Vietnam 1945

The Quest for Power

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Epilogue

The organizers of the celebrations in Hanoi and Saigon on 2 September 1945 made a point of displaying the flags of the Allied powers, minus the French tricolor, alongside the banners of the Viet Minh—Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The American OSS team in Hanoi already boasted a villa in front of which the Stars and Stripes was hoisted proudly; soon other villas were flying British and Chinese standards, and the first small French military unit to enter Saigon along with the British naturally risked a fight by flaunting the tricolor. The Japanese had put away the Rising Sun, yet their influence on events was not quite finished. The story of Vietnam during the next fifteen months is symbolized by the removal of one after another of these flags, until only the banners of the French and the DRV remained, held by citizens about to lock together in mortal combat.

On 6 September, a British advance party landed at Tan Son Nhat airport to prepare for arrival in Saigon of the Twentieth Indian Division, whose commander, General Douglas Gracey, also had responsibility for all other Allied units, civilian as well as military, about to enter Indochina south of the 16th parallel. When Gracey himself arrived a week later he immediately ordered his Gurkha escort to accompany a Japanese unit to evict the Vietnamese Southern Provisional Executive Committee from the former Governor-General’s Palace. On the 22d, Gracey accepted Jean Célèbre’s urgings that he rearm fourteen hundred French soldiers and civilians, who then, in the name of restoring law and order, proceeded to rampage through the city, cursing, beating up, detaining, and otherwise offending any native encountered. Although Gracey angrily disarmed the former internees as punishment, Vietnamese bands of different political tendencies struck back ruthlessly, killing more than a hundred and fifty French civilians, many of them women and children. As the hatred and bloodshed escalated, no
leader, British, French, or Vietnamese, was in a position to reverse the cycle. One-sided news accounts quickly reached Paris and Hanoi, provoking public outrage and strengthening the hands of those who argued that no negotiated solution was possible.

In London, as well as at SEAC headquarters in Kandy, word of these violent outbursts in Saigon led Great Britain to place a ceiling on the number of its own forces entering southern Indochina, while simultaneously attempting without success to speed up the arrival of French troops. On 3 October, the French cruiser Triomphant departed the first thousand-man contingent of the Fifth Colonial Infantry Regiment. Three weeks later, sufficient strength existed for Gracey to launch a combined British-French-Japanese attack on the town of My Tho in the Mekong Delta. During November, a French armored column swept northwest to Tay Ninh, while Japanese and British units cleared armed Viet Minh adherents from the region immediately north and northwest of Saigon. A French infantry battalion landed at Nha Trang on the central coast, backed up by the big guns of the Triomphant. British/Indian ground forces increasingly avoided participation in offensive operations, although Spitfire aircraft continued to roam the skies, swooping down occasionally to strafe Vietnamese hamlets and river craft. With Lord Mountbatten facing difficulties elsewhere in Southeast Asia, one Indian infantry brigade departed Indochina for Borneo in late December, and another headed for Malaya in mid January 1946. Amid much ceremony, the French made Gracey a citoyen d'honneur of the city of Saigon before he placed on 28 January, General Jacques Philippe Leclerc took the salute of the last British forces to leave two months later, which concluded Britain's direct involvement in Indochina except for repatriation of Japanese personnel still awaiting sea transport.

Once the shock of national defeat had been absorbed, most of the eighty thousand or so Japanese nationals positioned in Indochina in September 1945 turned their thoughts to home and to avoiding local dangers until such time as Allied commanders found spare ships to send them there. General Gracey often ordered Japanese forces positioned south of the 16th parallel to participate in offensive operations, however, and he gave them a variety of patrol, police, guard, and logistical duties as well. Because Japanese officers refused to take orders from French personnel, an elaborate network of British liaison officers had to be constructed. In the north, meanwhile, the Chinese general Lu Han ordered most Japanese personnel to concentrate in the vicinity of Haiphong, while temporarily retaining the services of a few technicians. General Tsuchihashi’s fears about ill-treatment of his men at the hands of the Japanese recruits was maintained with the likelihood.

