japanese colonialism until all Vietnam is liberated’. The inclusion of Japan reflects the fact that for left-wing parties of the thirties and forties Japan was the fascist aggressor against a democratic China, though Japan had already acted as a haven for Vietnamese exiles. Prince Cuong De had been sheltered there, so too had Phan Boi Chau, who had directed, from Japan, an underground revolutionary movement in Indo-China before the First World War. Ho became the Viet Minh’s general secretary. His party existed on Chinese soil, but it could hardly be said to have flourished. It proclaimed its allegiance to the Allied cause against the Japanese, and engaged in espionage in Indo-China. But Chiang Kai-shek mistrusted Ho. He feared the setting up of a Communist stronghold on his Southern frontier, which might match the internal one in Yanan. In 1942 Ho was arrested and imprisoned under conditions of unspeakable hardship for fifteen months. He wrote poems to keep himself sane:

The rice-grain suffers under the pestle; yet admires its whiteness when the ordeal is over.27

Partly as a result of a campaign by his fellow exiles, partly as a piece of calculation by the Chinese, who had hoped to use him as a tool for their policies in Indo-China, Ho was released in the spring of 1943. He then turned to the Americans for aid, which was generously given. Ho and his men attacked the Japanese posts near the China–Tonkin border with American logistical support, and were back in Tonkin by October 1944. The Northern provinces were gradually liberated from Japanese control: Cao Bang, Bac Can, Tuyen Quang, and part of Thai Nguyen, Lang Son, and Ha Giang. Ho did not use his entire force for this purpose. Ten thousand men were trained and held in waiting for the campaign against the French which was sure to come. They were led by a former Vietnamese history teacher and law graduate, who was bitterly hostile to the French in a way that Ho was not. His name was Vo Nguyen Giap and his wife had died in a French prison. With the active collaboration of the Americans in Kunming and the assistance in the field of OSS (Office of Strategic Services) units, the Viet Minh continued its liberation of Northern Tonkin. The French had mounted a column against them, which was to start out on 12 March 1943. The Japanese coup de force put an end to that. A few weeks before, Ho had a meeting with Colonel Helliwell, area commander of the OSS in Kunming, in which Helliwell agreed to supply him with arms, provided he would guarantee they would not be used against the French, and American officers should be allowed to operate in areas he controlled.28 American aid to Ho was more enthusiastic than this meeting suggests. Officers of the OSS who had penetrated into Tonkin were photographed in smiling groups with Ho and Giap in the months which followed. In the French view, the activities of the OSS were uniformly hostile to French interests. On the other hand, at this time, Ho himself was prepared to meet the representative of the new Paris Government. Since it was the product of a movement of national resistance, he may have hoped it would not suppress nationalism in its former colonies. At any rate, he would see what they had to say. An Annamite lieutenant called Phac, who escaped from Tonkin with the Alessandri column, made contacts with the Vietnamese nationalists in Kunming, and told Sainteny, head of de Gaulle’s military mission to Kunming, that he could arrange a meeting. In the first few days of August 1945 Sainteny met, for the first time, one of Ho’s staff, Nguyen Tong Tam, later to become Vietnamese Foreign Minister. The encounter took place on the first floor of a little restaurant in a Kunming back alley.29

* ‘Ho was an awfully sweet guy. . . . If I had to recall one quality of this old man sitting on his hill in the jungle, it would be his sweetness.’ The remark is that of a US officer quoted by The Reporter, 27 January 1945.30 Cf. also OSS reports recently released by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: ‘Forget the communist bogey. VML (the Vietminh League) is not communist, stands for freedom and reforms from French harshness. If the French go part way with them they might work with the French.’ (Major Allison Thomas, commander of a US Communist mission, quoted in The Times, 26 February 1971.) Major Thomas also reported Ho objecting to the presence of a French officer in the OSS team, but Thomas added, ‘he will welcome 10 million Americans’. (ibid.)
He struck Sainteny as the perfect type of Vietnamese intellectual. In addition he had 'something frank and manly which is fairly rare in that class of Indo-Chinese'. Nguyen Tong Tam’s purpose in meeting Sainteny was to convey to Paris, through him, the strong determination of his compatriots to free themselves from French tutelage, a determination which had been strengthened since the Japanese had dismantled the French administrative machine. Sainteny countered this by saying he had just returned from Paris, and that the Provisional Government of the French Republic had no intention of abandoning a single scrap of its legitimate rights in Indo-China. The most developed colonies would receive a more enlightened treatment than had been accorded them in the past, but these concessions would not be forced from France by violence. France was always prepared to discuss affairs with Indo-Chinese recognized as representing their country. Sainteny was concerned above all to avoid further bloodshed and to keep paths open to the revolutionary parties. For his part, Nguyen Tong Tam did not want to establish his country’s independence by a bloody uprising, and he offered Sainteny the possibility of further discussions in Hanoi, where his brother was one of the chiefs of his party, the ultra-nationalist Viet-Nam Quoc Dong Dang. He gave him a coded letter which would enable contact to be made.

