

Title:The Vietnam Wars

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The Chinese Dragon 208 B.C.-1428 A.D.

In **Vietnam**, a nation forged in the crucible of war, it is possible to measure time by invasions. Long before the Americans, before the Japanese, before the French even, there were the Chinese. They arrived in the 3rd century B.C. and stayed for more than 1,000 years, building roads and dams, forcing educated Vietnamese to speak their language, and leaving their imprint on art, architecture, and cuisine.

The Chinese referred to their Vietnamese neighbors as Annam, the "Pacified south," but the Vietnamese were anything but peaceful subjects. Chafing under Chinese taxes, military drafts, and forced-labor practices, they rose up and pushed their occupiers out again and again, creating a warrior tradition that would plague invaders for centuries to come.

The struggle with China produced a string of heroes who live on today in street names, films, and literature. In 40 A.D., the Trung sisters led the first uprising, then drowned themselves rather than surrender when the Chinese returned to surround their troops. Two centuries later, another woman entered the pantheon of war heroes. Wearing gold-plated armor and riding astride an elephant, Trieu Au led 1,000 men into battle. As she faced surrender, she too committed suicide. In the 13th century, Tran Hung Dao used hit-and-run tactics to rout the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. His strategy would be copied 700 years later against the French, with momentous results.

Finally, in the 15th century, a hero arose to oust the Chinese for good. Le Loi believed--as did generations of warriors to follow--that

political persuasion was more important than military victories. According to his poet/adviser, Nguyen Trai, it was "better to conquer hearts than citadels." In 1428, Le Loi deployed platoons of elephants against the Chinese horsemen, and forced China to recognize Vietnamese independence. Gracious in victory, Le Loi gave 500 boats and thousands of horses to the Chinese and ushered them home. Except for a brief, unsuccessful foray in 1788, they did not return.

Everything Tends to Ruin" 1627-1941

In 1627, a young white man arrived in Hanoi, bearing gifts and speaking fluent Vietnamese. Father Alexandre de Rhodes devoted himself to the cause that had carried him 6,000 miles from France to **Vietnam**: "saving" the souls of the non-Christian Vietnamese. He preached six sermons a day, and in two years converted 6,700 people from Confucianism to Catholicism. Vietnam's emperor, wary that the Frenchman's religion was just the calling card for an invasion force, banished Rhodes from the country.

Two centuries later, the French proved the emperor right. In 1857, claiming the right to protect priests from persecution, a French naval force appeared off Vietnamese shores. In 26 years, **Vietnam** was a French colony.

The French turned the jungle nation into a money-making venture.

They drafted peasants to produce rubber, alcohol, and salt in slavish conditions. They also ran a thriving opium business and turned thousands of Vietnamese into addicts. When France arrived in **Vietnam**, explained Paul Doumer, architect of the colonial economy, "the Annamites were ripe for servitude."

But the French, like the Chinese before them, misread their colonial subjects. The Vietnamese spurned slavery, and organized a determined resistance, using their knowledge of the countryside to outwit the French. "Rebel bands disturb the country everywhere," complained a French commander in Saigon. "They appear from nowhere in large numbers, destroy everything, and then disappear into nowhere."

French colonial officials made clumsy attempts to pacify the Vietnamese. They built schools and taught French culture to generations of the native elite, only to find that most Vietnamese clung proudly to their own traditions. When persuasion failed, the French resorted to brutality. But executions only created martyrs for the resistance and more trouble for the French. As one French military commander wrote with foreboding before returning home: "Everything here tends to ruin."

Life, Liberty, and Ho Chi Minh 1941-1945

Early in 1941, a thin, taut figure with a wispy goatee disguised himself as a Chinese journalist and slipped across China's southern border into **Vietnam**. In a secluded cave just north of Hanoi, he met with his comrades in Vietnam's struggle for independence. The time was ripe, he told them. In the tumult of World War II, the Japanese had swept through most of Southeast Asia, replacing the French in **Vietnam** with their own colonial troops. The Vietnamese, he said, must help the Western Allies defeat Japan. In return, the British and Americans would help **Vietnam** gain independence after the war. In the dim light of the cave, the men formed the **Vietnam** Independence League, or Vietminh, from which their fugitive leader took the name that would plague a generation of generals in France and the United States: Ho Chi Minh.

By 1941, Ho was known as supporter of Vietnamese independence. For 30 years he had drifted from France to China, to the Soviet Union, preaching Communism and nationalism to Vietnamese living abroad. When he returned to **Vietnam**, his frugal ways and his devotion to the cause won him an instant following.