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men at the hands of incoming Chinese forces proved unfounded; Yunnanese recruits in particular seemed awed by Japanese combat units, who maintained their discipline and composure even in defeat. It helped that Japanese commanders were well supplied with piasne banknotes, reducing the likelihood of confrontations over food, fuel, and other scarce resources.

By August 1946, the big holding camps for Japanese at Cap Saint-Jacques in the south and Haiphong in the north had been emptied, but the French continued to detain at least nine hundred Japanese officials, Kenpeitai members, prison guards, and alleged secret agents. The exact fate of many of these individuals is uncertain, although we know that a few were executed, while others eventually managed to make their way back to Japan. Marshal Terauchi had been transferred to Singapore earlier by the British for possible trial as a war criminal, but died of natural causes before the issue could be resolved. General Tsuchihashi made his way home unobtrusively, despite the desire of the French to punish him for the events of March 1945, above all for the summary execution of Indochina Army officers at Lang Son.

Meanwhile, perhaps five hundred Japanese officers and enlisted men had chosen to join the Viet Minh and other armed groups, especially in the south. Each was given a Vietnamese name and otherwise encouraged to blend in. They were particularly useful as weapons instructors and in the establishment of small equipment repair and ordnance facilities. Casualty rates were high, but a few survivors arrived back in Japan quietly in the late 1950s. At about this time, other Japanese with experience in Indochina returned to Saigon at the encouragement of Ngo Dinh Diem, now president of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam; some of these became quite wealthy in the wartime economic boom of the 1960s. Former Ambassador Matsumoto visited Saigon several times as Tokyo’s special representative.

Although the 1975 communist victory meant financial setbacks for Japanese businessmen, a decade later they were in the vanguard of renewed trading contacts with Vietnam. In January 1993, as if to tie up a loose end, Hanoi announced that it intended to return the remains of eighteen Japanese servicemen killed during or immediately after World War II.

In fulfillment of Allied General Order No. 1, the first Chinese troop units reached Hanoi on 9 September 1945, unceremoniously evicting Jean Sainteny from that city’s former Governor-General’s Palace the next day. Sainteny’s requests that colonial troops be released and rearmed were rejected. A week later General Lu Han met with Ho Chi Minh, implicitly accepting the DRV provisional government as a suitable partner, providing it delivered sufficient provisions to Chinese troops, did not protest massive Chinese financial manipulations, and kept popular discontent about the
occupation under control. General Hisao Wen was not happy that his plans to install the Vietnam Revolutionary League, headed by Nguyen Hai Than, had been foiled; later he pressured Ho Chi Minh to accept Revolutionary League and Nationalist Party members into the government, a tactical arrangement that satisfied no one.

At the ceremony organized by Lu Han to take General Tsuchihashi's surrender on 28 September, neither France nor the DRV was represented officially. Not long afterward, however, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek received the new French high commissioner for Indochina, Admiral d'Argenlieu, in Chungking, and by the end of October, French Ambassador Zimovi Pechkov was able to inform Paris that China might well return northern Indochina to France in exchange for substantial economic concessions. As the diplomatic bargaining continued into 1946, thousands of Chinese carpetbaggers took advantage of the military occupation to reap quick rewards at the expense of the long-suffering inhabitants, while division after division of troops from Yunnan and Kwangsi marched Haiphong en route to northern China and eventual battle with Mao Tse-tung's forces. On 28 February, Chungking agreed with Paris to withdraw the remaining Chinese forces in exchange for France relinquishing territorial and concessional rights extracted from China in the nineteenth century, providing a free port and customs tax for Chinese goods moving through Tonom, and granting special status to Chinese nationals residing in Indochina. Although Chinese generals in Hanoi wanted more than this, and managed to delay final withdrawal for six months, French troops began landing at Haiphong on 8 March.