That interview was the only direct contact made by Sainteny during his stay in Kunming. Other contacts were made through the Americans only. The OSS conveyed to Mission 5 (the code name for Sainteny’s mission) a message from the Vietnamese command, then in Tuyen Quang, which the OSS knew under the name of ‘The Viet Minh League’. The message contained five requirements which Ho and his colleagues wished to see embodied in any new form of government for Indo-China:

1. That there should be universal suffrage for the election of a Parliament which shall govern the country; that there should be a French governor acting as President until independence be secured; that this President choose a cabinet or group of advisers accepted by Parliament. The precise powers of all these officials can be clarified at some future date.

2. That independence be granted to this country in a minimum of five years and a maximum of ten.

3. That the natural resources of the country shall revert to its inhabitants after equitable compensation to the present holder; that France shall be the beneficiary of economic concessions.

4. That the sale of opium be forbidden.

We hope that these conditions will be deemed acceptable by the French Government.

The tone is democratic, and conciliatory to French interests. The French authorities in Kunming examined the text closely (it was written in English, no doubt at the request of the OSS) and sent a reply, also in English. Sainteny does not give the details of this reply, but says it referred necessarily to decisions which had to be taken in Paris, so it can hardly have been judged a satisfactory answer by the Viet Minh. In the course of the previous month, there had also been military contacts with the Viet Minh guerrillas. The head of the French mission ‘Picardie’, which had been set up in Tsin-tsi, reported favourably on the units he had met, and had suggested to them the possibility of a conference in Kunming between Sainteny and the Viet Minh leader. On 16 July a mixed Franco-American mission was parachuted into Indo-China to cooperate with the Directing Committee of the Viet Minh. Towards the end of the month another possibility of contact between Sainteny and Ho was offered by Major Gordon, who ran a resistance group in the border area between China and Tonkin. Sainteny understandably refers to him as an American, since he was working for US Navy intelligence, but Gordon was in fact a Canadian, who had been the Hai-phong representative of the Texaco Company in pre-war days. There seems little doubt that the Viet Minh leaders would, at that particular time, have welcomed Sainteny’s presence, and even had tricolour flags ready to greet him when he arrived. But the monsoon rains put a stop to air communications in the region, and in a matter of days the talk was all of the Japanese surrender.

The surrender caught the Viet Minh short. They had a rudimentary organization in the North of the country, and a military force; but in the South their assets were negligible. Their first task must be to establish themselves in the capital, Hanoi. Ho had already prepared for such a step. On 10 August, anticipating the Japanese surrender, he had convened a meeting of sixty northern delegates of varying
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political complexion to a meeting in Thai Nguyen province. This resulted in the formation of a National Liberation Committee of Vietnam on the 13th, the purpose of which was to take power before the Allies could prevent it. ‘The defeat of the Japanese,’ they warned their countrymen in a manifesto, ‘does not render us automatically free and independent... Let us free ourselves by our own energies... Onward under the flag of the Viet Minh.’

There was little opposition in Hanoi itself. Giap’s troops moved into the city, where demonstrations in favour of independence were already in progress. In theory, it was ruled by Bao Dai’s viceroy, Phan Ke Toai, who did not take long to sum up the situation. He surrendered to Giap, and the Viet Minh took charge of the city. By 20 August, five days after the surrender, Ho controlled the capital of Indo-China.

Then events moved even faster. Under pressure from Hanoi, the Emperor Bao Dai abdicated on 25 August and accepted the post of prime minister to the new administration, under the name of Vinh Thuy. A delegation from Hanoi travelled south to Hue and was greeted by frenziedly enthusiastic crowds. Its triumphal procession continued through the towns and villages of Central Annam, where the main question on everyone’s lips was ‘Who is Ho Chi Minh?’ Within a week they were on the border of Cochin-China, at Bien Hoa, where they drove straight for Saigon. They were led to the Governor’s palace, where the leader of the delegation, Hoang Quoc Viet, sent a telegram to Ho in Hanoi: ‘IN 21 PROVINCES I HAVE CROSSSED POWER IS IN OUR HANDS EVERYTHING GONE SMOOTHLY ALSO THROUGHOUT NAM BO.’

