



French troops invading Vietnam in 1858

French Control

French emperor Napoleon III ordered the invasion of Vietnam in 1858. France's desire to increase its trade position by controlling Vietnam, along with public sentiment against Vietnam for the missionary deaths, prompted the move. Over eight years' time, French armies took control of more and more of Vietnam's territory. By 1867, all of southern Vietnam was under French rule, becoming a colony named Cochin China. It took France until 1883 to take over all of Vietnam. They named northern Vietnam Tonkin. The central portion was called Annam.

Even though the Nguyen dynasty remained in the kingdom, it had no real power. The French controlled all aspects of government in Vietnam. Though the French built roads,

railroads, harbors, and bridges throughout the country, these didn't benefit the Vietnamese people. The French used this infrastructure as a means to get at Vietnam's many natural resources. Coal, rice, and rubber were important resources for the French. The French promoted industry, too, but Vietnamese workers received low wages, and all profits went to France.

Hard Times for Vietnam

The Vietnamese people suffered under French rule. By 1940, approximately 15 percent of children went to school. About 80 percent of the population was illiterate (unable to read and write). Working conditions and pay were poor, and medical care was almost nonexistent. Resistance movements, groups of Vietnamese people planning ways to overthrow the French colonial government in Vietnam, were growing.

In 1925, the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam was founded by Nguyen Ai Quoc. He later changed his name to Ho Chi Minh. He had a strong desire for his country to regain



its independence. The success of his Youth League enabled him to enlist other groups. Together they formed the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. This group called for peasant uprisings and gained political benefits for the Vietnamese people.

Japan Takes Control

In 1940, Germany invaded and took over France. At that time an agreement gave Vietnam to the Japanese, though the French were allowed to control the colonies.

Japan used Vietnam as a major base for its military operations. In 1941, the Indochinese Communist Party saw this turmoil as a great opportunity to throw out both the Japanese and the French and gain independence for Vietnam. They established the Viet Minh, a special fighting force. Ho Chi Minh was its leader.

Because the United States had joined World War II against Japan, the Viet Minh began an

Ho Chi Minh preparing to fight the French



50 Vietnam



alliance with the United States. In 1945, the Japanese, severely beaten in the war, surrendered. Ho Chi Minh happily declared Vietnam's independence. The French, still wanting to control Vietnam, refused to accept Vietnamese independence and fought back.

France retained control of the south, while the Viet Minh were driven back into the northern portion of Vietnam. Ho sought help from the United States, but by that time, the United States had a policy to stop the spread of Communism.



Soldiers in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu

South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem



Though Ho had been a friend, he was also a communist. So the United States sent large amounts of money to France to help it regain control.

The Viet Minh didn't give up. In 1949, China's new communist government offered aid, and the fighting continued. In 1954, the Viet Minh made a successful attack on a French fortress during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. It was a major defeat for the French. Tired of the war, France agreed to a settlement. This was the end of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict, called the First Indochina War.

Other world powers drew up a peace agreement called the Geneva Accords. The agreement was presented at the Geneva Conference held in Switzerland in 1954. Through this agreement, Vietnam was divided into two nations. North Vietnam was led by Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. Hanoi was its capital. It received aid from China and the Soviet Union, both communist nations. South Vietnam, with Saigon as the capital, was led by Emperor Bao Dai, the last emperor of the weakened Nguyen dynasty. He appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. Ngo seized power and removed Bao Dai as head of state. Ngo became president of South Vietnam, which he named the Republic of Vietnam. It was backed financially by the United States.

The War Begins

Ho was not in the least satisfied with this arrangement. He wanted his entire country to be united. In 1960 his government established the National Liberation Front (NLF). Its military force was called the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong led many guerrilla attacks against Ngo's government. This was the beginning of the Vietnam War, also called the Second Indochina War.

Ngo was facing trouble from inside his own country as well. Conditions were poor throughout the nation, and the Viet Cong were able to take over many parts of the countryside. Ngo's popularity dwindled. In 1963, a military coup overthrew his government and he was killed. Political confusion followed. The United States decided to step in.