As Chiang Kai-shek's confrontation with the Chinese Communist Party and Red Army intensified in 1947, Indochinese affairs slid towards incoherence. Many Kwangsi and Yunnan generals had deserted the Nationalist cause by early 1949, making the southern provinces a less promising venue for Chiang's forces to retreat to than the island of Taiwan. In January 1950, the new People's Republic of China became the first government to recognize the DRV. Stocks of American weapons and ammunition captured in China and transported to the Sino-Vietnamese border enabled General Vo Nguyen Giap to outmaneuver entire new divisions. Chinese anti-aircraft units played a key role in Giap's 1954 victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu. The CCP exerted considerable influence over Vietnamese communists until the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Relations cooled markedly following President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China, and eventually degenerated into armed hostilities in 1979. At least four hundred thousand overseas Chinese fled Vietnam. A decade later, the United States supported the Vietnamese who opposed Hanoi's socialist system. United Nations' General Assembly resolutions remained largely symbolic.

Following the withdrawal of the French from Indochina, Vietnam was no longer a colonial possession, but it was far from a politically stable nation. The United States, France, and Great Britain engaged in indirect support for the southern South Vietnamese government. American military advisors, French mercenaries, and South Vietnamese soldiers were provided to the South Vietnamese Army. For a while, the North Vietnamese, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, were left to their own devices. However, as the North Vietnamese gained strength, they began to attack the South Vietnamese mainland, leading to more direct American intervention in the form of military advisors, supplies, and training. This eventually led to a full-scale war between North and South Vietnam, with American troops eventually becoming involved in the conflict. The war ended in 1975 with the fall of Saigon and the reunification of Vietnam under the control of the North Vietnamese.
decade later, as the “socialist world” disintegrated, elderly communist rulers in Beijing and Hanoi saw cause to resolve their differences, yet Vietnamese suspicions about the long-term motivations of the Chinese persisted. Meanwhile, the Republic of China (Taiwan), taking advantage of Hanoi’s sweeping economic reforms, could boast in 1993 that it was the largest single foreign investor in Vietnam.

Following the Japanese capitulation in mid August 1945, the government of the United States saw no reason to become extensively involved in Indochina, having already agreed that Chinese and British forces would assume occupation responsibilities, and having formally reaffirmed French sovereignty over the territory. Even so, American theater-level momentum persisted a bit longer, and Washington was embarrassed by a series of articles by journalists who arrived with Allied units that expressed outrage at the general disregard for native aspirations to independence. American largess, personal contacts, and political favor became the object of intense local competition and complaints. Given general perceptions of its massive power and its prestige, decisions by the United States not to act took on causative significance in themselves.

During late 1945, the most important question was the degree to which the United States would assist France to regain sovereign authority over Indochina, above all by facilitating the arrival of French troops, equipment, and supplies. The Allied Shipping Pool decided to assign a far higher priority to repatriation of U.S. and British troops, as well as to transporting Indian soldiers home from the Mediterranean, although eight troopships were provided by the United States to move the French Ninth Colonial Infantry Division to Saigon. Most French soldiers were outfitted with U.S. weapons and uniforms, and they roared around in U.S. jeeps, trucks, and armored cars—a startling, depressing sight for Vietnamese who had hoped for American neutrality, if not outright support.

For a while, contradictory signals from the Americans abounded. In Saigon, much to the ire of General Gracey, OSS Lieutenant Colonel Peter Dewey publicly protested French behavior and met repeatedly with Viet Minh representatives, until he was killed by unknown Vietnamese assailants on 26 September. In Chungking, General Wedemeyer still chose not to reequip French troops in southern China, and neither did he try to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to reverse General Lu Han’s decision to exclude French forces entirely from northern Indochina. Brigadier General Philip Gallagher, the senior American adviser to General Lu Han, was taken by Major Patri to meet President Ho Chi Minh, and it was not long before Hanoi newspapers proclaimed Gallagher co-founder of a Vietnamese—

American Association. Patti was ordered by his OSS superiors to depart Indochina forthwith and appears to have been placed in career purgatory by the U.S. Army. He was probably fortunate not to be dragged out for condemnation by Senator Joseph McCarthy during the witch-hunts for communists in the 1950s.