Ho replied briefly: PROCLAMATION INDEPENDENCE 2 SEPTEMBER.

The result might not have been wholly displeasing to President Roosevelt, had he survived to see it. But it was hardly what Britain or France desired for South-East Asia. This divergence of views goes a long way back in the history of the war. In an incredibly offhand way, Roosevelt had offered the country to Chiang Kai-shek at the Cairo conference in November 1943. ‘The first thing I asked Chiang was,’ he later recalled, ‘“Do you want Indo-China?”’ Chiang politely refused the offer. The inhabitants were not Chinese and would not assimilate to the Chinese, though it is not clear whether or not Roosevelt was aware of this. Both of them agreed it should not be returned to the French. Roosevelt’s hostility to the return of Indo-China to the French was maintained consistently throughout the war. A month after the talk with Chiang, he sent a memorandum to his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, suggesting a post-war international trusteeship.

‘France has had the country,’ he wrote, ‘thirty million inhabitants—for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning... France has milked it dry for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that.’ Just over a year later, a week after the Japanese coup de force, he was talking to Taussig, the adviser on Caribbean affairs in the State Department, and the conversation turned to the Far East. Roosevelt reaffirmed his intention to see Indo-China taken from the French.

I asked the president if he had changed his ideas on French Indo-China (writes Taussig)... He said he had not changed his ideas; that French Indo-China and New Caledonia should be taken from the French and put under a trusteeship. The president hesitated a moment and then said — well, if we can get the proper pledge from France to assume for herself these colonies with the proviso that independence was the ultimate goal. I asked the President if he would settle for self-government. He said no. I asked him if he would settle for dominion status. He said no — it must be independence. He said that is to be the policy and you can quote me in the State Department.

iii The 16th Parallel Decision

It is against this background that the decision to split the country in two to deal with the Japanese surrender must be seen; a decision the consequences of which are still with us. It was adumbrated at the Potsdam Conference at a meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 18 July 1945. No French representatives, of course, were present. The idea of extending Mountbatten’s South-East Asia Command had been mooted, and the US Chiefs of Staff, in a paper on ‘Control and Command in the War against Japan’, commented on a proposal

* Stimson, the US Secretary for War, later hoped that Korea could be put under trusteeship, and feared that British and French refusal to allow Hong-Kong and Indo-China to be put under a trusteeship would make the Russians stand out for solitary control of Korea by themselves.
from their British opposite numbers that Indo-China south of latitude 15° North should be included in his command. They said they had no objection to this from a military point of view, but it was primarily a matter for Chiang Kai-shek to decide. They had already been reminded by Admiral Leahy two days before, when the question of sending two French divisions to participate in the Pacific War was under discussion, and their use in Indo-China was mooted, that that area was held to be under Chiang.40 A shift of part of the area did not appear practicable until his agreement was obtained. The British Chiefs of Staff submitted a counter-memorandum the following day, 18 July, saying they realized Chiang's agreement would have to be obtained, but they hoped the US Chiefs of Staff would support a recommendation to the President (Truman) and Churchill to press Chiang to give his consent. Such a recommendation should go in the conference's final report.41

The memorandum was discussed later the same day, and when General of the Army George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army, asked the British Chiefs of Staff for their views on dividing Indo-China into two, the northern part to be left in the China Theatre, Admiral Cunningham pointed out that the line of division would depend on contemplated operations through Siam. The American Admiral, King, said that the line of 15° North was an arbitrary division and might be changed to suit operational requirements. The British replied they would have to consider the line before making any firm proposals.42 Marshall returned to the idea on 24 July 1945 and asked Mountbatten what he thought of using two French divisions (both were composed of white men, he pointed out) for service in Indo-China, and dividing that country along the line of 16° North. Mountbatten replied that he had just heard of the proposition and his first reactions were favourable. He would have liked some latitude in the northern limit of the area in case his operations developed north of 16°, but he did not feel very strongly on the point. * The French, on the other hand, might find the proposition rather less agreeable.