Vietnamese soldiers guarding Viet Cong prisoners in 1962

The United States Enters

In 1964, America claimed that a U.S. Navy ship had been attacked in international waters east of North Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson ordered a major bombing raid on North Vietnam. Congress granted approval. Soon after, 3,500 U.S. Marines were sent to South Vietnam to assist in the fighting against the NLF. Most military leaders felt it would be a war that could quickly and easily be won in order to stop the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia.

But North Vietnamese leaders did not give up the fight. Large numbers of U.S. troops were sent to South Vietnam because the U.S. military was not doing well and needed to increase its numbers in order to try to win. Many South Vietnamese people felt that this was a civil war and were opposed to Americans being there. Many Americans felt the same. But U.S. leaders still sent more troops. About 75,000 U.S. soldiers were in Vietnam in July 1965—the number grew to 500,000 in early 1968. There were also about 600,000 South Vietnamese soldiers. The number of deaths rose rapidly, but the Viet Cong were slowly being driven out of South Vietnam.

U.S. soldiers entering a Vietnamese village



Damage to Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive was North Vietnam's answer. It began in January 1968 during the Tet holiday, a new year's celebration. The Viet Cong launched attacks on every major South Vietnamese city and town, as well as strategic points in the countryside. The intense battles continued for weeks.

It was becoming clear that even with huge numbers of soldiers and military hardware, the United States couldn't win. In the United States, the peace movement was putting pressure on the government to end the war. President Johnson halted the bombing in the north and began negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders. The Paris Peace Talks, which began in 1968, included representatives from the South Vietnamese government as well.

Still, the fighting continued. Losses mounted on both sides. Johnson refused to run for reelection, and in 1968

Richard Nixon was elected president. He began to slowly pull American soldiers out of Vietnam. In the United States, public opinion was growing against the war. People on many college campuses and in cities and towns across the country protested America's involvement.

A peace treaty was signed in January 1973. U.S. troops were withdrawn, and a peaceful resolution of the conflict was to take place. But more than 100,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in South Vietnam, and the fighting continued long after the U.S. soldiers had left. In 1975, communist troops took control of Saigon and declared victory. The war had finally come to an end.

Communist troops occupied Saigon in 1975.



Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong

Vietnam Is Reunited

North Vietnam and South Vietnam were reunited on July 2, 1976. The country was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, led by a communist government with its capital in Hanoi. But the price had been high. More than 3 million Vietnamese had died. Much of the countryside had been damaged by the fighting. Wilderness had been destroyed, and villages had been burned. Many people were homeless and hungry.

Over the next several years, hundreds of thousands of people fled the country on boats. Known as the "boat people," they

headed toward Hong Kong and other countries in Southeast Asia. Many eventually came to the United States. Some boat people escaped from South Vietnam as they feared persecution by the new government. Others just wanted to live in a place with greater prosperity and less destruction.

It was clear that the new government faced severe problems. The beloved leader Ho Chi Minh had died in 1969, and no strong leaders had taken his place. For so long the country had focused on war. Now, it was a challenge to deal with the issues that peacetime presented.

The economy was bad, and severe flooding in some parts, with drought elsewhere, increased the difficulties. Throughout the next decade, leaders tried to form alliances with the neighboring nations of Laos and Cambodia. In the end, Vietnam became involved in more fighting, as these countries dealt with their own internal strife. China, formerly a friend, attacked Vietnam in 1979 for its dealings in Cambodia. Vietnam was becoming isolated from nearly every other country in the world.

It was clear that changes were needed. The government announced a series of economic changes in the early 1980s, which led to the *doi moi* reforms of 1986. These reforms helped to open the Vietnamese economy to the rest of the world. Vietnamese people were eager to participate. The relaxed economic regulations and governmental controls gave them opportunities to run businesses on their own. They could build industries, trade with other nations, and promote tourism. They wanted to be part of the world economy

and enjoy greater prosperity. Few held any lingering grudges regarding the war.

The United States ended its long-standing trade embargo, or trade restrictions, with Vietnam in 1994. The next year full diplomatic relations were established. In November 2000, President Bill Clinton traveled to Vietnam, the first president since Richard Nixon to visit there. He was greeted warmly by crowds, even in Hanoi. His mission was mainly to deal with the issue of servicemen still missing in action since the war. But his visit also served to increase trade between the two nations and to promote greater cooperation between the United States and Vietnam.



U.S. president Bill Clinton in Vietnam