The Truman administration gave more consistent support to French efforts in Indochina as the Cold War intensified in 1948, and especially following communist victory in China, when Indochina came to be seen as a vital segment of the global anticommunist front line. Even before the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Washington increased its military aid to the French substantially, and by fiscal 1953-54, the United States was paying 78 percent of France’s total costs in Indochina. As Paris withdrew troops in stages following the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Eisenhower administration took up full sponsorship of the fledgling Vietnamese Army created by the French and supported the resolutely anticommunist Ngo Dinh Diem in his efforts to build a new Republic of Vietnam with its capital in Saigon.

In 1965, dissatisfied at Diem’s lack of progress in quelling the communist-led insurgency in South Vietnam, President John F. Kennedy backed a military coup that resulted in the killing of Diem and his younger brother; a third brother was executed a few months later. From that time on, it was probably inevitable that Washington would commit American combat forces to South Vietnam, although President Lyndon Johnson held back until March 1965. Four years later, when it was clear that even 550,000 U.S. troops could not provide the desired results, President Nixon began gradual reductions in the name of “Vietnamization” of the conflict. The agreement finally signed in Paris in January 1973 traded complete withdrawal of U.S. troops for the return of American POWs and the continued functioning of two separate administrations in the south pending further negotiations. These negotiations never got off the ground, however, and when Hanoi launched its massive military offensive in early 1975, President Gerald Ford decided not to send U.S. aircraft back over Vietnam to counter it. The Republic of Vietnam collapsed quickly, and America accepted hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Subsequently, the United States maintained an economic embargo on Hanoi, which was not lifted until 1994. Begun so well-meaningly in the middle of World War II, America’s Vietnam involvement produced domestic wounds second only to those of the 1861–65 U.S. Civil War.

French determination to return to Indochina in late 1945 was matched by neither the physical resources necessary to accomplish the task forcibly nor the political fl.
nor the political flexibility to negotiate power-sharing arrangements with Ho Chi Minh and other DRV leaders. French gunboats coursed up and down the tributaries of the Mekong, and armored columns dashed as far as Ban Me Thuot in the central highlands, but General Leduc lacked sufficient troops to control the southern countryside. It would take years to reconstitute a native militia, and even longer to create a Vietnamese officer corps. As for Tonkin, Leduc possessed no minesweepers or landing craft to mount an early amphibious operation around Haiphong, and lacked sufficient transport aircraft to drop even one battalion over Hanoi—assuming Chinese agreement to French reentry there, which was not forthcoming until six months later. Given those limitations, regaining control over Cambodia and Laos became all the more important. By January 1946, King Norodom Sihanouk had accepted French terms for Cambodia. Laos took a bit longer, because of Chinese objections to French forces operating north of the 16th parallel and armed resistance from bands of young Vietnamese and Lao, but by late April it was possible to install a commissioner of the French Republic in Vientiane. French forces from Laos had already penetrated central Vietnam to seize the former royal capital of Hue. Although these developments enabled Admiral d'Argenlieu to talk with more authority of an "Indochina Federation," they simultaneously reinforced the fears of the Vietnamese about what lay in store for them if effective national resistance could not be organized.