With American aid, Ho directed guerrilla operations against the Japanese. In August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allies. A month later, Ho mounted a platform in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square, where lanterns, flowers, banners, and red flags announced the festive occasion. Quoting directly from the American Declaration of Independence, he asserted that all men have a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Then, while the crowd of hundreds of

thousands chanted "Doc-Lap, Doc-Lap"--independence--Ho declared **Vietnam** free from 62 years of French rule.

The Fall of the French 1945-1954

The Vietnamese, their hopes kindled by the excitement of the moment, soon found that independence would not come as easily as elegant speeches. In 1945, French troops poured into the country, determined to regain control of the colony.

Ho, meanwhile, consolidated power, jailing or executing thousands of opponents. He also appealed several times for U.S. help, but to no avail. Determined to fight on, Ho

told French negotiators, "If we must fight, we will fight. We will lose 10 men for every one you lose, but in the end it is you who will tire."

In the winter of 1946-1947, the French stormed Hanoi and other cities in the North. Hopelessly outgunned, Ho's troops withdrew to the mountains. Led by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietminh harassed the French soldiers with a ragtag array of antique French muskets, American rifles, Japanese carbines, spears, swords, and homemade grenades. Moving through familiar terrain, supported by a network of friendly villagers, the Vietnamese struck, then disappeared into the jungle.

By 1950, the French war in **Vietnam** had become a battleground in a much larger struggle. China, where revolution had just brought Communists to power, and the Soviet Union were supplying the Vietminh with weapons. The U.S., committed to containing the spread of Communism, backed the French.

Even \$2.5 billion in U.S. aid did not keep the French from wearing down, just as Ho had predicted. The

final blow came in 1954, when General Giap surrounded 15,000 French troops holed up near the remote mountain town of Dien Bien Phu. After two months of fighting in the spring mud, the French were exhausted and Dien Bien Phu fell. Reluctantly, they agreed to leave **Vietnam** for good. Doc-Lap at Last 1954-1975

The Americans cringed at the thought of a Communist **Vietnam**, and picked up where the French left off. A peace accord temporarily divided **Vietnam** in half, promising elections for the whole country by 1956. With Ho in full control of the North, the Americans backed a French-educated anti-Communist named Ngo Dinh Diem in the South.

As President, Diem managed to alienate everyone, arresting thousands of dissidents and condemning scores to death. In 1956, he was accused of blocking the elections, adding fuel to a growing brushfire of rebellion.

The U.S. responded by pumping money into Diem's failing regime and sending military "advisers," many of whom were unofficially engaged in combat. Then, on August 2, 1964, reports reached Washington alleging that three North Vietnamese boats had attacked the U.S.S. Maddox, on patrol in Vietnam's Tonkin Gulf. The U.S. went to war, though the reports were later disputed.

In 1965, American bombers struck North **Vietnam** in a fearsome assault, designed to break the will of the people. But the North refused to surrender.

Meanwhile, in the South, Communist rebels, called the Viet Cong, operated stealthily under cover of the jungle. With aid from the North, they laid mines and booby traps, and built networks of secret supply routes. Like the French before them, U.S. troops--some 500,000 strong by 1968--pursued their elusive enemy in ways that alienated the people they were supposed to be saving. They burned villages suspected of harboring Viet Cong and sprayed chemicals to strip the jungle of its protective covering. By 1968, 1 out of every 12 South Vietnamese was a refugee.

On January 30, 1968, the Vietnamese celebrated Tet, their New Year, with fireworks and parties. But as darkness fell, a surprise attack interrupted the revelry. More than 80,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops stormed major cities and even the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

U.S. troops turned back the so-called Tet Offensive. But the American people, tiring of an expensive and seemingly fruit-less conflict, turned against the war. President Richard M. Nixon took office in 1969 amid a rising tide of antiwar sentiment. He agreed to begin pulling out of **Vietnam**. It took four more years of fighting and thousands more casualties, but in March 1973, the last U.S. troops withdrew.

Two years later, on April 30, 1975, columns of North Vietnamese soldiers entered Saigon, meeting little resistance from the demoralized South Vietnamese army. The last American officials fought their way onto any aircraft available and left **Vietnam** to the Communists. Ho Chi Minh, who had died in 1969, did not live to see the moment. After years of struggle, **Vietnam** had been unified-- but by force and at the cost of millions dead.

Abstract:

An historic tableau of wars in **Vietnam** from 208 BC to 1975 is presented. Periods covered are the Chinese wars from 208 BC to 1428, the French colonization of **Vietnam** from 1627 to 1941, Vietnamese involvement in World War II, the independence movement against the French and the war with the US.

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