When the Combined Chiefs of Staff approved their statement of 20 July, they included an appendix giving 15° North as the Indo-China division boundary. A corrigendum was circulated by the secretaries on 7 August substituting a fresh appendix, which gave the line as 16° North. No elucidation of the change is given in the documents.43 The report of the Combined Chiefs of Staff to Truman and Churchill, dated 24 July 1945, recommended that Mountbatten take over operations in Southern Indo-China on the grounds that they were more closely related to those of South-East Asia Command than to those of the China Theatre. The arrangement that he should control the area south of 16° North meant that General Wedemeyer would still control that part of Indo-China which covered the flank of projected Chinese operations. They added that at a later date it might prove desirable to place all or part of the remainder of Indo-China under Mountbatten. In this way the Combined Chiefs of Staff disposed of territory which did not belong to them. When the upshot of all these deliberations was conveyed to Chiang, he agreed to the dividing line, provided it ran through Siam as well, and allowed him to operate in that country down to 16° North. The reply did not reach Truman until the Potsdam Conference was over and in the drawing up of MacArthur's General Order No. 1 on 2 September 1945 Chiang's rider on Siam was ignored, fortunately for that country.44

This addition to Mountbatten's command, agreed upon at Potsdam, made his new task enormous. He now had the whole of the Netherlands East Indies to re-take, whereas previously only Sumatra had been within his province; and Indo-China south of the 16th parallel. His area contained 118,000,000 people, including 122,000 prisoners-of-war and internees who were in desperate need of all kinds of help; and almost three-quarters of a million Japanese troops and civilians (in proportions of 633,000/93,000). These were to be disarmed, concentrated, and repatriated when Japan surrendered. In addition 10,000 Taiwanese and Koreans would have to be returned to their respective countries.

He was not, at first, sure that the Japanese generals in South-East Asia Command would obey his orders, but a meeting in Rangoon with Lieutenant-General Numata, Chief of Staff to Field-Marshall Terauchi, on 27 August 1945, convinced him that he could rely on their capitulation if not on their good will. He at once arranged for token forces from his command to enter Siam and Indo-China. On 3 September an advance party of the 7th Indian Division flew into Bangkok, and prepared the Don Muang airfield as a staging post for the forces going to Saigon. Eleven days later, the 'Supreme
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Allied Commander South-East Asia Commission for the control of Field-Marshall Terauchi's Southern Army headquarters was set up in Saigon under Major-General Douglas Gracey, GOC 20th Indian Division. A brigade of this division had begun its fly-in on 13 September, and along with it Mountbatten established an Air Headquarters, with two RAF tactical squadrons, and a Naval Port Party. Gracey was also to disarm and concentrate all Japanese forces in his area, approximately 60,000 with nearly 2,000 civilians (an undertaking named 'Operation Nipoff' by a wag in Mountbatten's headquarters). He was to maintain law and order and ensure internal security; and to protect and evacuate Allied prisoners-of-war and civilian internees.

The order had qualifications. He was to occupy no more of Southern Indo-China than was necessary to ensure control over the Japanese Army. The British force was to be withdrawn as soon as its task was done, and the French would then be responsible for all political and administrative key areas.

* As always there was a slight discrepancy in the figures. The Japanese delegates to the Rangoon conference on 27 August brought a map with them showing the troops under the 38th Army as numbering 44,432. SEAC produced their own map of Japanese dispositions on 13 August, derived from Japanese sources, which gave the following figures: Southern Army Headquarters, 38th Army, 21st, 2nd and 35th Divisions, and 4th Independent Mixed Brigade, a total of 43,452. They estimated an additional figure of 6,282 for naval forces, 10,686 for air forces, and 1,871 civilians, a total of 62,431. Woodburn-Kirby gives an originally believed figure of 71,000 troops, including 9,000 air force, 4,000 navy, and 17,000 administrative personnel. The figure was found to include the 21st Division, about 13,000 strong, which was in the north, in the Chinese zone; and the 22nd Division, also about 13,000 strong, which had moved to Siam. Some of the 34th Independent Mixed Brigade's 2,500 troops also fell into the Chinese zone, since it was stationed at Tourane (Da Nang), close to the 16th parallel. The crucial figures for Gracey were the 17,000 troops in his immediate area, Saigon-Cholon, made up of Southern Army headquarters (1,500), 38th Army rear headquarters (500), the 2nd Division (8,000), plus 7,700 non-divisional troops. 35th Division headquarters, with one regiment, was in Cambodia, estimated at 1,000 strong.