While working to achieve military supremacy, the French did not abjure political discussions with prominent Vietnamese entirely. Ir Hanoi on 12 October 1945, Jean Sainteny and Léon Pignon met with Nguyen Hai Tham, head of the Vietnam Revolutionary League, without result. Three days later, Sainteny had his first meeting with Ho Chi Minh. In Paris, de Gaulle met secretly with Prince Vinh San, who had been deposed as boy emperor (Duy Tan) by the French in 1916, exiled to Réunion for twenty-five years, and then enrolled in the Free French forces. Apparently, Vinh San was to be touted as the monarch who had never abdicated, a symbol of both Vietnamese patriotism and Franco-Vietnamese cooperation. That the prince was completely out of touch with events in his homeland must have been considered an asset by de Gaulle. The idea of de Gaulle and Vinh San going to Saigon together was, however, aborted when the prince died in an airplane crash in Africa in December.

De Gaulle’s sudden resignation of the provisional presidency of France in January 1946, and France’s return to party government, gave Saigon greater weight in decision making with respect to Indochina. D’Argenlieu quickly lined up several wealthy, malleable Vietnamese to participate in a
Cochinchina Consultative Council. By contrast, Leclerc and Sainteny, increasingly mindful of France’s military limitations overall, showed more interest in reaching an understanding with Ho Chi Minh that enabled French forces to return unchallenged to the north following the anticipated Paris-Chungking agreement, and that began to set the parameters for future Franco-DRV cooperation. This led to the Preliminary Accord of 6 March 1946, in which the DRV agreed to receive fifteen thousand French troops amicably in exchange for formal recognition as a “free state having its own government, parliament, army and finances, and forming a part of the Indochina Federation and French Union.” Cochincharina’s unification with the rest of the country was to be the object of a popular referendum. For a brief moment, it appeared that both governments had overcome history, surmounted their opposition in their own ranks, and made the concessions that could produce a长期peaceful relationship.

Six days later, however, Jean Célèl publicly characterized the accord as a “local convention,” not committing France to a unified Vietnam; and on 12 March the minister for overseas territories, Marius Moutet, declared that Cochincharina would be treated as a separate “free state” within the federation, an interpretation totally unacceptable to the DRV. Moreover, some French leaders seemed to interpret “free state” to mean French rule with native support, whereas for Ho Chi Minh it signified cultivation of a special relationship by mutual consent. Subsequent diplomatic encounters at Dalat and Fontainebleau failed to resolve these fundamental differences.

During the rest of 1946, a shift to the left in France’s political climate appeared to suggest that diplomatic settlement with Ho Chi Minh was feasible. Precisely for that reason, Admiral d’Argenley in Saigon was determined to increase military pressure on the DRV. In late November, a dispute over customs controls in Haiphong harbor escalated quickly into French naval bombardment of the city, killing as many as six thousand people. Four weeks later, the DRV ordered a nationwide counterattack. Within months, French forces had seized almost all of Vietnam’s cities and towns, yet were experiencing difficulty pacifying the villages or penetrating the forests. In October 1947, French units almost captured Ho Chi Minh in a surprise assault in the hills of Bac Can province; Nguyen Van To, then chairman of the National Assembly, was caught in this raid and died shortly thereafter.

With each passing year, French casualties mounted and the Indochina war became a more divisive issue at home. Protracted discussions with the former emperor Bao Dai and an assortment of noncommunist associates
eventually produced a "state of Vietnam" alternative to the DRV, but all important decisions continued to be made by the French. In early 1954, hoping to lure General Vo Nguyen Giap into a set-piece battle, French commanders committed sixteen thousand troops to the Lintang valley of Dien Bien Phu, near the frontier with Laos. In an unprecedented logistical maneuver, Giap shifted sufficient soldiers, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, ammunition, and food 220 kilometers across the mountains of northern Vietnam to be able to isolate, bombard, assault, and finally force the surrender of the entire French garrison.

In July 1954, a new French government took the occasion of an international conference at Geneva to negotiate a cease-fire and regroupment formula with a DRV delegation headed by Pham Van Dinh. French troops withdrew south of the 17th parallel, and were then sent home, the last unit departing Saigon in 1956. Paris henceforth had no choice but to accept predominant American influence in South Vietnam. Sinteny was dispatched to Hanoi as France's "general delegate" to the DRV in the hope of building a new economic and cultural relationship, but this came to naught; he returned for the last time in 1969 to represent France at the funeral of Ho Chi Minh. In early 1993, President François Mitterrand became the first Western head of state to visit Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. "I am here to close a chapter, and even more so, to open another," Mitterrand declared.

