The Vietnam Wars, Section 3

The First Indochina War

From 1946 to 1950, the war was essentially stalemated. The French had overwhelming superiority in weapons; the French Army could take and hold any particular area it really wanted. However, the French had to bring soldiers from thousands of miles away, and it was not politically practical for France to send a really large number of French soldiers to Vietnam. The Viet Minh, better able to recruit soldiers locally, had a considerable edge in manpower.

There were basically three types of areas in Vietnam. 1) Some areas were firmly controlled by the French. Although Viet Minh agents and underground organizers operated in these areas to some extent, the Viet Minh could not afford to conduct real military operations in these areas. 2) Some areas were firmly held by the Viet Minh. French forces could fight their way into such areas when they were determined to do so, but this did not happen very often, both because it was expensive, and because the French were short of manpower for such operations. 3) The most important fighting took place in the intermediate areas—the places where both sides had troops. Viet Minh guerrillas hid, sometimes in the jungle but usually in the villages. The French could not destroy these guerrillas because they were so hard to find. It was very difficult to tell a guerrilla from an ordinary peasant. Most peasants would not tell the French anything about Viet Minh activities, but would tell the Viet Minh all about what the French were doing. The result was that the Viet Minh could stage many surprise attacks and ambushes, while the French could not often locate the guerrillas to make a counter-attack.

One should not regard the Viet Minh simply as a military organization. The Viet Minh cadres spread through the villages of Vietnam as local administrators and agents were as important as the soldiers who did the fighting. Note: In standard English usage, a "cadre" is a group of people who perform a leading role in an organization. In writings on Asian Communism, however, a "cadre" is an individual who performs leadership functions. A cadre in a Communist-led movement is not necessarily a member of the Communist Party.

There were some Vietnamese who opposed the Viet Minh. Eventually, the French formed a puppet government, the "State of Vietnam", and claimed to be fighting alongside this Vietnamese organization to save Vietnam from Communism. However, the French never got a great deal of benefit from this puppet government. The problem was that almost all Vietnamese, even those who opposed the Viet Minh, resented French rule. The French suspected (with good reason) that if they built up the State of Vietnam into a really powerful organization, with a substantial army of anti-Communist Vietnamese under its control, it would turn against them and try to break free of French domination. The French therefore gave the State of Vietnam no real power, and in particular they gave it no control over those Vietnamese who had been enlisted as soldiers to fight for France against the Viet Minh.

The most important groups of Vietnamese fighting against the Viet Minh were the private armies of certain religious groups: the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects in the South, and the Catholics in some areas of both the North and the South. These groups had supported or at least cooperated with the Viet Minh in 1945, but by 1949 most of them had changed sides and joined the French. Since each of them formed a fairly small minority of the Vietnamese population, there was little reason to worry about their trying to expell the French from Vietnam, and France trusted them with their own armed forces in a way it did not trust the State of Vietnam.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party won control of China. By early 1950, the new Communist
government in Beijing had established its control of the areas of China that border on Vietnam. For the first time, the Viet Minh was able to get significant quantities of weapons beyond what it could manufacture in the jungle or capture on the battlefield.

This changed the whole pattern of the war. The amount of weapons coming in from China was not large. The US, which began aiding France at about the same time China began aiding the Viet Minh, provided far more aid to France than China did to the Viet Minh. At the end of the war the French still estimated that they had about a five-to-one advantage in artillery. A five-to-one advantage in artillery, however, was not enough to allow the French to win or even to hold on. The artillery advantage of sixteen to one that the French had had in 1950 had been barely enough to compensate for the overwhelming superiority of the Viet Minh in manpower and peasant support. As soon as the Chinese began supplying even modest quantities of heavy weapons to the Viet Minh, the French were doomed. By 1954 the Viet Minh had won the war.

In the spring of 1954, the Viet Minh took the French outpost at Dien Bien Phu, in the highlands at the northwest corner of Tonkin. This was an area where hardly any Vietnamese lived, and where the Viet Minh could not therefore expect local support. The French had put thousands of men there, far away from other French forces, assuming that the Viet Minh would not be able to transport enough men, supplies, and equipment through the mountains and jungle to mount an effective attack. The Viet Minh, however, mobilized tens of thousands of civilians from distant areas to carve roads through the jungle and help with transportation. Many peasants walked along these trails wheeling bicycles with loads of hundreds of pounds. The Viet Minh concentrated far more artillery in the hills around Dien Bien Phu than they had ever put into one place before. Once the Viet Minh artillery and anti-aircraft guns had made it impossible for the French to land planes at Dien Bien Phu to deliver supplies, the French position became almost hopeless.

The United States considered intervening by air to save the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, but eventually decided not to do so. President Eisenhower did not think a small increase in US aid to the French would do any good, and he was not willing to commit the US to a really massive increase in its role in Indochina.

Some people talk about the Battle of Dien Bien Phu as if it were the main reason the French lost the war, but this is a serious exaggeration. Dien Bien Phu was the biggest single battle the Viet Minh won, but to understand the real nature of the Viet Minh victory, it is more useful to look at the way they took over most of the Red River Delta—the area near Hanoi—without any such grand battle. The French had concentrated much of their strength in the Red River Delta. They had far more artillery there than the Viet Minh. They had air support while the Viet Minh had none. In the Red River Delta (unlike most areas) the French even had more soldiers than the Viet Minh. But most of the peasants sided with the Viet Minh, so small groups of Viet Minh could move about the countryside, even operate in villages in which French troops were stationed, without the French being able to locate and destroy these Viet Minh units. The French troops spent most of their time huddled in their outposts, wondering when the next surprise attack was going to come. The Viet Minh in fact ruled the Delta by 1954 even though they had fewer troops there than the French.

In the areas that it ruled, the Viet Minh had to decide between two policy goals. On the one hand, Communist ideals required supporting the poor against the rich, which in the Vietnamese countryside meant supporting the poor peasants, especially tenants, against wealthy landlords. On the other hand, many landlords supported the Viet Minh in its struggle against the French, and the Viet Minh leadership was reluctant to weaken the struggle for independence by alienating such landlords. In the early years of the war, the Viet Minh stressed nationalist struggle, and did not pay much attention to organizing class struggle pitting the poor against the rich. After 1949, and especially after 1953, the Viet Minh paid more attention to the particular interests of the poor. The amount that landlords could charge for rented land were reduced; in some cases rents were abolished completely, and the land simply became the property of the peasants who farmed it. Some debts that the peasants owed to landlords were cancelled. The Viet Minh established a tax system that placed most of the burden of taxation on the well-to-do.