**FRENCH INDO-CHINA**

Hanoi a rising took place in Saigon. Before this, a United National Front party had been created in the South to fill the vacuum left by the Japanese. The Front consisted of Trotskyist, nationalist, and religious groups (Hoa Hao, Cao Dei), and the Viet Minh, and they organized a celebration of national independence in Saigon on 22 August, when thousands of people marched along the boulevards under banners proclaiming various revolutionary slogans. Anticipating the arrival of Allied forces, the Viet Minh claimed that they should head the United National Front, since they were on good terms with the Allies. If the Front rejected this proposal, it risked having the Allies dismiss its members as puppets of the Japanese. The Viet Minh claim was provisionally accepted. A Committee of the South was then formed to govern Cochin-China. Dominated by Communists, but asserting that it was a democratic and middle-class government, it took over public installations in Saigon without resistance. Not wishing to confront the hostility of the British-Indian forces which were known to be on the way, it tried to repress the natural ebullience of the population in these rather heady days, but on 2 September, in the course of a mass demonstration along the front of the cathedral. Four other Frenchmen were killed, and others injured, as were some of the Vietnamese. Looting of French were released by the Viet Minh police chief within forty-eight hours. The effect of these events on the French population of the city was profound. They had hoped to be delivered from the trauma of the Asiatic oppressor was being substituted for another.

**The British in Vietnam**

The situation did not permit Gracey to keep within the prescribed limits. He arrived to find Saigon in a state of chaos. On the same day that Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam in 1945, there was a slight discrepancy in the figures. The Japanese delegates to the Rangoon conference on 27 August brought a map with them showing the troops under the 38th Army as numbering 44,432. SEAC produced their own map of Japanese dispositions on 13 August, derived from Japanese sources, which gave the following figures: Southern Army Headquarters, 38th Army, 21st, 2nd and 35th Divisions, and 4th Independent Mixed Brigade, a total of 43,452. They estimated an additional figure of 6,282 for naval forces, 10,686 for air forces, and 1,871 civilians, a total of 62,431. Woodburn-Kirby gives an originally believed figure of 71,000 troops, including 9,000 air force, 4,000 navy, and 17,000 administrative personnel. The figure was found to include the 21st Division, about 13,000 strong, which was in the north, in the Chinese zone; and the 22nd Division, also about 13,000 strong, which had moved to Siam. Some of the 34th Independent Mixed Brigade's 2,500 troops also fell into the Chinese zone, since it was stationed at Tourane (Da Nang), close to the 16th parallel. The crucial figures for Gracey were the 17,000 troops in his immediate area, Saigon-Cholon, made up of Southern Army headquarters (1,500), 38th Army rear headquarters (500), the 2nd Division (8,000), plus 7,700 non-divisional troops. 35th Division headquarters, with one regiment, was in Cambodia, estimated at 1,000 strong.

**French Indo-China**

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Cambodia, and Laos) had been proposed, in which all offices would be available to all citizens of the country without discrimination. Freedom of worship, freedom of association, and freedom of the press were promised. The Federation would have its own armed forces. This seemed fairly positive, but there was a negative side. The French would retain control of foreign affairs and defence decisions, and French interests would have separate representation in the federal assembly, the chief task of which would be to vote on taxes and approve the budget. Ultimate control was to be vested in a high commissioner (a governor-general under another name) with ministers to advise him. The Association of Indo-Chinese in France had already rejected these proposals as inadequate, and when Cédile saw the Committee of the South on 27 August they politely told him the terms would not do. They already had better than this, and had won their own independence, though that did not necessarily imply a break with France. Besides, the Vietnamese intended the union of the ‘three Kys’ (i.e. the three parts of Vietnam: Tonkin, Annam, Cochin-China), not the perpetuation of their divisions, even in a federation.

The rejection of the proposals by the Committee of the South and the violence of 2 September seem to have turned Cédile against the new local institutions. He then turned for advice to a group of French planters and lawyers who were hostile to the Annamite population and unimpressed by the views of the new government in Paris. They urged upon him that a hard line was the only answer: ‘The Annamites are cowards. As soon as you show that you’re firm, and get out the big stick, they’ll be out of your way like a flock of sparrows.’

As the forerunner of the new High Commissioner, Admiral Thierry d’Argeville, Cédile’s function was to restore French sovereignty. He totally lacked the means to do this, but that did not prevent him holding a press conference on 9 September, in which he declared: ‘The Viet Minh does not represent popular opinion. It is incapable of maintaining order and putting down looting. First and foremost, order must be established, then we shall set up a government in conformity with the Declaration of March 24.’