Between its Declaration of Independence on 2 September 1945 and the outbreak of full-scale hostilities with the French in December 1946, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was transformed from a handful of men issuing edicts in Hanoi into a revolutionary state commanding the loyalty of the vast majority of the people living in the former Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. The DRV's flag, anthem, and motto ("Independence, Freedom, Happiness") stood above all other political symbols. Ho Chi Minh's frail image was revered widely as that of the national savior; his voice was conveyed by radio even to guerrilla fighters in the distant jungles of southern Vietnam. In the north and in large parts of central Vietnam, the DRV possessed an administrative apparatus, an army, a zealous militia, a police force (both public and secret), and tens of thousands of dedicated, if unpaid, literacy teachers, hygiene instructors, youth organizers, and cultural cadres. Citizens throughout the country joined Viet Minh groups according to occupation, age, gender, religion, or ethnic origin. Although officially dissolved in November 1945, the ICP continued quietly to restructure, recruit new members, attempt to control vital state sectors, and monitor society at large.
People did not identify with all these changes in equal measure. Pride in the new symbols of the Vietnamese state and faith in President Ho Chi Minh went deeper and extended further than confidence in government ministries, local administrative committees, or Viet Minh cadres. The army also won considerable admiration from the public, partly because of its crisp, no-nonsense style, but especially because of its early dispatch of troops to the south (most of whom never returned), and its stated readiness to fight elsewhere whenever ordered. Amid the general exuberance, some elements of society remained cautious about ICP / Viet Minh intentions. Thus, the substantial Catholic minority (about 10 percent of the population) worried about being punished for its historical links with the foreigner. Ho Chi Minh proved adept at alleviating those concerns, to the extent that Vietnamese bishops willingly lobbied the Vatican and Paris for recognition of the DRV, and thousands of young Catholics joined the army and militia. Several years later, many Catholics became alienated from “the Revolution,” yet very few returned to full-fledged cooperation with the French.

Local committees sometimes ignored national directives by seizing the property of landlords, harassing merchants, jailing individuals arbitrarily, extorting heavy financial “contributions” from anyone perceived as having benefited from the colonial system, and prohibiting a range of traditional customs. Anyone who complained risked being labeled a “traitor,” “reactionary,” or “counterrevolutionary.” Particularly flagrant violations of government instructions came to the attention of higher echelons, with special investigators being sent with powers to search and arrest. However, compliance was achieved more often by patiently explaining to obstinate local revolutionaries the importance of engaging the vast majority of citizens in united-front activity, while isolating and neutralizing those few who refused to go along.

Different tactics were employed against any group considered a potential challenger to the monopoly of political power held by the ICP / Viet Minh. In the north, local struggles quickly broke out with members of the Revolutionary League and the Nationalist Party, even while Ho Chi Minh met cordially with their leaders and accepted several into his government. By April 1946, ICP / Viet Minh activists had forced the adherents of the Revolutionary League and the Nationalist Party out of the political arena entirely except in the capital of Hanoi and a few towns along the communication routes to China. Nguyen Hai Than, for a short while vice president of the DRV, had already fled the country. Nguyen Tuong Tan attended the Dalat conference as DRV foreign minister, but disappeared...
China in June. DRV police soon made it impossible for independent political activity to continue even in Hanoi, yet in the name of an ever-expanding united front, some Revolutionary League and Nationalist Party members were permitted to keep their seats in the National Assembly. Others rotted in detention camps in the northern hills or made abject confessions to the police in order to avoid incarceration.

