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The Vietnam Wars, Section 2

The Emergence of the Viet Minh

The big chance for the Vietnamese came during the Second World War, when Germany conquered France, and Germany's ally Japan moved into Vietnam. For most of the war Germany dominated France, and French colonial officials ruled Vietnam under Japanese supervision. In 1944, however, the US and allied armies landed in Normandy; a government friendly to the Allies was soon restored to power in Paris. The French officials and soldiers in Vietnam then began plotting to switch sides and attack the Japanese. Their plotting was very inept; in March 1945 the Japanese attacked and crushed them. Most of the Frenchmen in Vietnam either fled to China or were imprisoned.

Japan did not have the manpower to replace the French colonial administrators, so the destruction of the French administration left the Vietnamese less tightly controlled than they had been in many decades. This opened the way for Vietnamese nationalism.

The most effective of the nationalist organizations was the Viet Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam. It had been founded by Ho Chi Minh, and most of its leaders were members of the Indochinese Communist Party. However, its immediate program was more concerned with national independence than with Communism. As Ho Chi Minh said, before one could practice Communism one had to have a country to practice it in. The Viet Minh invited Vietnamese of any political persuasion to join in the struggle against foreign rule.

The Viet Minh also did everything in its power to make friends with the US, and cooperated with the US in the struggle against Japan. However, while Ho Chi Minh established a good relationship with some individual US representatives in Asia, who even gave him some arms and equipment, he never succeeded in making contact with Washington. The US government was committed to a policy of alliance with France, and in the long run this policy precluded friendship with the Viet Minh.

The Viet Minh had been establishing guerrilla groups and underground organizations in some parts of northern Vietnam since the early 1940's. After the Japanese eliminated the French administration in March 1945, the Viet Minh was able to operate more freely, and it expanded very rapidly.

By the time Japan surrendered to the US in August, the Viet Minh had strong organizations in much of Tonkin and Annam, and significant support in Cochinchina. In the weeks following the Japanese surrender, the Viet Minh seized local authority in most of Vietnam, and declared the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

By the end of 1945, the French were coming back to Vietnam. Negotiations between France and the Viet Minh went on for about a year, but produced no effective compromise. The Viet Minh wanted Vietnam to have independence, or at least something very close to full independence. The French wanted to regain effective control of the country. By December 1946, all efforts at a peaceful settlement had failed; the French and the Viet Minh were at war.

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