Cédile clearly would have liked to use the big stick which had been recommended. But the only big stick at his disposal was General Douglas Gracey. Gracey’s troops had arrived in Indo-China expecting trouble, at any rate from the Japanese. After hostilities broke out, one brigadier (Brigadier C. H. B. Rodham of the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade) warned his men that there would be no clear front in their operations: they would be dealing with guerrillas and might find it difficult to distinguish friend from foe. They were to use the same vigilance against ambushes and doubtful friends that was required on the North-West Frontier of India. They were also warned of ‘nibbling’ at opposition: ‘Always use the maximum force available to ensure wiping out any hostiles... 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.’ This mood was to develop later, but there is no doubt that Gracey arrived prepared for a situation in which he might have to use force to carry out his mission.

Both American and British writers have been extremely critical of the way Gracey did this. In fact the situation left Gracey little room for manoeuvre, and it would have been beyond his competence to have treated with the Viet Minh as if they had been recognized by the Allies as the government, or even the future government, of Cochin-China. The Gurkhas of his 20th Indian Division, which had begun to land at Saigon airfield on 11 September, took over the airfield itself, then the powerhouse at Saigon, the police stations, the gaol, the banks, and the Post and Telegraph Offices, relieving the Japanese guards. Owing to bad flying conditions the build-up of Gracey’s first brigade, the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade, was very slow, and it was 26 September before it was concentrated in Saigon.

Cédile informed him, on his arrival, of the troubles of 2 September, and of Bao Dai’s abdication in favour of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. The Japanese had done little to maintain law and order, Cédile said. Gracey lost no time in informing Field-Marshal Terauchi that the Japanese forces, which were present in strength throughout the South, were responsible for the security of life and property in Saigon. He did not, at first, wish to
apply firm measures against the Viet Minh, because he knew the Labour Government in London did not wish to become involved in the repression of Asian nationalism. General Sir William Slim, former 14th Army commander, and now (since 16 August) Commander-in-Chief Allied Land Forces South-East Asia, passed through Saigon on 18 September and emphasized to Gracey that he had only one mission in Saigon, and that was to disarm the Japanese. He was not to get involved in the maintenance of order. This was easier said than done. The people of Saigon had celebrated the previous day as Independence Day and there was disorder in the city. The Viet Minh ordered the market to be closed, and French shops to be boycotted. French property was attacked. Gracey believed the Saigon newspapers were partly responsible for stirring up trouble, and on 19 September he prohibited their publication. He also sent a deputation to the Vietnamese authorities demanding that they hand over buildings they had requisitioned, and furnish him with a list of their armed police and the locations of their armed forces. He had drawn up a proclamation that day, and sent it to them, saying he was going to issue it on the 21st. The proclamation prohibited public meetings and the carrying of arms (even sticks). Looters and other wrongdoers would be summarily shot. A curfew was to be strictly enforced between 9:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m.

Gracey sent a copy of his proclamation to Mountbatten, pointing out that he had been forced to act, since the French on the spot were too weak to do so, and asking the Japanese to round up Annamite forces would have resulted in the Japanese warning wanted Annamites, who would promptly vanish. The proclamation was posted throughout Saigon-Cholon on 21 September.

"Mountbatten was quick to realize," says the official British history, 'that the action taken was not only courageous but sound..." This may refer to Gracey's occupation of vital installations in Saigon, in which case it is correct; if it refers to Mountbatten's acceptance of Gracey's proclamation, it is very far from the truth. 'While appreciating that the military situation in Saigon was grave,' Mountbatten later wrote in his despatches,

...I felt that this proclamation - addressed, as it was, to the whole of Southern FIC (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 have been 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 he had been set.60

He told General Leclerc, Commander-in-Chief of French forces in the Far East, who had arrived in Kandy on his way to Indo-China, that Gracey had overstepped his orders and that he was going to disavow him. Slim was in Kandy too, and, after discussing the affair with him and Leclerc, Mountbatten was persuaded to refer to the chiefs of staff the situation that had been produced by Gracey's action.

He telegraphed to them on 24 September that he saw two courses now open to him:

i he could implement the proclamation and retain responsibility for civil and military administration throughout southern French Indo-China, or,

ii he could limit his responsibility solely to the control of the Japanese Supreme Headquarters.61

Gracey had acted with courage and determination, he told the chiefs of staff, but his forces were inadequate, the river and the port of Saigon were not yet open, and the small British-Indian force and the French population might have been compromised.