In the south, bitter disputes continued to erupt between the CP / Viet Minh and other groups committed to fighting the French, notably the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious groups. Following arrival of Nguyen Sinh from the north at the end of 1945, a degree of basic communication and tactical coordination across competing groups was achieved. During 1946, small-scale attacks on French personnel and Vietnamese identified with the "Republic of Cochinchina" increased in urban as well as rural locations. Ironically, this momentum became apparent to the outside world in a nonviolent manner on 30 October, when almost all resistance units in the south observed a cease-fire agreement reached earlier by Ho Chi Minh and Marius Moutet in Paris. This surprisingly disciplined response helped to convince Admiral d'Argenlieu that pacification could not be achieved in Cochinchina until the DRV government was toppled in Hanoi. Meanwhile, throughout north, center, and south, the objectives of fighting separatism and achieving territorial integrity had become the touchstone of Vietnamese patriotism—around which the DRV and the Communist Party could consolidate political hegemony for the next three decades.

From the beginning, the DRV's main weakness was its economy. Another terrible famine in the north was barely averted in late 1945 by a variety of short-term measures, although at least ten thousand people nonetheless died of starvation. The May 1946 rice harvest was reasonably bountiful, and the government subsequently mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to repair the Red River dikes, thus preventing a possible repetition of the August 1945 floods. The revenues of the central government remained very precarious, however, several taxes having been abolished in conformity with Viet Minh promises, and others being difficult to collect in the revolutionary conditions prevailing. "Voluntary" contributions to support the army and other defense-related initiatives did flow in, but that still left other government ministries with minuscule budgets. Although the central authorities assigned high priority to resuming plantation agriculture, to reopening colonial-period mines and industries, and to stimulating commerce, the early results were disappointing. Paris repeatedly held out the lures of economic aid, technical assistance, and capital investment as part of a larger diplomatic settlement, but even if Vietnamese
and French negotiators had announced an agreement in late 1946 and begun to implement its provisions, it is not at all certain that Ho Chi Minh could have persuaded local committees to relinquish French property in the interests of joint reconstruction and development. French analysts often predicted the collapse of the DRV as a result of internal economic contradictions, not appreciating the degree to which people were willing to tighten their belts for a patriotic cause, or the capacity of Vietnamese society to keep afloat on village-level rice cultivation and cottage industries.

Withdrawal under fire from Hanoi and other cities and towns at the end of 1946 heightened the trends in the DRV toward economic decentralization, barter, and local taxation in kind, although leaders set ambitious production and collection quotas, which were often achieved. So long as foreigners denied Vietnamese unity and threatened the existence of the DRV, people seemed prepared, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to work longer hours and live on a bare minimum. This “war economy” system persisted beyond the DRV’s 1954 return to Hanoi, now bolstered by Stalinist/Maoist ideology and injections of aid from the Soviet Union and China that masked its inefficiencies. Not until 1979 did Communist Party leaders begin to lose confidence in the existing system, and it was another ten years before the economy underwent fundamental transformations.

The generation of ICP members who had survived repression and jai in the 1930s, and who disseminated the Viet Minh message before August 1945, went on to govern the DRV and command its armed forces for the next forty years. The generation of youths who joined patriotic groups in the summer of 1945, practiced marching, demonstrated, took control of offices, and formed local revolutionary committees became the vital middle echelon of Party, state, and military hierarchies for those same four decades, although not a few died in battle or were purged during the bitter 1970s campaigns against “class enemies.” Each subsequent generation has grown up in an atmosphere imbued with the mystique of 1945, whether conveyed by parents and grandparents or by Party cadres, schoolteachers, and writers.

As prior generations disappear from the scene and the circumstances of life change, heroic stories inevitably lose their glow. Because the legitimacy of the Communist Party in Vietnam is so closely linked to the events of 1945, efforts to revitalize the memory of that year are common, but no new interpretations have yet made their way past the censors. It seems only a matter of time, however, before novelists, filmmakers, and historians (perhaps in that order) find ways of looking afresh at this watershed in Vietnam’s modern history.