The first course suggested by Mountbatten would imply directly controlling all French forces and civil affairs until Leclerc could take over and would mean the use of British-Indian troops throughout Southern Indo-China. The second would entail senior French authority reaffirming Gracey's proclamation since, in Mountbatten's words, 'it would be dangerous now to revoke it'.62 Leclerc was not prepared to do this until he had enough force to back him. Mountbatten asked the chiefs of staff for a ruling, stressing that he preferred the second course, as soon as force was available.

The chiefs of staff reacted by changing Mountbatten's instructions. They wired him on 1 October that he was to use British-Indian troops throughout the interior of Southern Indo-China to help the French, 'so long as this does not prejudice (his) prime responsibility for Saigon'.63 The troops' role was to be preventive, not offensive, but none the less it was clear that the chiefs of staff endorsed Gracey's action.

Meanwhile, events had gone much further than a mere proclamation. Gracey had permitted the French forces in Saigon to carry out
their own coup d'etat. His troops took over the Saigon gaol and freed French paratroops who had been imprisoned by the Vietnamese. At Célide's request, he allowed the men of the 11th Colonial Infantry Division, who had been under guard in their barracks since 9 March, to be reamed and to leave the barracks. These French troops, about fifteen hundred of them, were spoiling for a fight, and went out into the streets to throw their weight about against the Annamite population. Before dawn on the 2nd, they occupied the police commissariats, the Sûreté, and the Hôtel de Ville.* Those whom the French historian Devillers terms 'the mediocre elements' in the French population then began to harass the Vietnamese mercilessly.† This can be explained by their fears of a general massacre, but Gracey had no intention of letting the pendulum swing back into violence against the Vietnamese. He ordered the 11th Colonial Infantry Division to return to their barracks and be disarmed. The Japanese command was given full responsibility for maintaining order.

Order was the first casualty of the next phase in Saigon. The electricity generating station was attacked by Vietnamese on 24 September, and dozens of Frenchmen were kidnapped or killed in the port area. The next day, there was a massacre in the Tan Dinh suburb: three hundred French men, women, and children were abducted, of whom half were killed in atrocious circumstances. This happened in the space of two hours, while Japanese sentries stood by, idle and indifferent.¶

Colonel Peter Dewey of the OSS was driving to the Saigon airfield on 26 September when his jeep was attacked. He realized the Vietnamese had taken him for a Frenchman, and cried out 'Je suis Américain', but it was too late. His body was removed by the Vietnamese before Allied troops could rescue it.

Gracey again rebuked the Japanese for failing to keep order, and warned Numata, Chief of Staff of Southern Army, that Japanese commanders who failed in this task would be treated as war criminals. Numata answered that the Japanese were unwilling to fire on the Vietnamese because they feared reprisals in the future when they would be disarmed themselves. He offered to act as intermediary between the Vietnamese and the British-French forces, pointing out that he had instructed his officers in Hanoi to maintain contact with the Viet Minh government there, in the hope of inaugurating a conference between Japanese, Viet Minh, British, and French.

The political impact of the Labour Government in London now began to be felt. It was hostile to colonial exploitation, and committed to emancipating its own colonies. It had no intention of stifling Asian nationalism by force of arms. This view was transmitted in Singapore on 28 September by the former Durham miners' leader, Jack Lawson, Secretary of State for War. Mountbatten held a conference with Gracey and Célide, and Lawson made it clear to them that although the British would keep their commitments to France, it was the policy of the British Government not to interfere in the internal affairs of Indo-China but to encourage mutual understanding between rulers and ruled.¶ Mountbatten reinforced this by pressing Célide to start negotiations between French and Vietnamese.** Célide answered that he had been attempting to do just that for the past three days.†

When Gracey returned to Saigon, he contacted the Committee of the South and arranged a ceasefire. Within a matter of days it was broken by Vietnamese attacks on British and Indian troops. Mountbatten summoned a conference, this time in Rangoon, which was attended by Gracey and Célide, and by Leclerc, in his capacity as Supreme Commander of the French forces in the Pacific. While the

* Devillers says the decision was Célide's.† Woodburn-Kirby speaks of Gracey 'ordering Célide' to take over the administration of Saigon.¶ 'On the Rue Catinat... the French population went wild; they insulted and attacked any Vietnamese who dared appear on the streets, while French and British soldiers looked on. Correspondents, both French and foreign, who happened to be on the scene, were shocked by the outrages.' The British account agrees that 'the behaviour of the French citizens during the morning of Sunday, 23 September, absolutely ensured that countermeasures would be taken by the Annamites.'** Devillers speaks of the 'absolute sincerity' of British officialdom in South-East Asia.
THE END OF THE WAR IN ASIA

conference was in progress, further news came in of attacks on Gracey's forces, and Mountbatten was compelled to order the 20th Division to secure the key points in Cochin-China, while continuing to negotiate. The Vietnamese leaders came to 20th Division headquarters to say they would not oppose British troops, but they would resist the French. Gracey refrained from using the French troops, but the Vietnamese did not keep to their assurances: guerrilla warfare began to develop throughout the whole of Southern Indo-China.

It was in this atmosphere that France's two highest officials in Asia came on the scene. Leclerc landed in Saigon on 5 October, and the High Commissioner, Thierry d'Argenlieu, arrived on 30 October. Leclerc had already been present with MacArthur at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay, and at Itagaki's surrender to Mountbatten in Singapore on 28 September. The latter occasion had been memorable for him in more ways than one. Intensely susceptible as far as French military honour was concerned, his touchy temper had been sorely tried. He had not been informed of the Potsdam decision to divide Indo-China before he left Paris, and although his orders contained a reference to a 'high commissioner' he did not know that one had been designated, still less that it was Thierry d'Argenlieu, with whom he was not on the best of terms. Worse still, at the Singapore ceremony he had watched a parade of French sailors from the battleship Richelieu and had drily commented to his neighbour, 'Don't you think they're too fat?' Any Frenchman who had not fought alongside de Gaulle was anathema to Leclerc, and when the Richelieu's commander sent a boat for him that evening, commanded merely by a leading seaman, and greeted him without any special honours on deck, Leclerc was furious. He summoned the ship's officers to the ward-room, made them stand to attention, and gave them a terrific dressing-down: 'The Navy has taken no part in the War! This behaviour must cease ... To start with, the Richelieu will now come under my command. I'll show you what stuff I'm made of, and how you make war!'

Thierry d'Argenlieu was equally authoritarian and equally sensitive to slights on his authority, but devious in achieving his ends. A Carmelite monk, whose name in religion was Father Louis de la Trinité, he had been called up in 1939, was taken prisoner by the Germans and escaped by fishing-boat from Brittany to join de Gaulle in 1940. Tortuous and given to secret intrigues, he had served under Leclerc in Africa. Now the boot was on the other foot, and Leclerc did not relish the fact. Between the two of them, they had somehow or other to re-establish French sovereignty. Leclerc had remained in Kandy until sufficient French forces were available for him to act effectively in Saigon. With the arrival of elements of the 2nd Armoured Division, and the presence in Saigon River of the chastened Richelieu, Leclerc began to take over from Gracey the responsibility for government and for disarming the Japanese. The 20th Indian Division packed its bags in January 1946, and on 1 March, with the approval of the combined chiefs of staff, Indo-China was withdrawn from South-East Asia Command.

In the Red River Delta, and in Hanoi, things were very different. No one, it became clear, ally or enemy, intended to allow the French to return to Tonkin. Jean Sainteny was only allowed to fly into Hanoi in the company of the OSS Major Patti. Pierre Messmer (later Prime Minister of France) was appointed Commissioner of the French Republic and parachuted into Tonkin, where he was captured by the Vietnamese. One of his officers was poisoned.* When Sainteny managed to reach the palace of the Government-General in Hanoi, he became a virtual prisoner, guarded by Japanese sentries, his only contact with the outside world being a radio link with Kunming. He was forced to watch helplessly from the windows when the crowds swarmed past on 2 September joyfully shouting "Doc Lap! Doc Lap! (Independence! Independence!"

There were worse humiliations to come. In mid-September the Chinese arrived. Their army descended on Tonkin like a plague of locusts. They looted whatever could be moved, and bought up immovable property by manipulating the rate of exchange of the Chinese dollar against the piastre. They lost no opportunity of humiliating the French in the eyes of the local inhabitants: when Sainteny flew back to Hanoi from a trip to Kunming, his bag was flung open on the tarmac of the airfield and its contents strewn on the ground by a Chinese customs official. French troops imprisoned

* Messmer finally reached Hanoi, but was not well enough to act as Commissioner, and handed over his functions to Sainteny. He returned to France soon after.